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The Impact of China's influence on the U.S. Strategy in the West Asia Region from 2021 to 2025

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The West Asia region, referred to in geopolitical literature as both the cradle of ancient civilizations and the epicenter of contemporary crises, has consistently played a pivotal role in global security and economic equations. Owing to its possession of the world's largest proven oil and gas reserves, its location at the crossroads of three continents, and its numerous flashpoints of tension, West Asia has historically been the primary arena for great-power rivalries. For the past seven decades, the United States — relying on an extensive network of military bases, a formidable naval fleet, and a web of security treaties with key regional states — had managed to establish an unparalleled hegemony over this region. However, the rise of the People's Republic of

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China as an emerging economic and political power on the international stage has fundamentally challenged this long-standing structure.

The central research question this study seeks to answer is: “How has China’s multidimensional influence in the West Asia region during the 2021–2025 period affected the strategies, priorities, and practical actions of the United States in this region?” In response, the core hypothesis posits that, unlike the traditional U.S. approach based on military interventions, direct force presence, and unilateral security ordering, China — by leveraging economic soft power, multilateral diplomacy, and massive infrastructure investments — has succeeded in constraining Washington’s strategic space in the region, compelling it to undertake a profound reassessment of its policies. The significance and necessity of this research lie in its precise depiction of emerging trends in West Asia’s regional order, its provision of an analytical framework for better understanding international system dynamics in the era of power transition, and its assistance to policymakers and regional studies scholars in more accurately assessing plausible future scenarios.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze the escalating rivalry between these two major powers in West Asia, this study employs Offensive Realism as its primary theoretical framework. This theory, systematically articulated by John Mearsheimer in his seminal work *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, rests on five core assumptions: (1) the international system is anarchic, lacking any overarching sovereign authority to resolve disputes; (2) great powers inherently possess offensive military capabilities that can be used to threaten others; (3) states can never be certain of others’ intentions; (4) survival is the primary goal of states; and (5) states are rational actors seeking to maximize their relative power. Within this framework, China’s emergence and its steadily growing economic, technological, and military capabilities are interpreted as a serious threat to U.S. regional and global hegemony. Moreover, China’s pragmatic and non-confrontational approach — built on the principle of “win-win cooperation” and avoidance of direct military engagement — has created favorable conditions for its penetration into domains previously regarded as America’s exclusive sphere of influence. Conceptually,

key notions such as “Balance of Power,” “Hegemony,” “Economic Diplomacy,” “Complex Interdependence,” and “Great Strategic Rivalry” are employed in this research. Furthermore, to more accurately explain China’s behavior, the concept of “Smart Power” — combining hard and soft power — has been utilized. By successfully integrating economic investments (economic hard power), provision of regional public goods (soft power), and maintaining neutrality in regional states’ internal conflicts (diplomatic smart power), China has demonstrated a novel model of influence that has been insufficiently addressed in earlier theoretical literature.

Research Methodology

This study is designed and conducted using a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method. Data collection is based on content analysis of authoritative scientific documents, strategic reports from reputable international institutions such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the International Crisis Group (ICG), annual U.S. Department of Defense reports on China’s military power, and official statements by senior officials from both countries and regional states. The study’s timeframe is deliberately limited to the years 2021–2025 to enable precise examination of current developments and the short-to-medium-term effects of China’s active presence in the region. To ensure validity and reliability, the triangulation method has been employed, whereby data are collected and cross-referenced from multiple sources and through various approaches. The coding and content analysis process has been conducted systematically using thematic categorization. In this context, five dimensions of China’s influence in West Asia have been identified and subjected to in-depth analysis: (1) economic dimension (trade, investment, and energy); (2) political-diplomatic dimension (bilateral and multilateral relations and mediation); (3) technological-infrastructure dimension (construction projects, communication networks, and technology transfer); (4) security-military dimension (training cooperation, arms sales, and joint exercises); and (5) cultural-public dimension (public diplomacy and academic exchanges). Correspondingly, U.S. responses in each of these domains have been categorized and explained separately.

Research Findings

The research findings indicate that during 2021–2025, China, through the adoption of a smart, multi-layered, and forward-looking strategy, has established a steadily growing and sustainable presence in West Asia that extends far beyond mere economic relations. In the economic dimension: In addition to securing a stable flow of oil and gas from major producing countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, China has undertaken large-scale investments in strategic infrastructure projects, including the construction and management of modern ports (such as Shahid Beheshti Port in Chabahar and Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi), development of high-speed rail networks, establishment of special economic zones and industrial parks, and expansion of advanced communication networks and the Internet of Things. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — as the largest infrastructure investment project in human history — has played a central role in linking the economic interests of regional countries with China's economy and creating transregional value chains. By 2023, China's trade volume with Gulf Cooperation Council countries exceeded \$300 billion, more than double the trade volume of these countries with the United States in the same year. In the political and diplomatic dimension: By adopting a policy of "active neutrality" in regional conflicts and strengthening strategic bilateral relations with key regional actors — including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and Egypt — China has succeeded in presenting itself as a cross-factional, trustworthy, and independent player free from the region's identity-based and religious disputes. The most significant event in this domain was Beijing's historic mediation in the normalization agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023, which, through the signing of a tripartite statement in Beijing, created a dramatic shift in the security dynamics of the Persian Gulf and West Asia. This move demonstrated China's emerging capacity for engagement in complex security conflicts and signified the decline of the traditional U.S. role as the region's sole hegemonic mediator.

Discussion and Analysis of Results

The results derived from the findings clearly demonstrate that China's growing multidimensional influence in West Asia has unprecedentedly challenged the

United States' long-standing hegemony. This challenge is not only manifest in the economic sphere — reducing America's share of regional energy markets and infrastructure projects — but is equally pronounced in strategic and diplomatic domains. On the one hand, Washington — which in recent decades, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, had adopted the "Pivot to Asia" or "Rebalancing toward East Asia" strategy centered on containing China — now confronts a new and paradoxical reality: China has not only emerged as a dominant power in its traditional sphere of influence in East Asia, but has also established new and extensive bases of influence in the heart of America's vital sphere, i.e., West Asia. This situation places the White House in a strategic dilemma: any withdrawal or reduction of presence from the region will be interpreted as ceding strategic space to the rival, while any direct military confrontation or engagement could incur enormous financial, human, and diplomatic costs. In response to this existential challenge, the United States has undertaken a series of diverse measures, including: (1) significantly increasing military and economic aid to its long-standing regional allies, particularly Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain; (2) attempting to revive regional security pacts, such as the creation of a joint naval fleet under the "Combined Forces" banner in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz; (3) intensive diplomacy to normalize Israel's relations with Arab states through the Abraham Accords; (4) intensifying economic and technological sanctions against Chinese companies and institutions active in the region; and (5) striving to design and present alternative projects to the Belt and Road Initiative, such as the "Build Back Better World" (B3W) scheme and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). However, evidence suggests that purely confrontational and security-oriented strategies no longer possess their former efficacy, and the U.S. is gradually compelled to accept the reality of the multipolarization of the regional order and China's effective role alongside other powers.

Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive analyses conducted in this study, the escalating rivalry between China and the United States in West Asia is not a temporary or fleeting phenomenon but rather a tangible reflection of profound and fundamen-

tal changes in the global balance of power and the transition from a unipolar order to a multipolar-multi-actor one. China, skillfully utilizing economic tools, long-term infrastructure investments, non-confrontational diplomacy, and a win-win cooperation approach, is redefining its role from a marginal actor and mere energy supplier to an effective, influential, and even decisive player in West Asia's security and political equations. In contrast, the United States — accustomed for decades to exclusive, unilateral, and coercive role-playing in this region — now faces an unprecedented historical scenario that demands fundamental adjustments to its traditional strategies, reduced reliance on military interventions, and adaptation to the new regional and global order.

Key words: China, United States; West Asia; East Asia; Offensive realism.

Conflict of Interest

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