Beyond Bipolarity: China-US Competition and Asymmetric Multipolarity in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT: This study asks why expanding Chinese influence in the Middle East has not produced either American strategic displacement or a stable bipolar order. Drawing on Regional Security Complex Theory, documentary analysis and eight expert interviews, the article develops asymmetric multipolarity: a regional order in which several external and regional actors are consequential, but their capabilities and functions are distributed unevenly across security, economic, technological and diplomatic domains. A structured comparison of Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates identifies three responses. Saudi Arabia pursues dual-track diversification, retaining US defence dependence while expanding Chinese energy and infrastructure ties. The UAE employs functional compartmentalization but faces sharper constraints where artificial intelligence, cloud infrastructure and export controls connect economics with national security. Iran's China relationship is better understood as sanctions-constrained alignment because confrontation with Washington narrows its alternatives. Across the cases, the United States remains the principal provider of deterrence, interoperability and maritime security, whereas China is a major trade, energy, infrastructure and technology partner without assuming equivalent security burdens. The article separates polarity from sectoral influence and shows that regional agency mediates great power rivalry without eliminating structural dependence. The Middle East is therefore moving neither towards Chinese hegemony nor simple bipolarity, but towards a differentiated order of competitive coexistence.

KEYWORDS: China-US Competition, Middle East, Asymmetric Multipolarity, Strategic Diversification, Hedging, Regional Security Complex Theory, Saudi Arabia, Iran, United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

The Middle East is often described as a proving ground for a new bipolar contest between the United States and China (Kausch, 2015; Cooley & Nexon, 2020; U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission [USCC], 2024a). Beijing has grown increasingly active in energy, trade, infrastructure, and digital systems, and Washington maintains strong military, intelligence, and defence relationships (Scobell & Nader, 2016; State Council of the People's Republic of China [PRC], 2016; Cronk, 2021; USCC, 2024a). However, the regional behaviour is not characterized by bipolarity (Cold War) (Kausch, 2015; Garlick & Havlová, 2020). Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to have close security ties with the United States and are also developing commercial and technological relations with China, while Iran's ties with Beijing are pragmatic and limited by sanctions (Garlick & Havlová, 2020; USCC, 2024b). The question that remains is why China's rise has not created a China-centric bloc or taken over U.S. security leadership (Alterman, 2009; Kausch, 2015; Scobell & Nader, 2016).

There are three limitations to the current explanations. First, power transition and realist accounts can add up national capabilities in such a way as to mask the differences between the types of power (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979; Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Cooley & Nexon, 2020). States can rely on a different power for defense interoperability and a different power for infrastructure or energy (Goh, 2005; Kausch, 2015; Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019). Second, hedging is used to indicate intentional non-exclusive alignment but is turned into a descriptive when used in relation to any mixed foreign policy (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; Haacke, 2019; Yetim & Hazar, 2025). Third, the regional agency can be minimised in accounts focusing on Washington or Beijing: Middle Eastern governments do have a role in access, impose conditions, and exploit competing offers (Kausch, 2015; Garlick & Havlová, 2020; Cooley & Nexon, 2020).

This article addresses these limitations through asymmetric multipolarity: a regional arrangement in which several actors exert significant influence, but their functions and capabilities remain unevenly distributed (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Kausch, 2015). The United States currently holds a significant advantage in deterrence, air and missile defense, intelligence and maritime security, and partnership diplomacy, while China has a strong position in energy, trade, infrastructure, and digital systems, but has not constructed an equivalent regional security network (Scobell & Nader, 2016; State Council of the PRC, 2016; Cronk, 2021, Garamone, 2023; USCC, 2024a). The powers are used selectively by regional states, depending on their security needs, the nature of sanctions imposed, and development priorities and advanced technology at their disposal (Goh, 2005; Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; Farrell & Newman, 2019).

The article asks how the unequal distribution of American and Chinese influence across military, economic, and technological domains shapes Middle Eastern state strategies. It makes three arguments: differentiated external roles facilitate functional compartmentalization instead of exclusive alignment (Goh, 2005; Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019); durable US security institutions create limits for China to diversify commercial weight to regional leadership (Scobell & Nader, 2016; Cronk, 2021; USCC, 2024b); and diversification grows to a maximum where technological controls, interoperability, and sanctions and intelligence relations limit it (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Haacke, 2019).

A structured comparison of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE, supplemented by eight expert interviews, tests these propositions. Saudi Arabia is highly reliant on the United States for security, and has extensive energy and development ties with China, while the UAE has large logistics and technology ties with China and strong defense ties with the United States; and Iran has an adversarial relationship with Washington, which greatly constrains alternatives, and makes China's role more important (Scobell & Nader 2016; Garlick & Havlová 2020; USCC 2024a). These differences help underscore that strategic diversification is not a regionally uniform process (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; Haacke, 2019).

The contribution is both theoretical and empirical. The article builds on Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to expand the definition of external penetration from alliances to the military, geo-economic, and technological fields (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Farrell & Newman, 2019). The framework is developed in Sections 2-3, the research design is explained in Section 4, and the findings are presented for each sector, comparative and interview findings in Sections 5-7, and the implications are discussed in Section 8 before the conclusion.

From Power Transition to Regional Diversification

The Limits of Bipolarity and Hegemonic Replacement

Classical realism expects rising powers to challenge established powers and weaker states to balance or bandwagon (Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001). Translated to the Middle East, it focuses on whether China is displacing the United States and whether governments in the region are taking sides, particularly in the energy corridors, ports, military access, telecommunications, and political manipulation.

However, aggregate capability does not show how power operates within sectors. These three are not automatically interchangeable: investment in ports does not automatically lead to basing rights, arms sales do not lead to political compliance, and oil sales does not lead to a security umbrella. An exit strategy and other alternative networks and institutional contestation can also undermine hegemonic orders, but without offering anyone a single alternative (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). The decline of unipolarity, too, can produce a plural, negotiated order, not a new hierarchy (Acharya, 2014).

Kausch (2015) singles out the Middle East as a region of competitive multipolarity with increased Chinese and Russian influence, and the emergence of regional swing states. However, multipolarity can also suggest several similar powers that are competing within the same strategic sphere. China has the potential to influence energy, infrastructure, and diplomacy, but it has not built an alliance, logistics, intelligence, and operational architecture for crisis security that could complement or ultimately supplant the United States. However, it is not only the number of influential actors that is an issue but how strategic functions are spread around.

Hedging: Useful Concept, Weak Boundary

Hedging offers a more behaviourally nuanced account. It is used to describe mixed policies which do not irrevocably align under uncertainty (Goh, 2005; Kuik, 2008; Tessman & Wolfe, 2011; Tessman, 2012). Hedging is also required to involve meaningful choices and the material or political costs that come with them in contrast to routine diversification (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; Haacke, 2019). US security relationships are key to preserving US access to Gulf energy, and China is desired as an energy market, investor, and technology partner. China has been said to be "hedging" against its rivals to secure "connectivity" and "energy security" (Salman & Geeraerts, 2015; Garlick & Havlová, 2020). This is referred to as ‘even-handedness' by Sun et al. (2024) and the UAE's attempt to balance US security and Chinese economic and tech connections (Huwaidin, 2024).

Hedging alone does not explain the structure that enables or constrains such behaviour. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have a wide-ranging security partnership with the United States and are already cooperating with China, while Iran does not have the same kind of arrangement with the United States. In addition, the security and intelligence of commercial options can become computing and military interoperability options. The analytical task is thus to link up between state strategy and regional allocation of functions and constraints.

Regional Security and Non-Military External Penetration

RSCT provides this regional foundation. Buzan and Wæver (2003) believe that the interdependence of security is greatest between neighbouring states and that external powers 'infiltrate' regional security complexes. Local tensions, security concerns of the regimes and territorial disputes demand outside assistance in the Middle East; outside powers can influence regional dynamics through alliances and partnerships.

The concept of external penetration must also account for non-military dependencies. Strategic influence can be achieved without formal alliances by ownership of infrastructure, cloud architecture, surveillance, governance of data and energy, and financial connectivity. Murphy (2022) illustrates China's approach to the Global South via partnerships, institutions, and political narratives, while the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies the influence that can be produced through connectivity, subject to the priorities of the host country (Garlick, 2020). However, from a different strategic angle, USCC (2024b) also paints a picture of a China that is broadly involved in the Middle East but selectively so, without speculating on the existence of a Chinese regional security architecture. Table 1 contrasts this sectoral differentiation with bipolarity, conventional multipolarity and hedging.

Table 1

Distinguishing Bipolarity, Multipolarity, Hedging and Asymmetric Multipolarity

Concept	Unit of analysis	Core expectation	Main limitations for this study	Source
Bipolarity	System or region	Two comparable poles generate bloc formation and high alignment pressure.	US and Chinese functions in the Middle East are not equivalent or institutionally comparable.	Buzan & Wæver (2003)
Conventional multipolarity	System or region	Several powers possess broadly comparable capacity to shape the same strategic field.	It can overstate the convertibility of economic, technological and military influence.	Cooley & Nexon (2020)
Hedging	State strategy	A state combines contradictory policies to manage uncertainty and avoid irreversible alignment.	It describes behaviour but does not by itself explain the sectorally differentiated regional structure.	Goh (2005); Kausch (2015); Ciorciari & Haacke (2019)
Asymmetric multipolarity	Regional order	Several actors are consequential, but functions, burdens and dependencies are unevenly distributed across sectors.	Requires careful specification of sectors and should not be treated as a claim of equal polarity.	Author's conceptual synthesis based on Buzan & Wæver (2003), Goh (2005), Kausch (2015), Ciorciari & Haacke (2019), and Cooley & Nexon (2020)

Asymmetric Multipolarity: Concept and Propositions

Asymmetric multipolarity refers to a regional order having three characteristics: the state's choices are affected by multiple internal or external factors; influence varies between domains of security, trade, technology, and infrastructure; regional states compartmentalize external relations but are subject to sector-specific dependencies. This notion thus connects regional structure to state agency and does not imply that all the actors involved have the same power.

The first dimension is differentiated external function. The United States provides security capabilities in terms of basing, intelligence, training and maintenance, and interoperability, while China provides many of the economic and technological inputs that are crucial to development strategies such as energy demand, engineering, ports, industrial zones, and telecommunications. These functions are similar but not interchangeable.

The second dimension is unequal burden sharing. While China is a major consumer of Middle Eastern energy and seaborne trade, the backbone of China's maritime and deterrence architecture is disproportionately based on

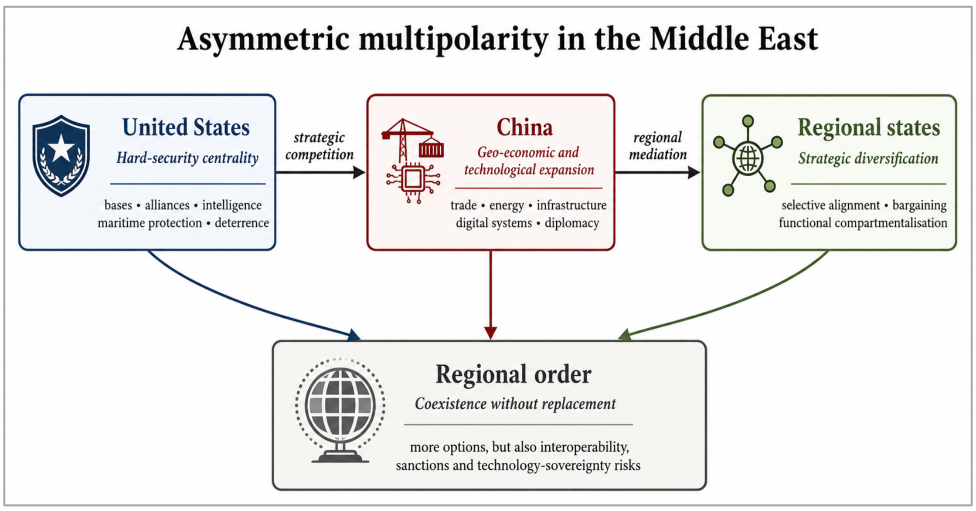
U.S. and partner support. Beijing's involvement includes anti-piracy operations and its presence in Djibouti but has yet to become the primary security guarantor in the region (Scobell & Nader, 2016; USCC, 2024b).

Compartmentalization in the third dimension is functional. Different partners for different budgets - government purposes: finance, diplomacy, technology, energy, infrastructure, defence, and intelligence. It is a better formula than security from Washington, economics from Beijing, as both powers work on an inter-sectoral basis, and technology is increasingly civilian development and security. It is thus a strategy rather than a predetermined arrangement of labour.

The fourth dimension is persistent cross-domain constraint. Governments can join sectors that they want to keep separate by creating export controls, sanctions, data security, and defence interoperability. Microsoft's recent investment in G42 is an example of this: access to high-end US cloud and AI platforms came with security promises of a US-China technology race (Microsoft, 2024). American security centrality and Chinese geo-economic and technological expansion can create coexisting, not replacing, ultimately generating an increase in bargaining space and maintaining institutional constraints, as summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Architecture of Asymmetric Multipolarity



(Source: Author's conceptual model)

Three propositions guide the analysis. First, an alignment process is allowed to be selective or differentiated, and it is not the exclusive formation of blocs (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019). Second, the US security institutions are significantly deeper than their Chinese counterparts, so they will not be fully replaced by Chinese commercial and diplomatic expansion. Third, diversification provides more bargaining leverage, but not full autonomy, as its depth and reach are limited by alliance dependence, sanctions, and technology dependence (Scobell & Nader, 2016; Farrell & Newman, 2019).

Research Design and Methods

The article employs a qualitative design based on an interpretivist approach with structured focused comparison, documentary analysis, content analysis, and supplementary semi-structured expert interviews. It is explanatory, not statistical; that is, it is designed to explain the nature and perception of differentiated external influence across cases and whether observed patterns are consistent with the propositions.

Through "maximum variation logic," Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE were chosen. They all have consequential ties with China and have very different relations with the U.S.: Saudi Arabia's US security partnership and economic transformation; the UAE's deep security ties and ambitious logistics, cloud and AI policies; and sanctions pressure on Iran to lean closer to China and severely constrain hedging options. The contrasts allow for the evaluation of the effect of structural conditions on strategic diversification.

The supplementary primary evidence was comprised of 8 semi structured expert interviews from the underlying doctoral study. They were held from 20 March to 31 July 2026 and included academics and experts on conflict, Middle Eastern politics, international affairs and US foreign policy. The interviewees are numbered from 1 to 8. The purposive subset was chosen because it is directly relevant to the China-US rivalry, is sectoral asymmetric, and is strategically diversified and security-dependent. Themes of contested US reliability, China's geo-economic role, maritime vulnerability, and data sovereignty and resistance to binary alignment were combined with deductive categories of security dependence, hedging, and external penetration and technology competition. The interviews cross-check the patterns found in the documents and do not necessarily reflect a regional perspective.

The same questions are asked regarding each case, such as what is being done by the United States and China, which relationships are institutionalized and hard to replace, which domestic priorities promote diversification, which cross-domain constraints are limiting, and what is the strategy outcome. This comparative logic is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Comparative Research Design and Case Selection Logic

Case	Key Structural Condition	Expected Response	Analytical Leverage
Saudi Arabia	High US security dependence; major Chinese energy relationship; ambitious economic transformation.	Dual track diversification.	Tests whether a central US partner can expand China ties without strategic realignment.
United Arab Emirates	Deep US defence and intelligence ties; high technology and logistics ambition; extensive China commerce.	Functional compartmentalization under technology pressure.	Reveals where economic and security domains become difficult to separate.
Iran	Adversarial US relationship; extensive sanctions; need for oil markets and diplomatic support.	Sanctions constrained alignment with China.	Shows the limits of applying hedging to a state with sharply restricted alternatives.

Source: Author's Research Design

The Sectoral Structure of China-US Competition

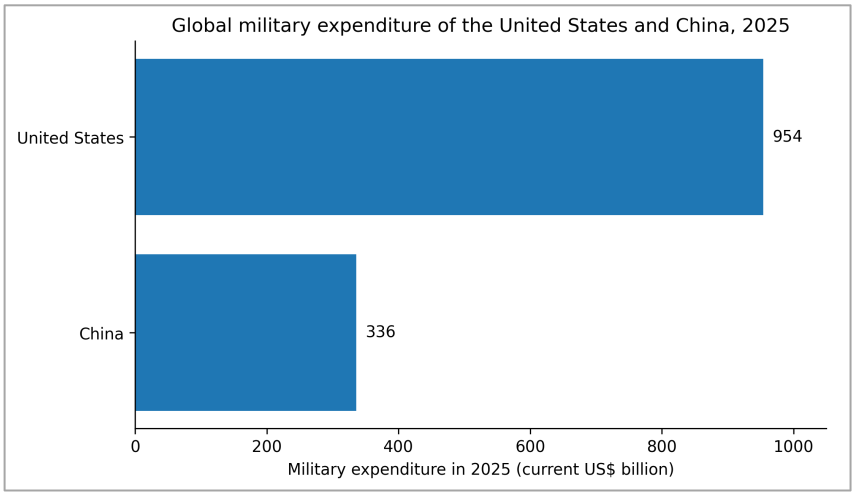
US Hard Security Centrality: Durable but Politically Contested

The hard security replacement thesis is the strongest as US influence is built into access agreements, command relationships, exchanges of intelligence or training, maintenance, and weapons interoperability and operational planning. According to the 2025 posture statement of CENTCOM, access, basing, overflight, integrated regional defence, and partner capacity are the key components of the American posture (Kurilla, 2025). Such institutional ties are costly to replace quickly.

This institutional advantage is reinforced by aggregate capability. In 2025, SIPRI estimated military spending of US$954 billion for the United States and US$336 billion for China (Figure 2). The United States spent 2.8 times as much as China and was the world's biggest military spender at 33% of global expenditure (Liang et al., 2026). The comparison should not be regarded as a direct indicator of the number of regional deployments made by the US and China: there is a lot more US and Chinese spending in other theatres. However, it refers to the broader resource base upon which global power projection, logistics and advanced military systems rely.

Figure 2

Global Military Expenditure of the United States and China, 2025.



(Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, April 2026; Liang et al., 2026).

Note: Global Expenditure is used as an indicator of aggregate capability, not as a direct measure of forces assigned to the Middle East

Regional legitimacy is not just gained by the military. Political costs have been incurred due to U.S. intervention in Iraq, mixed reactions to regional conflicts, and the U.S. alignment with Israeli military policy. Regional elites might feel that Washington is essential during a crisis but not trustworthy and/or disagree with parts of Washington's policy. This separation between ability and legitimacy is at the heart of the discussion. Political discontent may not lead to a change in security dependence due to a lack of the same degree of capacity as other security providers. It is not a simple loyalty hierarchy, but a continuously institutionally negotiated relationship, mediated by arms transactions and burden-sharing requests and diplomatic negotiations.

China's military presence is more restricted, with arms sales, anti-piracy missions, exercises, defence diplomacy and the Djibouti military base. While the Global Security Initiative emphasizes sovereignty, noninterference and cooperative security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023a), Beijing has not constructed a similar regional defence mechanism. The asymmetry is therefore institutional as well as quantitative.

China's Geo-Economic and Diplomatic Expansion: Influence Without Equivalent Security Provision

China has the greatest regional significance in the fields of energy and commerce. China's two-way goods trade with the Middle East has grown from approximately US$3 billion in 1992 to US$444.2 billion in 2023, and the Middle East has provided China with about 40-50% of its imported energy (USCC, 2024a). They are not a measure of political supremacy but instead make it impossible to exclude China from Gulf development and energy strategies. Beijing has formalized this through partnership diplomacy and the Belt and Road Initiative. In 2016, a '1+2+3' cooperation model was put forward in the Arab Policy Paper, which emphasized energy, infrastructure, trade and high technology cooperation (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016). Broad political cooperation within flexible political platforms, with no alliance commitment, through strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE.

Trade is matched by the diplomatic profile. China was seen to have played a facilitative role in March 2023 in the Saudi Iranian normalization talks, becoming a visible player who can work with competing countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023b). The deal was important but should not be interpreted as evidence of Chinese regional security leadership. There had been earlier mediation in Iraq and Oman, and the deal was based on the calculations made by the Saudi and Iranian governments. Beijing did not provide an apparatus to enforce compliance, but rather prestige, venue and political reassurance. The episode illustrates the comparative advantage in cheap diplomacy that China asserts over having multiple clients for its relations and being less tied to the politics of Washington by having only limited alliance obligations.

Chinese influence is also embedded in ports, industrial zones, electricity networks and telecommunications. Murphy (2022) connects China's presence in the Global South with material collaboration and stories of 'international order'. However, economic ties do not necessarily mean political convergence: China can invest in the Gulf without joining the US-led security and technology cooperation alliance.

Technology: The Boundary Where Compartmentalization Becomes Unstable

The area with the highest possibility of a shift to a new multipolar order is technology. Telecommunications, cloud, AI, surveillance and smart-city systems impact military interoperability, intelligence protection, data sovereignty and regime security. Chinese companies can play a key role in enabling the fast digital transformation, and the U.S. government is increasingly considering advanced computing and network architecture as a national security matter. US export controls illustrate this securitization. Restraints on advanced computing and semiconductor technologies aim at China's military and AI abilities but also impact third-country companies looking to gain access to both ecosystems (Bureau of Industry and Security, 2023, 2024). Gulf governments can have wide political relations with both powers but can also take exclusivity in project clouds, semiconductors, or defence technology stacks.

The UAE's G42 case illustrates it. The US$1.5 billion investment made by Microsoft in 2024 brought G42 closer to Microsoft Azure and was packaged as a partnership that is underpinned by high security and privacy standards (Microsoft, 2024). The deal not only gave the Emirates access to cutting-edge artificial intelligence technology but also mitigated the United States' fears of technology leakage and Chinese ties. This was no ordinary win for any one side over any other. Instead, the UAE leveraged its strategic significance to secure a big piece of the United States, and the United States took advantage of access to cutting-edge technology to influence the company's network decisions. Miller and Wright (2025) rightly characterize AI competition in the Gulf as technological statecraft, which can expand regional autonomy yet additionally establish new interdependencies.

Normative comparisons are difficult with technology, too. In the United States, there is a focus on security, trusted networks and adherence to export control requirements; in China, the focus is on development, sovereignty and export control restrictions that are not political. Both are not strictly practical. Digital standards can influence the nature of surveillance capability and information governance & reliance on foreign vendors. It's not just a hardware competition. It involves whose risk is acceptable, who gets data and updates, and what legal and security frameworks apply to infrastructure. That is why, when it came to the question of political sensitivities, the interview participants considered technology as a potentially more sensitive area than energy.

Maritime Security and the Asymmetry of Economic Exposure

The maritime security issue highlights the disparity between China's role in the world as a security provider and China's economic reliance. The main operating mechanism to secure the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab, and Suez Canal is the US-led and multinational one, and Beijing's routes through them are heavily reliant on it (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2026). China is a contributor to anti-piracy but has not taken the lead role in the freedom of navigation operations that are considered a crisis (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024; USCC, 2024b).

If an analysis is critical, you should make a distinction between description and strategic framing. Maritime routes are not protected for the altruistic benefit of the United States; they are protected because they are important to the United States, as is international trade and the confidence of international partners and military access. China's restraint must be viewed not just as free riding, but as risk avoidance as well. Direct involvement in forcible sea alliances might tarnish Beijing's ties with Iran and Arab alliance partners, run counter to Beijing's noninterference policy, and trigger the risk of further escalation (Sun et al., 2024). In this sense, therefore, it is a sensible aspect of its regional policy to have limited security provision, even if it restricts its claims of leadership (Koshaimah & Zou, 2023).

Regional states can thus increase Chinese trade and investment flows with the retention of American and multinational naval capability. The arrangement increases flexibility but also creates the risk of giving the impression of “diffused responsibility” as China can push for de-escalation without taking the burden of enforcement on itself, while Washington can ask for alignment in exchange for security, and regional governments can delay the establishment of collective maritime institutions, while external capabilities are still present (Gurol, 2022). This overlapping influence of sectors is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Sectoral Distribution of US and Chinese influence in the Middle East

Domain	United States	China	Regional implication	References
Hard security	Dominant in bases, deterrence, intelligence, interoperability and maritime operations.	Selective defence diplomacy, arms sales, anti-piracy activity and limited basing.	Substitution is costly; security dependence persists despite political dissatisfaction.	Scobell and Nader (2016); Kurilla (2025); USCC (2024a)
Energy and trade	Important investor, financial actor and security provider, but no longer the principal hydrocarbon customer.	Major energy customer and leading goods trade partner for many states.	Economic exclusion of China is impractical for most Gulf development strategies.	State Council of the PRC (2016); Scobell and Nader (2016); USCC (2024b)
Infrastructure	Selective projects and high-standard finance; strong role of private firms.	BRI linked ports, logistics, industrial and construction projects.	Host governments gain options, but project outcomes depend on commercial and political conditions.	State Council of the PRC (2016); Scobell and Nader (2016); USCC (2024b)
Technology	Advanced semiconductors, cloud systems, defence technology and export control leverage.	Telecommunications, surveillance, smart city and digital infrastructure presence.	Technology choices can reconnect economic and security alignment.	USCC (2024a); State Council of the PRC (2016)

Diplomacy	Alliance-centred influence and high crisis management capacity, but significant legitimacy costs.	Flexible partnership diplomacy and access to rivals, but limited enforcement capacity.	Regional states can diversify diplomatic platforms without abandoning US security ties.	Scobell and Nader (2016); State Council of the PRC (2016); USCC (2024b)
Maritime security	Principal operational security provider through regional presence and coalitions.	Economically exposed stakeholder with selective operational contributions.	China benefits from existing security goods while avoiding equivalent burden.	Kurilla (2025); Scobell and Nader (2016); Liang et al. (2026)

Comparative Case Findings

Saudi Arabia: Dual Track Diversification

Saudi Arabia is in dual-track diversification. Its defence ties to the United States are highly institutionalised, with the United States being a large arms supplier, trainer and maintainer, and China a growing partner in infrastructure, industry, renewables and digital technology, and a major oil importer from Saudi Arabia. The goal is to stop competing patrons for patrons and to decrease overreliance, but to keep access to capabilities that are not easily replaceable. The domestic political-economic impetus comes from Vision 2030, which focuses on diversification, logistics, and industrial capacity and technological upgrading (Saudi Vision 2030, 2025). These goals can be achieved by Chinese companies that are part of the finance sector and the energy demand of the nation, demonstrating the interaction between external competition and the transformation of the nation, instead of leaving it unaffected.

The high-level coordination between the two countries was formalized in the 2022 China-Saudi comprehensive strategic partnership, and the 2023 Saudi Iranian normalization agreement was hosted by Beijing. The US security relationship was unaffected by either development, as Saudi air and missile defence, training and interoperability remain tilted towards Washington. This lends support to Proposition 1, which stipulated that different functions promote selective alignment. The strategy nevertheless has limits. Interoperability and intelligence protection are concerns raised by the US at large Chinese technology or security partnerships, and China's simultaneous security ties with Iran diminish any exclusive security expectations. Saudi diversification, then, can enhance the country's bargaining chips, negating the hierarchy created by reliance on advanced U.S. defence capabilities.

Iran: Sanctions Constrained Alignment Rather Than Balanced Hedging

The problem is that Iran does not have an equivalent relationship with Washington to balance China. The US relationship is based on sanctions, military pressure and the nuclear issue, while the ties with Beijing mainly serve to act as a balm against isolation through oil selling, trade and diplomacy. This can more aptly be termed "sanctions-limited alignment" rather than "balanced hedging.

The comprehensive cooperation plan for 2021 gave a general guideline for economic and political cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2021). Iran sees China as a market for its oil, and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, while Beijing gets cheap oil and a geopolitical opening. Salman & Geeraerts (2015) and Garlick & Havlová (2020) evidence that there are substantial reasons for China to continue to maintain its ties with Iran as part of a broader energy hedging policy. But at the same time China has more economically advanced ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Fulton, 2021). It restricts Tehran's capacity to convert "enemy unity" over parts of US policy into an “enemy alliance”.

Sanctions thus bring about proximity and asymmetry. China's energy suppliers are more numerous, and Iran's buyers are not at a similar size. USCC (2024b) characterizes Chinese buying of Iranian oil as "opportunistic and sanctions aware.

Iran proves that there are unequal opportunities for diversification in the case of Proposition 3. China can be the market, the diplomatic saviour, and a go-around the isolation, but so far it has not offered any formal defence commitments or taken up Iran's wars. The relationship makes it more difficult to contain the United States and gives credence to the limits of Chinese security substitution.

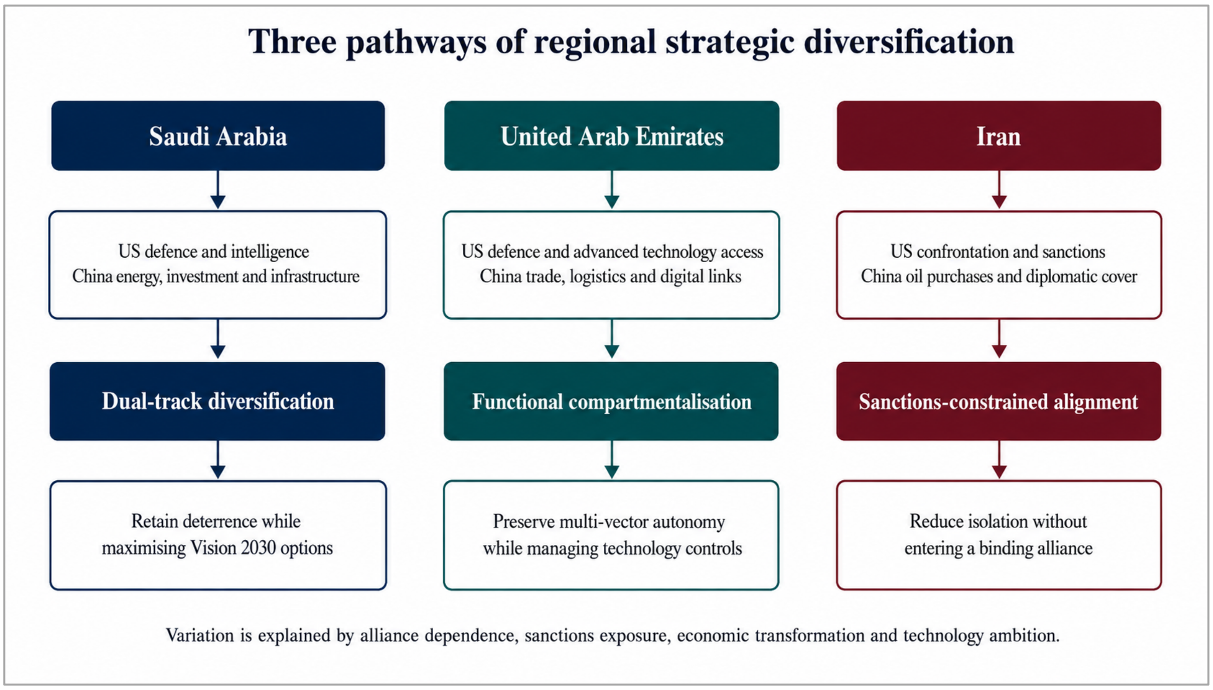
United Arab Emirates: Functional Compartmentalization Under Technology Pressure

UAE is the most evolved type of functional compartmentalization. It blends historical ties in the defence and intelligence sectors with a comprehensive strategic partnership with China and vast commercial, logistics, and technological connections (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Abu Dhabi has pursued its autonomy through several relationships, based on its capital, connectivity and strategic geography.

Its global logistics and technology vision rely on Chinese trade and usage of US defence systems, finance, cloud services and high-end semiconductors. Huwaidin (2024) calls it "walking a tightrope between U.S. security cooperation and China-related economic opportunity. The UAE does not just passively "hedge" however competing provides but actively creates them by investment, regulation, and strategic partnerships. The limits of this compartmentalization are revealed by technology. Access to such networks and advanced AI has raised concerns in the United States over trusted security measures, and while Microsoft's partnership with G42 expanded the Emirati capacity of advanced AI, it also provided security assurances (Microsoft, 2024). The case demonstrates that even the choice of governance and network at the firm level can be strategically relevant due to access to frontier US technology.

Figure 3

Comparative Pathways of Regional Strategic Diversification



(Source: Author, 2026).

The UAE benefits from the attention of investment and political events through both powers, but its independence is still under threat from export restrictions, network security demands, and commercial relationship variations. Functional compartmentalization is best applied when sectors can be separated and is more difficult when data, chips, technical personnel, surveillance and defence are intertwined.

Table 4

Cross Case Comparison of Strategic Diversification

Dimension	Saudi Arabia	Iran	United Arab Emirates
US relationship	Deep security partnership with periodic political friction.	Adversarial relationship structured by sanctions and deterrence.	Deep defence, intelligence and technology relationship.
China relationship	Energy-centred and expanding into infrastructure, industry and diplomacy.	Oil, sanctions mitigation and diplomatic support; implementation remains uneven.	Trade, logistics, investment and digital cooperation within a comprehensive strategic partnership.
Domestic driver	Vision 2030 economic transformation and demand for greater strategic room.	Regime security, sanctions resistance and need to reduce isolation.	Global hub strategy, logistics leadership and advanced technology ambition.
Resulting strategy	Dual track diversification.	Sanctions-constrained alignment with China.	Functional compartmentalisation and multi-vector balancing.
Principal constraint	US defence interoperability and limited Chinese security guarantees.	Asymmetric dependence on China and high sanctions exposure.	Technology controls, data security concerns and intelligence interoperability.

Source: Author's (2026) structured comparison.

Figure 3 and Table 4 demonstrate that 'regional hedging' is not a uniform outcome. Saudi Arabia diversifies across relatively separable security and development domains. The UAE pursues a more technologically intensive version in which the domains increasingly overlap. Iran lacks the option of balanced engagement with Washington and therefore approaches China from a position of sanctions-induced constraint. The comparison supports the article's claim that asymmetric multipolarity structures opportunities, but domestic and international conditions determine how much autonomy each state can extract from it.

Elite Interpretations of the Emerging Order

The eight interviews validated the general pattern of the documentary comparison and showed some differences in the level of regional multipolarity and its implications. A transfer of primacy from the United States to China was largely not desired, and the respondents spoke of a more plural and transactional order. The U.S. was the lead hard-security provider, though some interviewees doubted the reliability of or the price of its guarantees. China was linked primarily to trade and investment, infrastructure, energy, technology, and diplomacy but not to an equivalent defence system. Another theme that emerged from the interviews was strategic diversification, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where the US has robust security ties, and China has growing economic and technological relations. The areas identified where economic decisions can turn into security issues are maritime chokepoints, AI, telecommunications, surveillance, and data governance. These results indicate that the multipolar order is not yet fully formed or seen in the region, but rather a new and more differentiated order. Themes of the interviews are summarized and triangulated in Table 5 and Figure 4.

Table 5

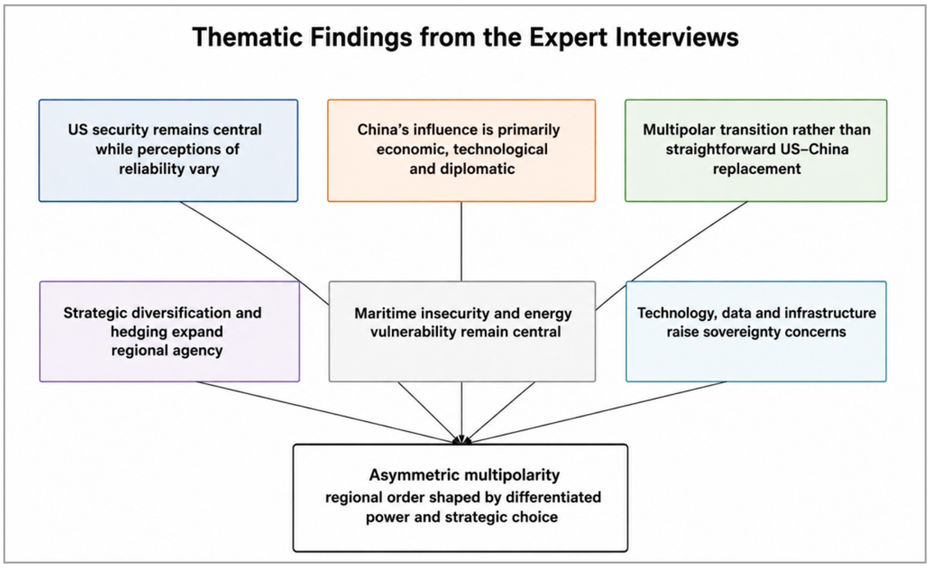
Interview Themes and Documentary Triangulation

Theme	Indicative interview evidence	Documentary triangulation	Analytical implication
US security centrality, but contested reliability	Interviewees 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 generally retained the US as the principal security actor, while several questioned the credibility or durability of its guarantees.	CENTCOM posture; US security-cooperation literature; SIPRI	Security dependence persists even where political confidence is uneven.
China as geo-economic and technology partner	Interviewees 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 emphasised trade, investment, energy, infrastructure, technology and diplomacy rather than equivalent Chinese defence provision.	USCC; China-Arab policy documents; BRI scholarship	Economic and technological centrality does not automatically generate security leadership.
Strategic diversification and hedging	Interviewees 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 explicitly described regional states as hedging or diversifying; Interviewee 1 described a similar search for alternatives.	Hedging literature; Saudi and Gulf partnership patterns	Regional states actively mediate great-power competition rather than simply choosing blocs.
UAE multi-vector strategy	Interviewees 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 described the UAE as retaining US security ties while expanding China-related economic and technology engagement.	Huwaidin (2024); Microsoft-G42; China-UAE comprehensive strategic partnership	The UAE shows how diversification can increase autonomy while technology and security interdependence impose limits.
Multipolar transition rather than binary replacement	Most respondents described a more plural or multipolar order; some qualified the concept by stressing additional powers and uneven capabilities.	RSCT; competitive-multipolarity literature	The emerging structure is plural but sectorally asymmetric.
Maritime and energy vulnerability	Respondents linked Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab disruption to shipping, energy prices and global supply chains.	CENTCOM; maritime-security literature; energy-flow data	Economic exposure can internationalise regional crises without equalising security burdens.
Technology and sovereignty risk	Several respondents linked AI, telecoms, surveillance and digital infrastructure to data security, dependency and strategic autonomy.	BIS controls; Microsoft-G42; technology-statecraft research	Technology can reconnect domains that governments attempt to compartmentalise.

Source: Author's thematic coding of the eight expert interviews and documentary triangulation.

Figure 4

Thematic Findings from the Eight Expert Interviews



Source: Author's Thematic Analysis

The interviews are not a regional opinion survey. The small specialist sample is analysed but not statistically. Convergence reinforces the interpretation, while disagreements on the reliability of the United States, depth of multipolarity, and depth of regional autonomy become substantive findings.

Discussion: What Asymmetric Multipolarity Explains

The results contradict the idea that the Chinese economic expansion in the Middle East is a harbinger of hegemonic replacement (Mearsheimer, 2001; Cooley & Nexon, 2020). There is also a significant, but differentiated, Chinese presence in trade, energy, infrastructure, technology, and diplomacy, while the United States has more robust institutions for deterrence, interoperability, and regional security (Alterman, 2009; Scobell & Nader, 2016; Garlick & Havlová, 2020). Considering current evidence, then, it is reasonable to affirm Proposition 2: "Asian commercialization can threaten some of the aspects of US influence, but it does not necessarily represent strategic substitution.

The findings also challenge a simple bipolar interpretation. Bipolarity is more than two great powers; it is related to a more disciplined alignment and more coherent poles (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Saudi Arabia and the UAE still have significant ties to Washington and Beijing, Iran's ties with China are still transactional, and others outside and within the region are still playing a significant role (Kausch, 2015; Garlick & Havlová, 2020; Cooley & Nexon, 2020). A more accurate perception of this plural but uneven distribution of functions is obtained with a concept of asymmetric multipolarity (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Kausch, 2015).

Diversification also does not automatically produce autonomy (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; Haacke, 2019). Saudi Arabia is gaining economic options; the UAE can operate across ecosystems, while having technology and trusted-network requirements; and finally, Iran is mitigating its isolation through China yet remains asymmetrically exposed to US sanctions (Scobell & Nader, 2016; Garlick & Havlová, 2020; USCC, 2024b). Hedging is therefore a continuing management strategy whose effectiveness depends on the structure of dependence.

The article is also extended to RSCT (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). External penetration in the modern MEDIAST takes place through military alliances, but also energy markets, digital infrastructure, technology regulation, and sanctions (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Cooley & Nexon, 2020; USCC, 2024b). These channels play a role in the security of the region, although they are not presented as a defence policy. A cloud services agreement may change the data sovereignty/confidence in intelligence trust; a port might have commercial and possible logistical uses; an oil relationship might sustain a sanctioned state without being an alliance (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Scobell & Nader, 2016; USCC, 2024b). While regional threats and state relations mediate this, RSCT is still useful, but the idea of penetration needs to be expanded beyond military penetration (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Kausch, 2015).

Asymmetric multipolarity may be durable without being stable. Misperception may lead to economic diversification being seen as strategic defection, competing technology systems may result in duplication or exclusivity costs, sanctions may be politicised commercial ties, and external security provision may weaken incentives for regional security institutions (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Garlick & Havlová, 2020; Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Kausch, 2015). In this order, states are given more choices but might also have more fragmentation on the regional level. Table 6 presents the evaluation of the 3 propositions.

Table 6

Assessment of Analytical Propositions

Proposition	Evidence	Assessment	Qualification
P1: Differentiated external functions encourage selective alignment and compartmentalization.	Saudi dual-track strategy; UAE multi-vector strategy; interview rejection of binary alignment.	Supported.	Iran has fewer options and is not a balanced hedger.
P2: US security institutions limit Chinese strategic replacement.	CENTCOM architecture, interoperability, maritime role, expenditure gap and interview evidence.	Strongly supported.	China's limited security role is growing and should not be treated as zero.
P3: Diversification increases bargaining space but remains constrained by cross-domain dependencies.	Saudi and UAE diversification; Iran's sanctions-constrained alignment; interview evidence on conditional autonomy.	Supported.	Constraints vary by sector and state; autonomy is negotiated rather than absent.

Source: Author's synthesis of documentary, comparative and interview findings.

Conclusion

China-US competition is transforming the Middle East without producing either straightforward hegemonic replacement or stable bipolarity. Influence is not spread evenly across sectors: the United States continues to be pivotal in the field of hard security, interoperability and maritime protection, while China is a key energy, trade, infrastructure, technology and diplomatic partner. As a result, there are regional variations in responses. Saudi Arabia continues to diversify in a dual-track fashion, the UAE has a functional compartmentalisation pattern under increasing pressure from technological developments, while Iran shows sanctioned alignment. Asymmetric multipolarity better reflects this plural and unequal order than does bipolarity or generic multipolarity, as it separates the regional strategy from the sectoral influence, and the polarity from the multipolarity. Diversification can enhance bargaining leverage yet does not ensure autonomy; technology controls, sanctions, institutions of alliances, and security dependence bring areas back together that governments try to divide. The new order is thus best seen as a competitive co-existence that leaves differences intact. Future studies should apply the concept to more cases in the Middle East, and explore how AI, cloudification, defence localisation, and renewable energy enhance the convertibility of economic influence to security power.

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