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Assessing How China Utilizes the Concept of “Great Power Responsibility” to Expand its Influence in the Middle East

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Extended Abstract

Over the past two decades, China has undergone a profound transformation from a regionally focused actor into a globally influential power whose economic dynamism, technological advancement, and diplomatic activism have reshaped the international system. As Beijing's material capabilities have expanded, so too has its ambition to redefine the norms, principles, and institutional arrangements governing global order. Central to this ambition is China's effort to articulate and promote a distinct interpretation of “great power responsibility” a concept that diverges significantly from Western understandings of global leadership, intervention, and normative authority. Rather than framing responsibility in terms of military engagement, democracy promotion, or humanitarian intervention, China emphasizes sovereignty, non-interfer-

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ence, development-oriented cooperation, and multilateralism. This alternative framing has become a cornerstone of China's foreign policy identity and a key instrument in its strategy to expand influence in critical regions, including the Middle East. The Middle East occupies a pivotal position in China's strategic calculus. It is a region where Beijing's core interests—energy security, connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and geopolitical balancing vis-à-vis the United States—intersect. China's growing presence in the Middle East is not merely a byproduct of economic expansion; it is a deliberate and carefully calibrated policy aimed at embedding China within the political, economic, and security architecture of the region. The question guiding this study is therefore: How has China employed the concept of great power responsibility to expand its influence in the Middle East in competition with the United States? Addressing this question requires a conceptual examination of China's interpretation of great power responsibility, as well as an empirical analysis of its policies, initiatives, and diplomatic behavior in the region. China's official discourse presents great power responsibility as a commitment to promoting stability, development, and mutually beneficial cooperation. This discourse gained renewed prominence following President Xi Jinping's announcement of the Global Governance Initiative in September 2025, which builds upon earlier frameworks such as the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). Collectively, these initiatives articulate China's vision for a more equitable and multipolar world order grounded in respect for sovereignty, adherence to international law, and inclusive multilateralism. In the Middle East, this vision translates into a foreign policy approach that seeks to avoid entanglement in regional conflicts while simultaneously expanding China's economic footprint, diplomatic presence, and normative influence. China's strategy in the Middle East rests on three foundational pillars. The first is energy security, as the region supplies more than 40 percent of China's crude oil imports. Ensuring stable access to energy resources is therefore a core national interest, and China has cultivated long-term partnerships with major producers such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates. These partnerships are framed not as extractive relationships but as mutually beneficial arrangements that contribute to regional stability and economic develop-

ment an interpretation consistent with China's development-oriented notion of responsibility. The second pillar is the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative, which positions the Middle East as a critical hub for global connectivity. Through infrastructure investments, port development, digital cooperation, and financial integration, China seeks to embed regional economies within a broader Eurasian network centered on Beijing. The BRI is presented as a vehicle for shared prosperity, reflecting China's claim that great power responsibility entails enabling development rather than imposing political conditions. In practice, BRI projects have deepened China's economic interdependence with Middle Eastern states, thereby increasing Beijing's leverage and influence. The third pillar is multilateralism and geopolitical balancing, particularly vis-à-vis the United States. China's growing diplomatic engagement including its role in mediating the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement illustrates Beijing's attempt to position itself as a neutral, stabilizing actor capable of facilitating dialogue without imposing ideological agendas. This stands in contrast to Western approaches that often involve political conditionality or military intervention. By emphasizing neutrality, sovereignty, and non-interference, China seeks to differentiate its model of great power responsibility from that of the United States and present itself as a more acceptable partner to regional governments. China's behavior in the Middle East demonstrates how the concept of great power responsibility functions as both a normative framework and a strategic tool. Beijing consistently portrays its actions as contributing to regional stability, economic development, and peaceful coexistence. For example, China's diplomatic rhetoric surrounding conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Palestine emphasizes political solutions, humanitarian assistance, and respect for national sovereignty. Although China avoids direct military involvement, it leverages its economic influence and diplomatic channels to shape regional dynamics in ways that align with its long-term interests. The findings of this study, based on conceptual analysis and descriptive-analytical methodology, indicate that China's approach to great power responsibility in the Middle East is characterized by pragmatism, restraint, and strategic opportunism. China seeks stability not out of altruism but because instability threatens its energy supply, investment environment, and regional partnerships. By respecting sovereignty and avoiding intervention, China ap-

peals to regional governments wary of Western interference. Through development-oriented cooperation, China strengthens economic ties that gradually translate into political influence. And by promoting multilateralism, China challenges U.S. dominance while presenting itself as a constructive global actor. Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, China has intensified efforts to expand both hard and soft power in the Middle East. Unlike Western powers that often invoke great power responsibility to justify military intervention or political pressure, China frames responsibility in terms of economic development, stability, and partnership. This alternative framing has resonated with many Middle Eastern states seeking diversification of external partnerships and greater autonomy from Western influence. China's mediation efforts, economic diplomacy, and participation in regional forums further reinforce its image as a responsible major power committed to peaceful development. Xi Jinping's Global Governance Initiative represents the culmination of China's evolving vision for global order. It emphasizes multilateralism, justice, and respect for civilizational diversity principles that challenge Western-centric models of governance. In the Middle East, these principles translate into policies aimed at reducing regional dependence on Western powers, strengthening China's role as a key economic and diplomatic actor, and embedding the region within a multipolar global system. China's growing influence is therefore not merely a consequence of economic expansion but a deliberate effort to reshape regional and global governance norms. In conclusion, China's use of the concept of great power responsibility in the Middle East reflects a broader strategy to expand influence while avoiding the costs and risks associated with military intervention. By emphasizing sovereignty, development, and multilateralism, China presents itself as a benign and constructive actor, even as it pursues strategic objectives such as energy security, geopolitical balancing, and regional integration under the Belt and Road Initiative. This approach enables China to compete with the United States for influence in the Middle East while maintaining a narrative of peaceful rise and responsible leadership. Ultimately, China's development-oriented interpretation of great power responsibility serves as both a normative justification and a practical mechanism for expanding its presence in one of the world's most strategically significant regions.

Key words: China, Middle East, Great Power Responsibility, Partnership Agreement.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.