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Explaining the economic and political relations between America and China in the Middle East (2021-2023)

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Abstract

The Middle East region, especially the Persian Gulf, is one of the most strategically important regions in the world. Throughout history, great powers have sought to gain influence in this region through various strategies and policies. In addition to asserting their dominance in the area, they also aim to control their competitors.

For more than half a century, the United States of America has dominated this region with different policies and strategies. On the other hand, China has been trying to expand its influence in this region for about two decades. The gradual weakening of US positions in the region is a long-term trend that originated long before the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

During Obama's presidency, the "Pivot to Asia" policy was announced. According

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to this policy, America was preparing to gradually shift the focus of its foreign policy to the Asia-Pacific region, while at the same time reducing America's presence in the Middle East and Europe. This policy continued during the periods of Donald Trump and Biden.

The goal of the Biden administration's Middle East policy, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, is to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, encourage this country to increase oil production for the world market, and strengthen ties with Israel to bolster America's position in the region.

At first, China viewed developments and events in the Middle East mainly through the lens of revolutionary ideology.

The Middle East and North Africa have traditionally been outside China's sphere of interest. Geographical distance, loose historical contacts, and social, cultural, and linguistic differences all played a role in adopting this policy. In the early 1980s, after Deng Xiaoping's reforms and the "opening door" policy, China began to look for new partners that could meet the growing need for energy resources, and thus the Persian Gulf countries became the focus of China's attention. Therefore, this country's relations with political actors in the Middle East were mainly based on energy and commercial interests. China has a strong and increasing need for energy and natural resources to maintain economic growth.

China and the United States of America, as two great powers based on national interests, have cooperative or competitive relations in political and economic fields and issues. The purpose of writing this article is to examine the policies of the United States and China in the Middle East region based on the concept of "competition."

Methodology: The current research methodology involves collecting data from library resources and internet sources and articles. The analytical and explanatory research approach, along with qualitative data analysis methods, will be utilized. The study will focus on the period from 2021 to 2023. The research findings indicate a decline in the power, influence, and capacity of the United States as one of the great powers. The capabilities and power of the United States across various dimensions - political, economic, social, and cultural - have decreased. Conversely, China's power, ability, and capacity have been increasing. As an emerging power, China is working to expand its influence in different

regions globally, particularly in the Middle East region.

The main question addressed in this article is: What policies will China and America pursue in the Middle East between 2021 and 2023? In the Middle East, these policies revolve around "oil and energy transit," "Iranian threats," and "arms sales." China's strategy in this region involves building political and economic relationships with America's adversaries, such as Iran, while attempting to distance hesitant and distrustful allies of America, like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, etc., by establishing economic partnerships and gaining access to the oil and energy market. China's foreign relations are guided by principles of non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-commitment.

Result and Discussion: While the United States of America played a pivotal role in shaping the Middle East order after World War II, its presence in the region has significantly declined over the past decade. A critical turning point for the United States occurred with the remarkable expansion of oil and natural gas production within its own borders since the 2010s, driven by the development of domestic shale reserves starting around 2006. By 2014, the United States had surpassed both Saudi Arabia and Russia to become the world's largest oil producer. Consequently, the U.S. was no longer reliant on the Middle East for a sustainable energy supply.

In the Biden era, America's national security strategy emphasizes two fundamental components: military de-escalation and regional integration. The recognition that U.S. military intervention does not necessarily lead to democracy in the region has shifted the focus toward more attainable goals, such as creating stability and safeguarding national interests.

The Middle East policy of the People's Republic of China is guided by the document titled "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era," published by the Information Office of the State Council of China in January 2021. China's interaction with Middle Eastern countries operates within the framework of the One Belt, One Road concept. This strategy aligns with China's broader global plans to reduce commercial, economic, and technological dependence on Western countries and global production chains.

The factors that have increased China's influence in the Middle East are:

- Similarity of the political systems (authoritarian systems) of the Middle

East Arab countries with the political system of China.

- The principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries by China under the pretext of violating human rights.
- China's lack of support for opponents and opposition in Middle East countries.
- The non-establishment of opponents of Middle East political systems in China and the granting of all kinds of asylum to them.
- Lack of colonial history of China in the Middle East region.
- Sharing of economic benefits.

The findings of this research indicate that China does not seek to form alliances or coalitions in the Middle East to confront America. The region is not as strategically important to China as regions like the South China Sea or Central Asia. Therefore, low-level competition between the two countries in this region is more likely.

Conclusion: Competition between America and China is ongoing in various regions worldwide, including the Middle East, particularly in the Persian Gulf. The United States is gradually losing its dominant military and political positions in the Middle East. The country has been compelled to abandon its aggressive "regime change" and "democratization" efforts in Arab countries, notably Saudi Arabia, as well as its emphasis on human rights. In essence, America's strategy in the Middle East is evolving gradually.

Meanwhile, China is undeniably expanding its influence in both political and economic realms, adhering to a policy of non-intervention. China appears to be striving to steer clear of local conflicts and avoid direct confrontation with the United States. China's foreign relations are guided by principles of non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-commitment.

Research findings suggest that China in the Middle East is not actively seeking alliances or coalitions to counter America, as the region holds less strategic significance for China compared to areas like the South China Sea. Through strategic investments in key infrastructure, China has emerged as a primary economic partner for Middle Eastern countries. In essence, China and the United States are engaged in a competition to enhance their influence and power in the Middle East.

Key words: China, America, Middle East, China's global security plan.