



Middle East Geopolitics and Great Power Rivalry in the Post-2020 Era

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Abstract

The Middle East has played an important geopolitical role in world politics, because of its strategic position, huge energy resources, sea lanes and ideological significance. The region has undergone a transformation in the post-2020 world, which is defined by a renewed rivalry between the great powers: The United States, China and Russia. Such competition has grown fiercer in the areas of economic cooperation, military collaboration, technology race, energy politics, and proxy warfare. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Abraham Accords, the Russian-Ukrainian war, growing Chinese relations with the Gulf and the shifting priorities of the United States' foreign policy have had an impact on the changing geopolitical context since 2020. This article explores the changing geopolitical landscape of the Middle East since 2020 and offers insights into the impact of great power competition on Middle Eastern alliances, security arrangements and economic policies. The study suggests that the Middle East had been a unipolar region, where the United States was the dominant power, and is now emerging as a multipolar geopolitical space, where there is strategic balancing between regional and global actors.

Keywords: The Middle East, Great Power Rivalry, Geopolitics, Multipolarity, Energy Security, Regional Security, United States, China, Russia, and Gulf Politics.



Introduction

The Middle East has occupied an important position in the geopolitical map, not only because of its geographical location, but also its rich energy resources, ideological value and the possession of some of the world's most important trade and maritime routes. The region lies at the crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe, and naturally acts as a bridge connecting the major continental and world markets. Due to this strategic position, the Middle East has always been a focus of interest for outside powers, ranging from colonial powers in the past to the current global powers that want to exert influence, secure resources and gain strategic advantage. The modern world has seen a further increase in importance of the region because of the enormous reserves of oil and natural gas needed for maintaining economic stability and energy security around the world (Arshad, 2026). The Middle East is a region of great importance to the global energy supply, with its leading economies like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates deeply integrated into the international economic system. Moreover, the strategic significance of the region is further reinforced by key maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal, which are main avenues for global trade and energy transportation between Europe, Asia and Africa. Due to all of these factors, global powers have always sought influence in the Middle East to secure economic benefits, military benefits and a long-term geopolitical advantage (Yergin, 2025).

The Cold War over, the United States was the major external power in the Middle East. American influence spread over time, through military alliances and security ties, economic cooperation, and intensive political involvement with regional states. The United States had built solid military infrastructure throughout the Gulf region and had built close military and strategic ties with the Saudi Kingdom, Israel, Egypt and other Gulf monarchies. It also claimed to be the primary security provider for the region, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. But, this historical regional preeminence has been facing some changes in the global order in the post-2020 world. The U.S. has increasingly withdrawn from direct military engagement in the Middle East, partly because of the expense of prolonged wars and the change in priorities in the country and the world. Meanwhile, Washington has been more concerned with strategic competition with China in the Indo-Pacific area, thereby diminishing the significance of the Middle East in its foreign policy calculus (Alterman, 2022).

In the Middle East, there is now room for other great powers, namely China and Russia, to assert themselves (Nader, 2026). Through trade, infrastructure development, technological collaboration, and energy ties, China has emerged as a significant economic partner for numerous countries in the region. Beijing has been pouring money into ports, transportation systems, industrial complexes and telecommunication facilities in the Middle East under its Belt and Road Initiative. China's increasing appetite for energy has also led to a stronger relationship with Gulf countries, who are an integral part of China's long-term economic plan. China's attitude of non-interference in domestic affairs appeals to many regional governments that want co-operation without political pressure. The Chinese attitude of 'non-interference in the domestic affairs' is attractive to many regional governments that want to cooperate without being pressured politically. Additionally, China's diplomatic work has increased, particularly in its mediation efforts with Saudi



Arabia and Iran in 2023, showcasing its rising influence in regional diplomacy and conflict resolution (Fulton, 2022).

Russia has also regained its significance as a geopolitical player in the Middle East at the same time. The military action in Syria was a pivotal moment for it as it sought to assert Moscow's strategic presence in the region and assert its dominance over the West. Russia's backing of the Syrian government ensured its long-term military access to the Mediterranean and bolstered relations with some regional actors. In a way, Russia has increased its partnership over the years with Iran, Türkiye, Egypt, Libya, and other Gulf countries. The strategy of Moscow is mainly military cooperation, arms sales and diplomatic relations, which means that it is seen as a competitor of the West in terms of influence. The Russia-Ukraine War also helped to heighten geopolitical tension in the world and to impact the Middle East. The war's effects on oil prices elevated the significance of the oil producers of the Gulf, while Western sanctions drove Russia to deepen its relationship with non-Western actors, including the Middle Eastern oil producers (Trenin, 2023).

In addition to the global powers, so have the regional states come into their own and become more involved in their own foreign policy. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Türkiye, Israel, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates are all seeking strategic independence through multi-faceted relationships. Many of these states are looking to China, Russia and other emerging powers, rather than just the U.S., to maximize their national interests. For instance, Saudi Arabia is pursuing a security alliance with the U.S. and is deepening its economic ties with China. Türkiye's foreign policy aims at a balanced approach with involvement in the NATO bloc as well as with regional actors and Russia. The Republic of Iran has increased its ties with the Chinese and Russian powers to face Western sanctions and political isolation. There is a general movement towards multi-polar international system, in which regional states are not only passive actors but active players in international arena (Kamrava, 2023).

There have been a number of notable events which have transformed regional politics in the post-2020 era. The most important was the Abraham Accords, the move toward normalization between Israel and a number of Arab countries, including the UAE and Bahrain. The agreements were a huge change in regional diplomacy, championing cooperation and common interests on security issues, including Iran. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Iran are vying in and around Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, maintaining regional tensions of various sectarian and geopolitical forms. Furthermore, the Russia-Ukraine War, the global inflation, and supply chain disruptions have led to economic uncertainty and instability in the energy market. While this, China's growing diplomatic and economic presence in the region is undeniable, and it is evident that the Middle East is no longer a region of influence solely of the West but a major region of multipolar global competition (Lynch, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

The theory of Realism was applied as the basis for this study because it is one of the theories that was most influential and widely used in international relations. Realism models international politics as a constant struggle of states for power, security and survival in an anarchic international system with no overarching authority to control state action. Realist scholars argue that states are essentially driven to serve their national interests and enhance their strategic power as they are always uncertain and competing in



international politics. In this type of security environment, states do not have the complete security of international institutions or moral principles, but rely on military power, economic strength, diplomatic influence and strategic alliances to secure their country's national interest and to build their own regional or global influence. Realism also suggests that great powers will strive for supremacy and influence as each state aims to achieve the greatest possible level of security and to avoid becoming strategically dominated by another state. Major global powers and regional actors are increasingly competing politically, militarily and economically in the post-2020 Middle East (Mearsheimer, 2021), in which this theoretical framework is very applicable.

The Middle East is a major case of realist politics as a region that has been defined in the past through strategic rivalries, security dilemmas, proxy wars and foreign involvement. It has a vast oil and gas resource, strategic maritime routes and geopolitical location which make it one of the most contested regions in the international system. Realism helps to account for the U.S., China, and Russian efforts to increase and maintain influence in the region through military presence, economic ties, and diplomacy. The U.S. has long had large military forces, defense pacts, and political relations with Gulf nations and Israel to secure energy supply, shield allies, and have a strong presence in the region. Likewise, Russia has gained more military and diplomatic muscle by its presence in Syria and strategic partnerships with Iran and other regional players. While not a military power, China has a lot of influence because of its economic policies, infrastructure development and the Belt and Road Initiative. Realist analysis suggests that these policies don't require cooperation or development but are linked to the foreign policy aims of power projection, strategic access, and geopolitical influence (Walt, 2022).

The balance of power is another concept that is relevant in this study and is associated with realism theory. The balance of power is a situation in which it is intended that no one power should be too strong in comparison to others, through strengthening others powers or by forming alliances. Today in the Middle East, countries in the region are tending to a balancing policy instead of relying on a single global power. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Egypt are investing in a multi-dimensional foreign policy, establishing ties with the U.S. while also deepening ties with China and Russia on economic and strategic fronts. The strategic balancing is a sign of the multipolar international order in which regional countries are moving towards greater autonomy and flexibility in foreign policy decisions. The states of the Middle East are moving away from monobloc affiliations toward pragmatic options that enable them to benefit the most from economic gains, security, and diplomatic ties with various international players. This is an example of how global politics and the rise of great power competition have made the regional power balance more dynamic and complex since 2020 (Gause, 2023).

Strategic Importance of the Middle East

The Middle East is a region of great geopolitical significance today because of its strategic geographical position, energy resources, maritime communications and ideologies. The area has been pivotal to global politics for decades, serving as a crossroads between three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe), making it a key location for international trade, transport and political engagement. Historically the Middle East has been important to a number of world powers, both colonial and contemporary, who have tried to win influence in the region's resources, trade routes and political events. The role of the Middle East has



expanded even further after 2020 due to the shifting global demand for energy, geopolitical rivalry and the rise of multipolarity in the international political arena. The area still has an impact on world economic stability, on security policies, and on the diplomatic relations between the main global powers (Kamrava, 2025).

Oil and natural gas reserves are one of the major contributing factors to the strategic importance of the Middle East. It has some of the world's largest proven energy resources, playing a key role in the global energy production and distribution. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates are all important in international energy markets, providing oil and gas to most of the Asian, European and North American economies. Saudi Arabia remains one of the world's top oil exporters and has quite a big influence on the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Qatar too has become a big exporter of LNG, particularly since the world's demand for alternative energy sources is rising after the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The region is very important for the industrial economies due to the dependency on stable energy supply, thus external powers like U.S., China, Russia, and European countries have a strong political and economical interest in the region. Energy security is a key driver of foreign interests and geopolitical competition in the Middle East (Yergin, 2021).

Another crucial element which made the Middle East region so geopolitically significant is ownership of strategic chokepepoints and international trade routes. Several important waterways are located in the region, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and the Suez Canal. They are vital to international trade and transport of energy, as a large share of the world's oil traffic crosses through them on a daily basis. Its significance lies in the Strait of Hormuz, which is at the border between Iran and Oman, and is the main shipping route for exports of oil from the Gulf countries to international markets. Likewise, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait links the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden, and is vital to commerce between Europe and Asia. The Suez Canal of Egypt also increases the strategic importance of the Middle East by offering one of the shortest sea fares from Europe to Asia. Political, military or any type of disruptions in these chokepepoints can have a big influence on the world trade, global energy prices and economic uncertainty. Consequently, the region has been a constant target for the global powers who have always wanted to preserve naval presence and strategic relationships to ensure maritime security and stability and protect international shipping routes (Al-Rasheed, 2025).

The Middle East is also very significant ideologically and religiously, apart from the economic and strategic considerations. Makkah and Madinah in Saudi Arabia are the holiest cities in Islam and are considered to be of great importance to Muslims globally. The area is also very sensitive politically and religiously, as Jerusalem is sacred for Muslims, Christians and Jews. The Middle East remains a hotspot for political Islam, sectarianism and identity politics that shape regional and international relations. Sunni-Shia political clashes and dynamics among these nations, including Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, have been influenced by rivalries between Sunni and Shia groups. Religious ideologies and sectarian identities can also relate to geopolitical interests, making regional conflicts more complex and difficult to solve. Thus, the Middle East becomes a source of internal instability and also external powers become interested in influencing the political developments of the Middle East as being of ideological importance. The Middle East is thus strategically important not only in terms of its resources and geopolitics but also due to its religious, cultural and ideological impact on international politics (Nasr, 2025).



The U.S. and the Evolving Regional Order

From the earliest days of the Cold War through the post-Cold War period, the United States has been seen as the most powerful outside presence in the Middle East, and since the end of the Cold War, American political, military, and economic might has been at the heart of the Middle East order. Washington has long maintained a large military presence, strategic alliances, and diplomatic presence in the Middle East to ensure access to energy, to protect allies, to deter terrorism, and to ensure regional stability. After the Gulf War, the attacks on 9/11 and the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the involvement of the Americans grew considerably. In these conflicts the United States emerged as the key security guarantor for a number of Middle Eastern nations, particularly the Gulf monarchies and Israel. In the post-2020 period, however, significant shifts in priorities in American foreign policy have brought about a gradual shift in the regional balance of power. The United States has now pivoted its strategic focus from a Middle East-centric approach to a strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific region, particularly toward great power competition with China, and efforts to minimize the high cost of military involvement in the Middle East. This shift in U.S. global priorities in Washington is driven by the shift of policy makers' perceptions of China as the U.S. long-term competitor to global leadership (Miller, 2025).

Although the country made a relatively strategic move, the United States remains influential in the Middle East in terms of military, political and economic power. Military bases in Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE on the other hand are vital to the regional security framework and will continue to be vital in the future. Washington's continued deployment of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain and major airbases in Qatar reflects its ongoing dedication to defending routes of sea trade, counter-terrorism missions, and friendly governments in the Gulf region. The U.S. also maintains strategic partnerships with Israel and Saudi Arabia, which are deemed important allies in the U.S. Middle East policy. These relationships include continuing security cooperation, intelligence sharing, arms deals and joint military exercises. In addition, Washington is still following policies to restrain Iranian regional influence through economic sanctions, diplomatic efforts and backing of regional partners worried by Tehran's nuclear drive and regional activity. The U.S. continues to see Iran as a key threat to stability and U.S. interests in the Middle East (Byman, 2025).

The signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020 – the diplomatic normalization agreement signed by Israel and several Arab nations, including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan – was one of the biggest geopolitical milestones in recent years. The pacts were a significant diplomatic success for the United States because they reshaped the traditional regional alliances and fostered cooperation between Israel and Arab states. In the past, several Arab governments have desired to maintain official relations with Israel but have been deterred by the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli conflict. But the shifting geopolitical landscape, mutual concerns about Iran and a thirst for economic opportunity prompted several Gulf nations to seek a normal relationship with Israel. The Abraham Accords helped pave the way for increased cooperation in trade, investment, technology, tourism, and security issues, and enhanced a regional bloc in line with the United States' strategic interests. These accords also reflected a wider trend in the Gulf states over the past several years, as the push for economic modernization, technological advancements, and strategic pragmatism took precedence over the more



traditional ideologies. The accords were seen by the United States as an important move towards reconfiguring regional politics and establishing a more pro-American regional security system (Alsuwaidi, 2025).

Despite its considerable influence, however, in recent years the United States has been the subject of an increasing perception of falling commitment and reliability from Middle East partners. Winds of uncertainty have blown through the region since the gradual withdrawal of direct military involvement, the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the American strategic shift. Consequently, a number of countries in the Middle East have been looking to expand their diplomatic efforts and cut their ties with the United States. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Türkiye have diversified their economic and political ties with China and Russia, and have maintained ties with Washington. China's rising diplomatic, military and economic presence in the Middle East has added to the region's competitive geopolitical landscape, as has the presence of Russia in its military and diplomatic presence. The regional states now have more flexible and multidimensional foreign policies aiming at maximizing national interests with balancing relations with various global powers and not just on the leadership of the United States. The overall trend reflects the shift from a monodimensional worldview of the "United States versus the rest" to a multipolar geopolitical configuration of strategic competition and differentiated partnerships (Kamrava, 2025).

Chinese Presence in the Middle East

The new post-2020 world has seen China grow to be one of the most prominent external forces in the Middle East, with its economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical presence in the region significantly increasing. The Chinese have been more interested in economic cooperation, building infrastructure, trade partners, and diplomacy than the United States has been in its history, which has been dominated by military alliances and security deals. In the Middle East, Beijing's policy has mostly been the non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states, which has been attractive to many Middle Eastern governments that have looked to China for economic investment without political pressure or demands for governance and human rights. China has been playing a more and more active part in the Middle East as the world slowly moves toward multipolarity, especially driven by the rising demand for energy, expanding energy trade, and China's global strategic agenda. The Middle East is now playing a central part in China's foreign policy and economic agenda, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to enhance connectivity and trade ties between Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East (Fulton, 2025).

China has dedicated a vast amount of resources to developing ports, industrial zones, transportation infrastructure, telecommunications and energy infrastructure throughout the Belt and Road region as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Chimerica has been involved in significant infrastructure development projects in nations like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Iran and Iraq. The investments are not just economic in nature but of strategic relevance as well, giving China a chance to reinforce the long-term political and commercial ties with governments in the region. The transportation and logistics infrastructure built under Chinese assistance strengthens trade connectivity and complements Beijing's overall strategy to ensure energy supplies and global transportation corridors. This means that China's economic diplomacy has allowed it to build a powerful presence in the region without resorting to heavy military



involvement or direct political involvement in its local conflicts. This has set China apart from Western powers, making it more appealing to Middle Eastern countries that look for diversified international relations (Liu, 2025).

However, energy cooperation is one of China's most important pillars in its ties with the Middle East. China is the world's biggest importer of energy; oil and natural gas supplies from the Gulf countries are crucial to China's economic growth and industrial development. Saudi Arabia has emerged as one of China's biggest oil suppliers, alongside other nations like Iran, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, which have also boosted energy and trade ties with Beijing. China is becoming an attractive long-term economic partner for Gulf countries, given its burgeoning size and investment potential. Besides energy cooperation, China has been strengthening its cooperation in technology and AI, digital infrastructure, renewable energy and telecoms. 5G networks and digital systems are being developed in several countries in the Middle East by Chinese companies, especially Huawei. The technological cooperation has led to China playing a greater role in the field of technology that is gaining more importance in the international arena and in the strategic rivalry between major powers (Sun, 2025).

One of the most significant developments was the successful negotiation of China's role in bringing Saudi Arabia and Iran together to restore normal relations in the Middle East, which was achieved in 2023. One of the great turning points in China's involvement in the Middle East happened in 2023 when Beijing managed to make Saudi Arabia and Iran agree to resume normal relations after years of tension and rivalry in the region. The pact was seen as a big diplomatic success for China as it demonstrated Beijing's ability to play the role of a mediator in one of the world's most strategically sensitive areas. In the Middle East, China was traditionally a figure of uncertainty for both the United States and the other nations, but its mediation efforts signaled a willingness for other regional powers to enter into dialogue with other global powers. The Saudi-Iran rapprochement was also a sign of China's wider goal of enhancing its political presence and appearing as a responsible player in the international community who could facilitate dialogue and stability in the region. This advancement consolidated Beijing's reputation as a middle-power player that prioritizes economic cooperation and peaceful engagement over military confrontation. The development reinforced Beijing's image as a neutral and pragmatic player, more inclined towards economic integration and peaceful engagement, rather than military confrontation (Ahmad, 2025).

China is increasingly active in the Middle East, with strategic geopolitical implications for the United States. While China doesn't directly threaten U.S. military supremacy, its growing economic and technological power has created strategic competition, cyber security and regional dominance concerns in Washington. China's growing presence in telecom, AI, infrastructure, and ports is a concern for American policymakers as it could erode the influence of the West and put Beijing in a stronger position to exert more leverage in the region in the future. However, China has kept its military competition with the USA in the Middle East at bay, and mainly has been using economic diplomacy, investment and political ties to increase its influence. This approach is part of China's foreign policy, which emphasizes economic integration and asserting its strategic influence over other nations while avoiding conflict. This has turned the Middle East into an ever more significant region of great power rivalry where China is trying to



gain influence by traditional means such as trade, investment, technology and diplomacy, not military force. (Khan, 2025)

Russia's Strategic Return to the Middle East

Since then, Russia has quietly been making a comeback as a key geopolitical player in the Middle East, particularly in Syria following its military intervention in 2015, a pivotal moment in regional geopolitics and global geopolitical struggles. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's role in the Middle East weakened and the U.S. became the most dominant external force in the Middle East. But during President Vladimir Putin, Moscow tried to return to the international stage and to get more strategic foothold in vital areas such as the Middle East. Russia has been actively building political, military, and economic ties with several Middle East nations via diplomacy, arms deals, energy, and security deals in the post-2020 age. Russia's expanding regional role is part of its quest to assert its centrality and to compete with the West in international politics. Russia, in contrast, tends to be a champion of state sovereignty and political stability, a stance that has drawn a number of authoritarian governments in the region (Trenin, 2025).

One of the most crucial pillars of Russia's Middle East policy is its cooperation with the Syrian regime. Moscow's military assistance to the Syrian regime during the Syrian civil war guaranteed it long-term military access to the Mediterranean Sea via naval and air bases at Tartus and Latakia. First, it saved the Syrian government and showed the capacity and readiness of Russia to extend presence of its armed forces outside its immediate neighbourhood. The Syrian war enabled Moscow to put on a show of advanced military equipment, hone its diplomatic skills, and demonstrate its reliability as a security provider for troubled or insecure regimes. Russia has also strengthened its political and military ties with Libya, Iran, Egypt and some Gulf states, apart from Syria. Russian diplomacy has increasingly begun to depict Moscow as an alternative to the West, stressing non-interference, strategic cooperation and pragmatic interaction over the ideological conditions. It has helped Russia forge closer relations with other regional countries that want more freedom in their foreign policy and less reliance on the United States (Khan, 2025).

Higher energy prices and increased geopolitical tensions around the world since 2022 had a strong impact on Middle Eastern politics and energy markets. The Russia – Ukraine Wars had important implications for Middle Eastern politics and energy markets after 2022. The conflict had a significant impact on the global energy prices, which rose markedly, and this had a positive effect on the strategic significance of Middle Eastern oil and gas producers, particularly the Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Meanwhile, the sanctions imposed on Russia by the West spurred Moscow to strengthen its economic and political ties with non-Western partners, including regional players in the Middle East. Russia increased cooperation with OPEC+ partners, particularly Saudi Arabia, to affect global energy production and market stability in the economic interest of all. The cooperation showed that Moscow could continue to play an important role in world energy policy even during the time of sanctions and political isolation from the West through strategic cooperation with the Middle Eastern states. Russia also ramped up its trade, military and diplomatic relations with nations that were not fully on board with western foreign policy (Al-Farabi, 2025).

While less powerful than China or the U.S. with its vast military arms, Russia remains a key player in Middle East geopolitics. Moscow still plays a role in the regional conflicts and



negotiation, arms sales, and energy politics. Russia's recent military interventions in Syria, Libya and Iran have shown their capacity to shape outcomes and stay relevant in region, despite the increased complexity of the international arena. Flexible diplomacy, military alliances, and pragmatic cooperation are the pillars of Russia's Middle East policy, rather than massive economic investments. In this regard, Moscow has become a new kind of global player who seeks to counterbalance the influence of the West and to play a part in shaping a multipolar regional order. The post-2020 Middle East is a region of growing geopolitical complexity, where Russia remains one of the key players influencing regional security dynamics and regional diplomacy (Markazi, 2025).

The Role of Regional Powers and Strategic Balancing

The Middle East has become an increasingly independent and pragmatic region over the last few years in response to greater great-power competition and global politics. In contrast with the previous decades, which were characterized by a strong reliance on the United States for security and political backing by many regional states, some countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, Iran and Qatar are opting for a multi-dimensional approach with a focus on maximizing both strategic autonomy and national interests. The states are increasingly playing a balancing game between different international actors instead of just sticking with one, such as the United States, China or Russia. This is a strategic balancing that is a result of the international system change, especially the gradual development of multipolarity and the loss of trust in a single pole leadership. The regional governments have become more willing to diversify their economic cooperation, security cooperation, and diplomatic ties to enhance flexibility and lessen reliance on external partners (Kamrava, 2025).

Saudi Arabia is one of the most visible instances of this new regional approach. The Kingdom has closely held security relations with the United States, but at the same time has been working to foster economic and diplomatic relations with China, while keeping in touch with Russia. Saudi Arabia's economic diversification and technological modernization plans, along with foreign investment policies, under the Vision 2030, demand a stable regional relationship, as well as partnerships with various powers around the world. Riyadh has, therefore, shifted to a more pragmatic foreign policy, focusing on economic growth and strategic agility rather than geo-political alliances. China has emerged as an increasingly vital economic partner for Saudi Arabia, especially in the realm of energy, infrastructure, and technology, highlighting Riyadh's ability to pursue independent energy policies despite them diverging from those of the United States, while participation in OPEC+ showcases Riyadh's desire to seek energy policies that are separate from the United States' (Al-Saud, 2025).

Iran is also ratcheting up its efforts to build strategic ties with non-Western nations to offset U.S. sanctions and political isolation. Iran has been testing the U.S. presence in the Middle East via regional proxy groups and political partnerships in nations like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Meanwhile, Iran is strengthening its long-term economic & security ties with China & Russia. Iran's strategic cooperation with China is an indication of its efforts to find investment and trading possibilities and diplomatic backing despite the restrictions imposed by Western countries. There has also been improved cooperation in the military and energy spheres, particularly since the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The two partnerships are examples of Iran's policy of countering the pressure of the West by bringing its own rival countries closer together (Nasr, 2025).



Similarly, Turkey has sought to adopt a multi-faceted foreign policy that would not solely prioritize relations with Western powers but also with the non-Western powers. Türkiye is a member of NATO, but it has been increasing its contacts with Russia in various areas, including energy, defense, and diplomacy, while also continuing its cooperation with the United States and Europe in the region. For Ankara, its recent interventions in Syria, Libya, the South Caucasus and the Eastern Mediterranean are a testament to its desire to become one of the most powerful players in the region and have an autonomous strategic impact. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have also engaged in a flexible diplomacy that involves cooperation with different international actors and a greater economic investment and mediation in the region. Israel, meanwhile, has been pursuing a more robust strategy with Gulf Arab nations, especially in light of the Abraham Accords, in the wake of concerns about Iran's regional influence and security concerns. Nevertheless, in the face of this regional cooperation, Israel remains as heavily reliant on America's military, economic and diplomatic support for its national security as ever before. All these developments underscore the transformation of Middle Eastern regional powers from passive actors determined by external powers to active participants in the shaping of regional geopolitics, strategic connections, and global power dynamics (Hassan, 2025).

Energy Politics and Economic Competition

Energy remains the core of the Middle East geopolitics and continues to influence decision making within the region and the outside powers. The need to transform energy systems, address economic recovery from the pandemic, and the changing geopolitical landscape are accelerating the global energy transition. These shifts have created greater competition in the investment of oil, natural gas, renewable energy and new technologies. In the Gulf in particular, energy is a powerful economic force and an important lever for geopolitical action. States, like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait, are actively seeking to diversify their economies in long-term development plans, and still heavily dependent on hydrocarbon revenues. Meanwhile, these states are seeking to invest in renewable energy investments, hydrogen development and other advanced technologies to guarantee their relevance in an evolving global energy order (Al-Maktoum, 2025).

Rapidly expanding Chinese energy demand has put the Middle East in a key role in Beijing's energy security agenda, and strengthened ties with the Gulf's oil and gas producers. Gulf-China relations have been developed from the field of traditional energy trade to the field of infrastructure construction, industry cooperation, and technological investment. Stable energy imports have driven long-term strategic ties with key producers like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, further strengthening economic ties between Asia and the Middle East. Meanwhile, the Russia-Ukraine war has also had a significant impact on global energy flows, especially in Europe. Europe has made other energy ventures less reliant on Russia, which has put Middle Eastern producers in a more strategic position, particularly Qatar that is now a major exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG). The LNG industry has emerged as an integral part of Qatar's energy landscape and its exports have gained significant importance in the energy security plans of European nations, emphasizing the country's role in global energy supply and the interconnectedness of Middle Eastern energy markets and European energy security (Hassan, 2025).

In addition to the classic energy market, competition in the Middle East has recently spread to technological development, infrastructure investment, logistics networks, ports,



and digital connectivity. Today, some of the world's leading powers use economic leverage as a tool of geopolitical competition, rather than simply as a business tool. The investment in ports, industrial corridors, telecommunication networks and digital systems is increasingly aligned with strategic objectives and linked to the exercise of influence on trade corridors, supply chains and data networks. China, the United States and Russia are competing to spread their influence by building infrastructure, strengthening defence ties and technology ties. This has made economic relations with the Middle East highly sensitive to security concerns and has created a division between economic and security policies that has not existed before. In a region that is becoming more technologically interconnected, this changing landscape is a testament to how technology and infrastructure are now key instruments of geopolitical influence (Khan, 2025).

The After-2020 Security Challenge

While some diplomatic progress and normalisation have been made, the Middle East remains beset by ongoing and complex security concerns that can undermine the stability of the region. Syria, Yemen, Libya and Gaza continue to be significant hotspots of instability which are driving humanitarian crises, displacement and political divides. These wars tend to be long, with regional and external actors joining in on both sides to gain strategic benefits. Sectorial differences, doctrinal differences, terrorism and lack of effective governance add to the complexity of dealing with regional peace and stability. Political volatility in several states has fostered an environment that allows non-state armed groups to become more influential in determining security outcomes in the Middle East (Nasr, 2025).

The nuclear program in Iran is one of the biggest security threats that remains relevant and contributes to the tension between Tehran and Washington, as well as Tehran and its neighbours, Israel and the Gulf Arab countries. The failure to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has added to the uncertainty in the balance of regional security. Without a comprehensive deal, tensions between Iran and Western powers have grown, and there is a risk of further escalation. Meanwhile, technological advances like cyber warfare, drone technology and precision missile systems have revolutionized the way wars are fought in the Middle East today. New forms of fighting have made security conditions more volatile and brought state and non-state actors to the extreme vulnerability to asymmetric threats. The modern security landscape in the post-2020 era is witnessing a transformation in warfare as a result of technological advancements, with cyberattacks on critical infrastructure and the growing role of drone warfare in regional conflicts. Technological innovation is revolutionizing warfare in the post-2020 security landscape, as evidenced by the use of drones in conflicts and cyberattacks on critical infrastructure.

The region's increasing entanglements with outside powers have had a mixed impact on regional security. Global actors, like the USA, China, and Russia, can be a good aspect of deterrence, conflict management, and diplomatic mediation on the other hand. Great power competition can also, however, fuel proxy wars, regional schisms and bring about protracted instability through the formation of competing coalitions. External conflicting powers can draw their own strategic interests into local conflict, making it possible for local situations to become linked to wider geopolitical rivalries. The interplay of regional instability and global competition reflects the intricacies of the Middle Eastern security landscape in the post-2020 period. In conclusion, although diplomatic



engagement and economic cooperation have brought some stability, the region remains to face serious challenges to long-term peace and security from unresolved conflicts and escalating great power rivalry (Al-Rashid, 2025).

Conclusion

There are significant changes in the geopolitical picture in the Middle East from the beginning of the post-2020 era. Competition is now multipolar, with the United States, China and Russia, as well as assertive regional powers, at play. American presence is still strong but not unchallenged any longer. Economic and diplomatic engagement has increased in China, and military and strategic influence has grown in Russia.

To enable autonomy and secure national interests, regional states have sought to pursue strategic balancing policies and diversifying partnerships. Geopolitical tensions remain defined by energy politics, technological rivalry, the security of the seas, and regional conflicts.

The future of the Middle East will primarily rely on the way global and regional powers compete, negotiate and cooperate on security matters. With a lack of effective conflict management, there can be more instability if there is greater competition. But, with greater economic entanglements and diplomatic contacts also comes opportunities for regional cooperation and strategic balance in a new multipolar world order.

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