

US FOREIGN POLICY: MULTIPOLARITY AND TECH-SECURITY RIVALRIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Executive Summary

This essay looks at United States foreign policy in the Middle East with a particular focus on growing tech-security rivalries and multipolarity. The region's geopolitics is no longer merely determined by military might or unrivaled influence, such as the US hegemony in the post-Cold War era. As the shifting sands of the Middle East transition into a multipolar arena for rival powers, the race for influence, control of resources, and trade routes intensifies, especially between the US, Russia, and China. To respond to growing multipolarity, the US is prioritizing tech-security partnerships under the Trump 2.0 administration's foreign policy playbook to maintain strategic leverage.

Along with the potential for inclusive political frameworks, multipolarity also carries the risk of alliance fragmentation, escalating conflict, and regional instability. How the US adapts its strategic posture matters to regional stability, especially through leveraging tech-security partnerships and assertive diplomacy to maintain exclusive influence.

This essay argues that America can lead by embracing an integrated strategy that links the Middle East to regional and international networks. It calls for US leadership to play a proactive role, respected not merely as a military power but as a guarantor of security that the Middle East urgently needs and that America's adversaries and competitors are not willing or are unable to provide.

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US Strategic Posture and Foreign Policy

The policy, interests, and values underlying United States foreign policy have long been debated in the Middle East. From the American perspective, the region's future, and US national security cannot be secured without direct US engagement. Historically, following the Cold War, US's strategic positioning in the Middle East came with certain assumptions of responsibility for the region's security and stability. This engagement takes its roots in the region's geostrategic location and its role as a hub for power rivalry involving the US, Europe, and adversarial powers like Russia and China. Under successive administrations, the Middle East has continuously remained a high-stake priority for the US's strategic posture to exert influence over the region's political, economic, and alliance structures.

On the security front, to counter real and perceived threats, the US foreign policy compass consistently revolves around a strategy of containment towards Iran alongside active engagement with key regional actors, particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Yet with multipolarization gradually taking root in the world, the Middle East heads toward a fracturing alliance system, renewed conflicts, and possible erosion of long-standing assumptions among legacy alliances. This new phase of multipolarity urges major players, especially the US, to recalibrate its foreign policy approach in response to growing competition among regional poles vying for influence and power. Within the larger foreign policy context, specifically under Trump 2.0 administration, Washington's diplomatic presence converges with its military posture, with a particular focus on defense technology as central instruments of influence. In a region facing both political fragmentation and alarming multipolar competition, the US seeks to leverage arms deals, tech-security partnerships with key regional states such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar. President Trump formalized the signing of \$142 billion arms package with Saudi Arabia, touted as the largest-

ever US defense sale alongside a \$600 billion economic and tech investment pledge. Trump also inked an agreement with Qatar worth \$1.2 trillion, including defense sales, such as drones and remotely piloted aircraft. Finally, the UAE pledged over \$200 billion in investment deals including AI and tech infrastructure partnership with the US. The UAE also signed a partnership deal to build the largest AI data center outside the US in Abu Dhabi. These signature deals reflect a tech-security-focused approach in Trump 2.0 administration's diplomacy, using arms diplomacy, AI infrastructure, and investment partnership as key influence levers in the Middle East.

Under conditions of emerging multipolarity, it is important to evaluate the US policy framework and influence instruments to explore the risks and opportunities arising from a multipolar Middle East. As multipolarity steadily alters the regional balance of power, the Middle East serves as both a testing ground and a partner for the US where defense, emerging technology, and diplomacy strategically intersect. The question of how the US adapts to the shifting geopolitical reality of the Middle East (namely from a unipolar to multipolar regional order) while maintaining strategic leverage matters significantly to effectively address power competition, escalating conflicts, instability, and emerging security dilemma.

Prospects for Security and Stability in a Multipolar Middle East

The Middle East's security and stability have long been the aspiration of any outside power that assumed dominance in the region. Yet, the clash of interests, combined with the region's fertile geostrategic hub for rivalry, has rendered this aspiration futile. Against this backdrop, today the region undergoes another period of transformation, as conflicts and geopolitical interests of great power competition reshape its security architecture and political

alignments. The region's security and stability profoundly remained fragile even during periods of relative unipolarity, under US hegemonic dominance, as manifested in political turmoil and recurring conflicts. Currently, this competition for influence majorly concentrates around the existing battlefields in the region, especially in Israel's cold war against Hamas and Iran's axis of evil throughout the Middle East.¹

Amid growing multipolarity,² the United States remains a central player, leveraging defense partnerships and cutting-edge technologies to maintain its strategic foothold. The largest \$142 billion US-Saudi arms agreement in history signals the region's turn toward growing defense capabilities with the Israel-Gaza war looming. Without a doubt, the US's Middle East foreign policy, especially under the Trump 2.0 administration, is positioned to capitalize on advanced defense technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), fighter jets, cyber capabilities, and hypersonic weapons, as central instruments in diplomacy and security relationships across the region.

Undoubtedly, a growing multipolar Middle East holds promise of a more inclusive regional order that rejects established dominant powers, such as the US and its allies, to decide the future of the region. Nonetheless, the risks of multipolarity greatly jeopardize the region's stability, such as by preventing a peaceful political resolution to its long-standing conflicts. Currently, a rift between rival powers is clearly seen, with the US, China, Russia, and, to an extent, Europe as the major competing poles actively working through their foreign policy tools to influence outcomes and policy in the Middle East. With the ongoing Israel-Gaza war and the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, the risk of multipolarity in the Middle East is becoming even more acute. There is no doubt that the region has already hedged toward greater fragmentation. More importantly, multipolarity deepens the divisions that first sharpened during the Arab Spring and the onslaught of ISIS in Syria and Iraq between 2014

and 2017. When it comes to these acute risks, Washington, realizing its military edge, moves to reprioritize US interests in the region that mainly focuses on security and defense technology as the strategic advantage of US. By strengthening the defense capabilities of partners and allies, the US can not only pursue a buck-passing strategy in times of crisis but also increase critical deterrence against adversaries in the region.

Balancing Influence

Core US policy framework under Trump's second administration resuscitates a subtle transactional diplomacy where the premises of burden-sharing, economic leverage, and security partnerships are prioritized. Washington's cutting-edge defense industrial base remains key to US influence instruments in the Middle East historically, and specifically under Trump 2.0. Although US under President Trump's leadership has been labeled as obsolete in terms of long-term diplomatic strategy, enhancing long-term security frameworks, which is essential to economic interests, remains central to US engagements in the region.³ Increasing multipolarity signals the nature of alliance building is undergoing major shifts and thus requires refocused diplomacy. Greater player plurality is evident in China's Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's military presence and arms exports, and Europe's increasing diplomatic engagements in Iran, Syria and Gaza. In response, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar pursue diversified relationships with these key players to balance US influence and prevent overreliance on the US.

For instance, China offers advanced technology transfers and infrastructure investments, such as through a digital Silk Road (DSR), establishing giant cloud data storage centers, and AI R&D in the Middle East.⁴ Russia maintains tactical arms exports and military relationships in the region. Since 2021, Russia made 40-50% of total military exports only to Middle

East,⁵ which included advanced systems such as fighter aircrafts. Assuming a comparative advantage, Russia continues arms sales to key Middle East players as part of Moscow's foreign policy arsenal in its competition against the US. Europe, while in the past remained on the sidelines of the region's many crises, now ambitiously aims at greater influence. While playing an active humanitarian role, Europe seeks to build a stronger and more strategic partnership with the GCC countries, enacting its first-ever Gulf strategy in 2022.⁶ Yet, these actors' quest for more influence is greatly influenced by Trump 2.0 administration, that prioritizes strategic partnerships with key local players to tilt the region towards US's pole, shaping the contours of its deterrence and strategic posture.

Nonetheless, multiple poles of power require Washington to evolve from a zero-sum game mindset to strategic alliance building that ensures long-term dependence on US. More importantly, the US should not cling to an outdated unipolar strategy that will inherently weaken the US's overall security architecture that critically depends on host bases, logistics hubs, and energy chokepoint security, such as in the Red Sea. The new US administration under Trump 2.0 may lack a long-term engagement strategy in the region momentarily, but it has demonstrated the capacity to forge meaningful partnerships with key players such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar while not hesitating to employ military force when diplomacy fails, such as strikes on Iran's nuclear sites,⁷ not only as a means of containment but also a show of American might in the region and beyond.

Tech-Security Rivalry: The Middle East as a Testing Ground

In the 1988 US National Security Strategy, the Reagan administration recognized the significance of the Middle East and actively worked to prevent the Soviet Union from capitalizing on the region's geostrategic advantage. During that period, maintaining political

dominance over the Middle East was vital to US hegemony and containing the spread of communism and thus, turning the Middle East into a geopolitical hotspot between the Soviet Union and the US.⁸ Today, multiple actors are vying for influence in the Middle East beyond bipolar rivalry. Regional powerhouses like the GCC have strengthened their agency by leveraging oil, investment, and defense partnerships in pursuit of security and economic development. This is where the nexus of technology and security is amplified by allowing these regional players to engage diverse partners, specifically the US, Russia, and China, and strategically play these powers against one another for influence. The Middle East serves not only as a partner arena for these regional rivals but also a testing ground for advanced weaponry, manifest in the Israel-Gaza war, the remote confrontation between Iran-Israel (involving the US), and proxy wars such as those with the Houthis in the Red Sea.

In the context of the US-China contest for dominance, the Middle East proves fertile ground for tech-security rivalry- that is to build up technological, defense, and national security capabilities of rival powers based on heightened threat perceptions and the powerful influence of domestic pro-security coalitions.⁹ Given the concept of the techno-security state,¹⁰ the US, China, and, to an extent, Russia seek to expand their geopolitical footprints through the establishment of economic zones, security partnerships, and arms deals. This approach/rivalry increasingly transforms the Middle East into both a partner and a testing ground for these advanced weapons systems across multiple domains. Specifically, the US provides a suite of next-gen systems, such as precision-guided munitions, fifth-generation fighters, missile defense systems, hypersonic and long-range missiles, and autonomous drones, as well as cyber capabilities and AI-driven integration.

This portfolio of advanced systems assures the US technological edge and strengthens strategic dominance. For instance, while gaining unprecedented military capabilities,

regional powerhouses like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar deepen their security reliance on the US defense industrial base, guaranteeing long-term partnership and influence. Even more importantly, Washington's billion-dollar defense deals with GCC countries signal commitment to strengthening partners' deterrence defensive posture. This new phase in the US's foreign policy approach stands in stark contrast to popular perceptions of the United States as unreliable, unpredictable, and unwilling to sustain long-term security guarantees in the Middle East. Tech-security as a currency for partnership reinforces the US position as the indispensable security partner, if not guarantor.

China and Russia's versions are often cheaper, though come with fewer political and normative conditions. In this sense, their platforms remain relevant to regional players, who often fear complete dependency on US platforms that relatively increases Washington's strategic posture in the region. For instance, Russia's MiG-29 fighter jets are easier to maintain and cheaper than advanced US fighters, without burdening arms sales with preconditions.¹¹ In the case of China, the Middle East serves as an emerging market for China's arms sales, especially military drones. For example, China's advanced Wing Loong drones, which are similar to US -made MQ-1 Predator drones, are more affordable, easier for regional integration, and come with few political conditions. Since 2017, China's drones have found buyers across the Middle East and particularly the Gulf, as a result of US restrictions on similar drones that opened the door for Chinese alternatives.¹²

Another key observation is that China and Russia's arms sales, and by extension, techno-security competitions, remain mere military hardware with little strategic influence, as they are not paired with building meaningful alliances and lack diplomatic strategizing with regional actors. This is where the US tech-enabled arms diplomacy becomes a tool of influence by leveraging emerging defense tech capabilities that form the backbone of a new

diplomatic language- one where arms deals and tech transfer meet to create deep, strategic partnerships. These shared capabilities with key regional actors allow the US to embed itself in the defense industrial bases of these partners and thus enable interoperability, intelligence sharing, increased deterrence, and long-term political alignment.

If the US continues to utilize complementary diplomatic support alongside tech-security partnerships, it can effectively build partners' capacities to contribute to regional US objectives,¹³ bolster alliances, and counteract adversarial influences in the Middle East. The US not only remains the region's dominant arms supplier but also stands out as the only power capable of conducting high-level diplomacy as a complementary measure to its military footprint. As such, the United States' long-term diplomatic strategy highlights the fusion of military power and technological innovations that collectively shape US influence and leadership. This strategy is evident in the 1995 National Security Strategy (NSS),¹⁴ which emphasizes maintaining US superiority —better understood today as influence- in both military and technological domains to advance diplomatic objectives and sustain regional stability.

The Way to Stability

To some critics, the United States lacks consistent strategy when it comes to setting foreign policy doctrine. Steven Metz, the Henry L. Stimson professor of military studies at the US Army War College, explains this lack of concrete blueprint for a coherent national strategy, mainly due to “centuries of isolationism; the absence of clear threats to national security and abundant natural resources meant that there was little need for strategy.”¹⁵ For the 21st century, the United States is at a crossroads as the world's political stage is transitioning into multipolarity. The Middle East, among other regions of the globe, is at the center of this

transition, serving as an acute multipolar arena. The US's long-term aspiration to bring about stability to the region requires a consistent, interconnected foreign policy approach that links the region to the world.

First, the Middle East needs to be integrated into global political, economic, and technological networks not only as a means to deepen its interdependence but also to create shared stakes in stability. A consistent, inclusive strategy needs to include all countries in the region, not only wealthy Gulf states, but also their adjacent neighbors like Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and possibly Iran. They also need to be part of infrastructure projects, such as digital connectivity and multilateral trade agreements that link them to the Gulf's technological advancement with global markets. Countries like Iraq and Syria lie at the heart of the Middle East's geopolitical map, and thus the spread of terrorism and instability within their borders generates ripple effects with far-reaching security implications for the entire region.

Second, the United States' integrative strategy for the region must build on its technological edge that fosters new partnerships. As the world's hub of technological innovation, the US is well positioned to promote collaboration in emerging technologies, such as AI applications across various sectors. Leveraging technology for diplomatic engagement should be the US's foremost policy objective in the region, not just as tools of military dominance but as platforms for joint security frameworks that address security challenges.

Finally, the US policy should consider selective cooperation on regional issues to balance the multipolar competition with China and Russia. Although competition with these great powers will persist, cooperating on urgent issues, such as counterterrorism in Iraq and Syria, nuclear proliferation in Iran, and humanitarian crises in Gaza, can open channels for diplomatic negotiations, ease tensions, and project influence through skillful leadership. This approach

enables US leadership to play a proactive role in the region, respected not merely as a military power but as a guarantor of security and development that the Middle East urgently needs and that America's adversaries and competitors are not willing or are unable to provide.

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