China in the Middle East: Following in American Footsteps?

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Articles & Testimony

Growing great-power competition and a shift in American defense policy could create a power vacuum in the Middle East.

The US National Defense Strategy, issued in January 2018 by Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, begins with a brief sentence whose implications for American policy are nevertheless profound. 'Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism,' it asserts, 'is now the primary concern in US national security.' Given that the United States has been squarely focused on terrorism since September 11, 2001, and has fought two major wars and numerous smaller engagements in large part to combat it, the shift described is significant.

The precise meaning of this shift for US policy in the Middle East is not explained in the National Defense Strategy, nor in the more broadly focused National Security Strategy promulgated by the White House. At first blush, the pivot would seem to imply a diminished focus on the Middle East. The region is certainly at the centre of any policy of counter-terrorism, but is not home to any global powers and has not for some decades been a major theatre of great power competition.

Yet there are signs that this may be changing. The most visible sign of this change is the Russian intervention in Syria, which since 2015 has not only heralded the rekindling of Moscow's ambition to be a major regional player, but has brought US and Russian forces into uncomfortably close proximity. Yet Russia's aspirations are ultimately constrained by the limits of its financial resources and diplomatic influence.

China's mounting involvement in the Middle East has been less ostentatious than Russia's, yet is likely to be more significant in the long run. As China's economy has grown, so have its economic interests in the Middle East, which for Beijing is a source of energy and investment, as well as a destination for Chinese capital and workers.

Following the well-trod pattern of emerging powers, Chinese diplomats and soldiers have followed in the wake of its merchants. Beijing has dispatched naval forces to protect trade routes and to evacuate citizens caught amid regional

strife, as well as special envoys for Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and other issues to ensure China's place at the diplomatic table. American disillusionment and disengagement from the region and the resulting vacuum in international leadership has arguably increased both the urgency and appeal of these activities for Chinese leaders.

Chinese and American interests in the Middle East are strikingly similar. The states of the Persian Gulf supply China with a significant portion of its imported oil and natural gas, a dependency that is likely to grow in coming years. The United States, in contrast, has become increasingly self-sufficient with respect to its energy supply; however, global energy prices and thus the global economy remain susceptible to shocks originating in the region, and US allies in Asia and elsewhere are critically dependent on Middle Eastern supplies. Likewise, both the United States and China have been the victim of terrorist attacks directed or inspired by groups based in the Middle East and have sought to address the problem at its source. For the United States, this has meant a campaign of counter-terrorism operations alongside diplomatic and economic pressure targeting states that sponsor terrorist groups. Beijing for its part has sought cooperation with the Syrian government regarding foreign fighters from its Uyghur minority.

These overlapping interests and a common desire to foster regional stability have not, however, resulted in any strategic convergence between the US and China. Gone are the days of Chinese support for guerrilla movements like Yasser Arafat's PLO, yet wide gaps remain in the American and Chinese approaches to the region. While the US has intervened proactively in the region, both militarily and politically to bolster friendly governments, promote democratic and pro-market reform, and counter threats to American interests, Beijing has striven to secure smooth diplomatic relations with just about all governments of the region, even those otherwise ostracised by the community of nations. This tendency, combined with a reflexive opposition to the assertion of American power in global affairs, has given China a broad set of shallow relationships, and has positioned it, intentionally or not, as the defender of regimes such as that of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

Yet just as the United States' strategy is shifting, so too is China's. As its economic and political profile in the region has grown, China has tried harder to exercise leadership—convening diplomatic conferences on issues like Syria and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—and has increasingly taken sides in the Middle East's disputes. As elsewhere, it has also fostered deep economic ties and embedded itself in the region's critical infrastructure. Beijing's main ally is shaping up to be Iran, which not only offers potential access by land to the region's energy supplies, but is the only state on the Gulf littoral not locked into a security relationship with Washington.

Thus far, American concern regarding China-Iran cooperation has focused on the threats posed by the latter—Chinese assistance for Iran's nuclear and missile programme, for example. But with an increasing focus on inter-state strategic competition, it is possible that this concern will grow to encompass the ways in which Iran facilitates Chinese efforts to out-compete the United States globally. This, in turn, feeds into the American perception that there exists a global bloc of revisionist states determined to weaken the US-led international order.

How US policy in the Middle East will shift as a result of mounting global great power competition remains uncertain. American fatigue with the Middle East and competing priorities elsewhere might tempt US policymakers to continue to disengage from the region, leaving regional powers to shoulder greater burdens and external actors to seize further opportunities. Amid increasing great power rivalry, however, concerns about ceding strategic ground to China and others may grow to outweigh any stratagem of burden-shifting.

In practice, the scepticism regarding open-ended nation-building enterprises in the Middle East will likely continue, and Washington's military focus in the region may shift toward ensuring that no other power can exclude the US from the region's congested airspace and sea lanes. At the same time, the US is likely to promote the involvement of friendly external powers such as India, Japan, and the EU in the region, and seek to pull US regional allies closer and improve their resilience to economic and political subversion. Particularly key in this regard will be Turkey, of great interest to US rivals by virtue of its geographic position and the prospect that strained US-Turkish ties could rupture

NATO.

Of course, the interests the US and China share in the Middle East give rise to the prospect of not only conflict, but also cooperation. Neither party relishes the prospect of assuming the region's burdens alone, or of it becoming a theatre of great power struggle. Yet cooperation will depend not only on identifying common threats and opportunities in the Middle East, but conceiving inter-state strategic competition in a manner that is not strictly zero sum. If the two sides can do so, then US and Chinese shared interests in the Middle East can become a source of relief from bilateral tensions in Asia, rather than an extension of them.

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