

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Shifting Sands: US Gulf Policy Recalibrates As China's Regional Ambitions Grow

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Abstract

Since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in the 1990s, the United States has played the role of security guarantor in the Gulf, and despite prevailing concerns of American retrenchment, it retains a strong military footprint across the region. But China's emergence as a major player in the Gulf—with its geopolitical ambitions, thirst for foreign oil, and attractive offer of business and investment with a “look the other way” policy on human rights—has stoked fears about the eclipse of American power. While the Gulf remains of strategic importance to the US global strategy, Washington's readjustment of its regional goals suggests that it is recalibrating. Drawing on the literature of foreign policy change, this analysis uses three case studies to examine Washington's recalibration toward the Gulf under the Biden presidency: US engagement with the Iran nuclear deal, US defense agreements with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and US-GCC tech relations, specifically tensions with China over the use of Huawei technology. This article is part of a special issue on the response of Gulf countries to rising Sino-American competition edited by Andrea Ghiselli, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Enrico Fardella.

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After decades of hegemony, US allies and commentators alike argue that we are witnessing an erosion of American power in the Gulf.¹ President Barack Obama's inconsistent response to the Arab Spring, the Trump administration's 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or Iran nuclear deal), and America's hasty drawdown in Afghanistan in August 2021 have all contributed to the apprehension felt among Gulf states, who fear that US interests have shifted fundamentally. However, the narrative that the United States is abandoning its commitment to the region is a myth.² Despite prevailing fears of retrenchment, fueled all the more by Washington's geostrategic pivot toward the Asia-Pacific, the United States still retains a strong military footprint across the region, from its Central Command hub at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar to the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain and troops based in Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Moreover, Washington has maintained its Gulf allies since the end of the Cold War, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman.³ Many of these allies, who fear Iranian dominance and armed groups like Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthi movement, still look to the United States as their guarantor of security and defense.⁴ Meanwhile, China's emergence as a major external player in the Gulf—with its geopolitical ambitions, thirst for foreign oil, and attractive offer of business and investment with a “look the other way” policy on human rights—has stoked fears about the eclipse of American power. This has produced another narrative: that the United States and China may be on a collision course.

Against this backdrop, this article argues that, despite the narrative of US withdrawal from the region, the Gulf remains of strategic importance to American global strategy. Washington's reassessment of priority theaters in the Indo-Pacific and readjustment of its goals in the Gulf suggests that US Middle East policy is recalibrating with respect to China's growing presence in the region. Drawing on the literature of foreign policy change, this article uses three case studies to examine the recalibration: US engagement with the JCPOA, US-GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) defense agreements, and US-GCC tech relations, specifically tensions with China over the use of Huawei technology.

The first section provides a brief review of American engagement in the Gulf to understand the policy recalibration toward the region. The second part examines definitions of foreign policy change and employs Charles F. Hermann's concept of goal changes to describe the nature of the recalibration. The next section explores the first of three case studies that illustrate this policy—US involvement in the JCPOA—and highlights the Biden administration's current posture toward Iran. The article then examines the second and third case studies, exploring US-GCC relations in the areas of defense and technology. The final section summarizes the key arguments and presents potential implications of America's policy of recalibration vis-à-vis Chinese competition in the Gulf.

¹ An earlier version of this article was first presented at “The Persian Gulf and the US-China Rivalry,” a roundtable held in Rome on July 6, 2023. That event and this special issue have been sponsored by the ChinaMed Project of the TOChina Hub and the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme at Durham University.

² Middle East Policy Council, “Complaints of US Withdrawal from Region Are Overblown, Scholar Contends,” August 18, 2023, <https://mepc.org/commentary/complaints-us-withdrawal-region-are-overblown-scholar-contends>.

³ Mark N. Katz, “The United States and Regional Great Power Rivalry,” working paper, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2023, 10.

⁴ Ibid.

AMERICAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Since the Cold War, the United States has operated as the dominant external player in the Gulf, where it has “enjoyed unprecedented influence.”⁵ During the 1990s and early 2000s, it participated in a series of military interventions to craft a regional order and preserve American national interests. Some notable US operations involved liberating Kuwait from Iraqi aggression in 1990–91; launching a “global war on terror” to destroy al-Qaeda and topple the Taliban government in Afghanistan in 2001; invading Iraq in 2003 to oust Saddam Hussein; and supporting the Arab Spring movements that engulfed the Middle East and North Africa in early 2011. This period was defined by overwhelming American primacy and the “creation of strategic imbalances” within the region.⁶ These imbalances included an Iraqi state degenerating into violent insurgency due to Sunni-Shiite tensions, the stationing of US troops on the Arabian Peninsula, Israel’s becoming the region’s sole nuclear power, and a series of anti-government uprisings protesting political corruption and demanding economic and social reforms.

The election of Obama in 2008 marked “a new beginning” for the United States and the Arab world, as Washington began to rethink its role in the Gulf and to look further East to the Asia-Pacific.⁷ Obama “was not seeking new dragons to slay.”⁸ Instead, he sought to “cure the trauma left behind” by the Bush administration through ending forever wars in the Middle East and crafting a new era in which the United States would take a step back from its traditional “world policeman role.”⁹ As such, US policy experienced a significant reconfiguration in the Middle East during the Obama years. The American public’s war fatigue, combined with the president’s skepticism about interventionism, influenced Obama’s decision to eventually remove troops from Iraq in 2011 and to withdraw troops from Afghanistan by the summer of 2012, just three years after approving a “surge” of 33,000 troops.¹⁰ Moreover, the administration faced significant challenges in the region as it sought to mend US-Middle Eastern relations, some caused by unforeseen external factors, such as the turmoil from the Arab Spring—including Washington’s abandonment of longstanding allies like Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak—US inaction over the Syrian civil war, and the rise of transnational terrorist groups, notably the so-called Islamic State.

When Joe Biden was elected to office in 2020, he promised to retreat from America’s traditional military-centric and hard-power policies in the region, underpinned by coercive force and regime change. Like his Democratic predecessor, Biden sought to disengage from the unpopular 9/11 wars by resetting relations with Gulf partners and by remaining committed to promoting human rights—all while maintaining a substantial physical military presence in the region due to growing Chinese influence.¹¹ Unlike President Donald Trump, who viewed the Middle East

⁵ Richard Haass, “The New Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 6 (2006): 2–11.

⁶ Hossein Mousavian, “An opportunity for a US-Iran paradigm shift,” *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no.1 (2013), 129–144.

⁷ Barak Obama, “Remarks by the President at Cairo University,” June 4, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

⁸ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525.

⁹ Mohammad Salman, Moritz Pieper, and Gustaaf Geeraerts, “Hedging in the Middle East and China-US Competition,” *Asian Politics and Policy* 7, no. 1 (2015): 575–596. Interview with Alistair Burt, Lancaster, June 29, 2022.

¹⁰ The White House, “The Way Forward in Afghanistan,” December 1, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/defense/afghanistan>.

¹¹ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

through the prism of great-power competition, Biden's strategy can be best described as a policy of recalibration. Various factors can explain this policy, some of which remain outside the scope of this article; however, unpopular Western intervention after 9/11 and public war-weariness at home, combined with Washington's "pivot" toward the Indo-Pacific to challenge rising Chinese aggression, have contributed to Washington's decision to reassess its strategic priorities and reorient its posture toward the region.

DEFINING FOREIGN POLICY CHANGE AND RECALIBRATION

Understanding why states choose to recalibrate and to redirect their foreign policies is important to this examination, as such changes produce consequences for their domestic constituents and other states: They can cause conflicts to erupt, economies to rise and fall, and alliances to reconfigure.¹² The literature distinguishes types of foreign-policy change, from minor to moderate to major; Jerel A. Rosati categorizes them as intensification, refinement, reform, and restructuring.¹³ Other scholars focus on the most extreme form of foreign-policy change, what Kalevi Holsti refers to as "foreign policy restructuring" and Thomas Volgy and John Schwarz define as "comprehensive change in the foreign policy orientation of a nation."¹⁴

Hermann's categorization of foreign-policy change, deemed the most influential, distinguishes three forms: in means (programs), ends (goals/problems), and international orientation, the most extreme of the forms.¹⁵ Foreign-policy changes also occur with a change in government and, in Washington's case, the election of new leadership in the White House. As Hermann highlights, governments may change their foreign policies to distinguish themselves from their political opponents. As noted, Biden has endeavored to differentiate his Middle East strategy from his predecessor's by maintaining a sizeable American presence in the region without becoming entangled in another protracted intervention.

This article uses Hermann's concept of goal changes to describe the nature of America's recalibration toward the Middle East under Biden. American recalibration can be defined by Washington's reduction of resources invested in the Gulf and its reassessment of key strategic partners. Drawing on foreign-policy change, the following case studies of the JCPOA and US-GCC relations examine how American policy has recalibrated with respect to China's increased influence. These cases have been selected because they represent some of the main US priorities in the Middle East under the current administration: deterrence against Iran, defense and security, and integration to build prosperity and stability in the region.¹⁶

¹² Charles F. Hermann, "When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1990): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2600403>.

¹³ Jerel A. Rosati, "Cycles in Foreign Policy Restructuring: The Politics of Continuity and Change in US Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy Restructuring: How Governments Respond to Global Change*, ed. J.A. Rosati, J.D. Hagan and M.W. Sampson III (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 221–261.

¹⁴ Kalevi Holsti, "Restructuring Foreign Policy: A Neglected Phenomenon in Foreign Policy Theory," in *Kalevi Holsti: A Pioneer in International Relations Theory, Foreign Policy Analysis, History of International Order, and Security Studies*, ed. Kalevi Holsti (Springer, 2016), 103–119; Tim Haesebrouck and Jeroen Joly, "Foreign Policy Change: From Policy Adjustments to Fundamental Reorientations," *Political Studies Review* (2020): 3.

¹⁵ Hermann, "When Governments Choose," 6.

¹⁶ Atlantic Council China-MENA Podcast, "US Perceptions of China's Middle East Presence," March 30, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/china-mena-podcast/us-perceptions-of-chinas-middle-east-presence>.

DEAL OR NO NUCLEAR DEAL?

One main priority of US policy toward the Gulf has been strengthening partnerships with allies to enhance their capabilities to deter Iran, which seeks regional dominance.¹⁷ While deterring Iranian aggression has remained an important policy goal for both Republican and Democratic administrations, changes in leadership in the White House since 9/11 have produced an inconsistent approach. Trump's policy of applying maximum pressure, for example, was a crucial departure from Obama's attempts to use diplomacy and strategic communications to extend an olive branch to Tehran.¹⁸ Reports of the Biden administration's informal deal to bring home American captives "in exchange for imprisoned Iranians and access to \$6 billion in frozen assets for humanitarian purposes" drew criticism from political opponents who argued for a Trump-style, maximum-pressure strategy.¹⁹ The use of diplomacy to bring home American prisoners as well as to ensure Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons, while also remaining prepared to deploy military power, reflects US goal changes in the region.

Biden's Iran policy, however, has proved troublesome from the beginning of his presidency. On the one hand, US strategy has vacillated largely due to external factors outside of Biden's control, such as the string of protests across Iran that erupted in fall 2022 over the murder of Mahsa Amini while in the custody of the regime's so-called "morality police." On the other hand, questions still remain over the future of the JCPOA, the landmark agreement between Iran and world powers that placed restrictions on Tehran's nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. During the first two years of his presidency, Biden was determined to resurrect the JCPOA, which Trump had branded "decaying and rotten" as he unilaterally withdrew from it in 2018.²⁰ For Biden, resuscitating the Iran nuclear deal was a sign of an American recommitment to multilateral diplomacy in the Middle East. However, despite US plans "to return to full compliance," Tehran has since advanced its nuclear program.²¹

Biden's ambition to restore the JCPOA, a vital step toward repairing America's reputation, has suffered many setbacks, including the ongoing war in Ukraine, the nationwide revolts in Iran from fall 2022 to early 2023, and Iran's suspected support of Hamas's attack on Israeli civilians in October 2023. The Iran protests, in particular, raised doubts about whether Washington could revive the JCPOA through diplomatic means, as it could potentially undermine one of its original purposes: pressuring Tehran to end its tyrannical regime and brutal oppression of the Iranian people.²² As the administration sought a deal despite its comment that the agreement could be beyond resuscitation, it continued to offer rhetorical support to protesters and introduced new sanctions in March 2023 targeting Iran's oil and petrochemical sales.²³ However, if the interim deal

¹⁷ Hermann, "When Governments Choose," 6.

¹⁸ Robert Gates, *Exercise of Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2020), 98–100.

¹⁹ Alexander Ward, Matt Berg, and Eric Bazail-Eimil, "The backlash to Biden's Iran deal is fierce," *POLITICO*, August 14, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2023/08/14/the-backlash-to-bidens-iran-deal-is-fierce-00111088>.

²⁰ Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," transcript of speech delivered at Diplomatic Reception Room, Washington, May 8, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action>.

²¹ Suzanne Maloney, "After the Iran Deal: A Plan B to Contain the Islamic Republic," *Foreign Affairs*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/iran-nuclear-deal-plan-b-contain-islamic-republic>.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Eric Brewer and Henry Rome, "Biden's Iran Gamble," *Foreign Affairs*, June 9, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iran/bidens-iran-gamble>; Al Jazeera, "US issues more Iran sanctions amid stalled diplomacy," March 2, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/2/us-issues-more-iran-sanctions-amid-stalled-diplomacy>.

goes ahead, the United States would potentially refrain from encouraging new sanctions against Iran.²⁴ The administration's increased willingness to exercise more diplomatic tools of power to engage with the regime should be interpreted as a US goal change.

One implication of this strategy is that it creates potential opportunities for Sino-American cooperation. For example, amid precarious US-Iran relations, Beijing saw an opportunity and did what Washington could not: In March 2023, it brokered a deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia to resume diplomatic relations, thus potentially reducing Iran's ability to acquire nuclear weapons. As Jonathan Fulton highlights, this agreement turned the binary in the Gulf—that the “US does security and China does the economy”—on its head.²⁵ The rapprochement is not expected to end the rivalry between the two powers. Iran and Saudi Arabia previously clashed over the Arab uprisings, with Bahrain accusing Tehran of inciting anti-government protests in the country; Iran backed Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria while Saudi Arabia supported Sunni rebels; and Riyadh sought to defeat Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen. However, one likely outcome of this agreement is that tensions will diminish, thus contributing to greater regional stability and benefiting both US and Chinese interests.

More significant, Beijing's diplomatic victory suggests that China, not the United States, has become the external great power that possesses the most leverage over Iran: “Iranian leaders see the new global locus of power shifting eastward.”²⁶ Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, declared that Asia, not the United States, will become the center of knowledge, economics, and political and military power.²⁷ Nonetheless, even against the backdrop of Chinese diplomatic gains, Iran's nuclear-weapons potential, as well as the future of US-Iranian relations, remain uncertain. Recent events, especially Hamas's attack on Israel, could prevent an interim deal between Washington and Tehran from moving forward.

US-GCC DEFENSE RELATIONS

Washington's resetting of relations with Gulf partners, specifically in the realm of defense cooperation, provides another example of its goal changes in the region. US ties with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain have been directly impacted. In early 2021, the Biden administration paused US arms sales to the Saudis and Emiratis during its review of defense agreements with Gulf allies, deals made by the Trump administration worth billions of dollars.²⁸ In 2019, the United States escalated arms sales to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi tied to the Abraham Accords, the set of agreements constructed to normalize Arab relations with Israel. However, many lawmakers in Washington opposed the sales due to the involvement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Yemen war, a bloody conflict that has killed thousands of civilians and left millions suffering from famine.²⁹ Moreover,

²⁴ Kali Robinson, “What is the Iran Nuclear Deal?” Council on Foreign Relations, June 21, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

²⁵ Atlantic Council China-MENA Podcast, “US Perceptions.”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jennifer Hansler and Kylie Atwood, “Biden administration pauses arms sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE,” CNN, January 27, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/27/politics/us-pauses-saudi-uae-arms-sales/index.html>; Edward Wong, Catie Edmondson, and Eric Schmitt “Trump Officials Prepare to Bypass Congress to Sell Weapons to Gulf Nations,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/23/us/politics/trump-saudi-arabia-arms-sales.html>.

²⁹ Ibid.

the horrific 2018 murder of journalist and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents left several members of Congress decrying Trump's decision to bypass Congress and use emergency measures to rush munition sales to the kingdom.³⁰

After his election, Biden reassessed US relations with Gulf partners, especially Saudi Arabia, which along with its neighbors has feared that preoccupation with the Asia-Pacific has left the United States increasingly disinterested in and less committed to the region. The administration distanced itself from Riyadh, pledging to make its oil-rich partner a "pariah state" over its human-rights record, actions in Yemen, and intelligence linking the Saudi government, including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), to Khashoggi's murder.³¹ The United States also refused to label the Houthis a terrorist organization.³² However, Biden's rhetorical condemnation of the kingdom has not upended Washington's decades-old military and economic relationship with Riyadh, which remains a key customer for defense contracts. Months after Biden declared he would end US support for Saudi "offensive operations" in Yemen, including "relevant arms sales," the administration approved a \$650 million sale of air-to-air missiles to enable Riyadh to improve security.³³

The US-Saudi agreements were secured against the backdrop of China's efforts to deepen defense cooperation with Gulf states on arms and military exercises.³⁴ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Saudi arms imports from China were valued at \$245 million between 2010 and 2020.³⁵ As Toshi Yoshihara and Richard Sokolsky have argued, such sales to the Gulf have served both an end, creating profits, and a means, enhancing Chinese status in the region, which have in turn undermined US influence.³⁶ For example, while the United States previously opposed Riyadh's repeated requests for ballistic missiles, reports emerged of the Saudis' building these munitions with Chinese support.³⁷ Moreover, China has engaged in formal, albeit limited, military exercises with the kingdom since both countries pledged to expand military cooperation in early 2022. Previously, in late 2019, Saudi Arabia held a joint naval exercise with China to address piracy and terrorism threats.³⁸

The United States has also reassessed its relationship with the UAE, as demonstrated by its decision to halt the sale of F-35 jets to Abu Dhabi. The \$23 billion deal, which included the sale of 50 Lockheed Martin war planes, as well as drones and other munitions, was frozen amid US concerns over the UAE's growing relationship with China, particularly the use of Huawei's 5G

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ David E. Sanger, "Candidate Biden Called Saudi Arabia a 'Pariah.' He Now Has to Deal With It," *The New York Times*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/24/us/politics/biden-jamal-khashoggi-saudi-arabia.html>.

³² Philip Loft, John Curtis, and Matthew Ward, *China and the US in the Middle East: Iran and the Arab Gulf*, Commons Library Research Briefing (London: House of Commons Library, 2022), 29, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9612/CBP-9612.pdf>.

³³ Al Jazeera, "Biden administration approves \$650m weapon sale to Saudi Arabia," November 4, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/4/biden-administration-approves-650m-weapon-sale-to-saudi-arabia>.

³⁴ Loft, Curtis, and Ward, *China and the US*, 22.

³⁵ Ibid., 23.

³⁶ Toshi Yoshihara and Richard Sokolsky, "The United States and China in the Persian Gulf: Challenges and Opportunities," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2002): 71.

³⁷ Loft, Curtis, and Ward, *China and the US*, 24.

³⁸ Reuters, "China, Saudi Arabia launch joint naval exercise—media," November 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-saudi-military-idUSL3N28010M>.

technology.³⁹ Moreover, Washington demanded a guarantee from Abu Dhabi that the weapons would not be used in the Yemen war. In November 2021, the Biden administration switched its position and decided to move forward with the deal. However, the mounting pressure exerted by Washington on Abu Dhabi to choose between it or Beijing, the UAE's biggest trading partner, led the Gulf state to "suspend talks," citing "technical requirements, sovereign operational restrictions and cost/benefit analysis."⁴⁰

Following the UAE's decision, the Emiratis have maintained a diversity of weapons suppliers, including China, from which they ordered the L-15 trainer and light combat aircraft in 2022.⁴¹ Researchers have argued that this move represents a "step up" from previous weapons and military hardware purchases from China.⁴² In fact, according to SIPRI, the UAE purchased around \$166 million in Chinese arms between 2010 and 2021.⁴³ The reported presence in 2021 of a Chinese military base in the UAE, which both parties have denied, further underscores a strategic shift for US-Gulf relations and highlights that China's "profile in the Gulf military-security sphere has gradually increased."⁴⁴

The militarization of relations between GCC countries and China, however, remains underdeveloped in comparison to their deals with the United States. China has provided less than 2 percent of GCC arms imports, which have mostly included drones.⁴⁵ Despite the changing nature of US engagement in the region, coupled with China's increased involvement in defense and arms sales, the United States still remains a dominant supplier of military arms and munitions to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf allies. Moreover, US involvement in the Gulf remains substantial, as it has continued to maintain a notable military presence for counterterrorism and other security purposes.

In July 2022, the winds appeared to have shifted for US-GCC relations, specifically US-Saudi ties, as Biden met with MBS in Riyadh as part of his wider Middle East tour to discuss increasing oil production and other issues. This was a clear reversal of Biden's earlier policy to separate the US relationship with Saudi Arabia from the crown prince, as illustrated by Biden's engagement with King Salman in February 2021.⁴⁶ However, as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken remarked, the US "relationship with Saudi Arabia is bigger than any one individual,"⁴⁷ and Washington and Riyadh have continued to view one another as strategic partners. Beyond the traditional "oil for security" arrangement, the United States has continued to rely on its Saudi partner to achieve its

³⁹ Reuters, "UAE told the US it will suspend talks on F-35 jets – Emirati official," December 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/uae-threatens-pull-out-23-blm-f-35-drone-deal-with-us-wsj-2021-12-14>.

⁴⁰ Ben Samuels, "Two Years After Abraham Accords, Why the UAE F-35 Deal Remains Grounded," *Haaretz*, September 13, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2022-09-13/ty-article/.premium/two-years-after-abraham-accords-why-the-uae-f-35-deal-remains-grounded/00000183-3743-d070-abef-f7d755450000>.

⁴¹ Loft, Curtis, and Ward, *China and the US*, 23.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ SIPRI, "Arms exports to the UAE: TIV tables 2010–2021," <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

⁴⁴ Mona Abu Shanif, "Strategic Maneuvering: The Gulf States Amid US-China Tensions," Middle East Institute, January 20, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/strategic-maneuvering-gulf-states-amid-us-china-tensions>.

⁴⁵ Loft, Curtis, and Ward, *China and the US*, 6.

⁴⁶ Hassan Hamdan AlAlkim, "US President Joe Biden's Foreign Policy towards the Gulf," *Open Journal of Political Science* 11, no. 3 (2021): 378–401.

⁴⁷ Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky, "Saudi Arabia is a partner, not an ally. Let's stop the charade," *The Washington Post*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/03/04/biden-khashoggi-saudi-arabia-crown-prince>.

strategic objectives in the region, which include deterring Iran, ending the war in Yemen, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and supporting counterterrorism operations.⁴⁸

The US strategic pact with Bahrain in September 2023 illustrates additional changes in American policy goals. The legally binding agreement, which commits Washington to provide assistance if Bahrain faces an imminent security threat, is the first of its kind in the region: “Never before has the United States gone so far in extending such a security pledge to an Arab state.”⁴⁹ Although the Biden administration has sought to extricate the United States from the Middle East, a region that has “dominated the US national security agenda for decades,” National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan asserted that this “does not mean the US can, will or should leave the region outright.”⁵⁰ The security pact between Manama and Washington reflects just that: Against the backdrop of prickly relations with Saudi Arabia and intensified competition with China, the United States has further demonstrated its commitment to the region, shedding its “hot and cold” reputation shared among Arab allies.

In sum, Washington’s reassessment of its key partnerships in the Gulf amid growing Chinese interference, while simultaneously participating in defense and security-cooperation efforts, reflects changes in US policy goals in the region. Nonetheless, while Biden reversed many policies of his predecessor—such as freezing arms sales and delisting the Houthis as a terrorist organization, as well as pressuring Saudi Arabia and the UAE to end the Yemen war—US Middle East policy has still been largely driven by national interests. The president stated that the United States remains committed to defending human rights and promoting good governance in the region; however, Washington has not thereby sought to cut ties with its Gulf allies. Nonetheless, while US-Saudi relations have appeared to survive a bumpy period and US-Bahrain ties have stepped into a new phase of security cooperation, US-Emirati defense relations remain uncertain in the wake of increased Chinese interference.

TENSIONS OVER HUAWEI

A final example of American foreign-policy goal changes in the region is what Mohammed Soliman has called its “technology containment” policy,⁵¹ in which the United States has discouraged Gulf partners from using the technologies of Chinese telecoms provider Huawei. Gulf states like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar have become increasingly digitized in the last decade, using wealth from oil production to invest in their high-tech infrastructures and moving swiftly to launch 5G nationwide commercial services.⁵² This has coincided with Gulf states’

⁴⁸ Gerald Feierstein, “Policy Brief on Saudi Arabia,” Middle East Institute, March 16, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2021-03/16.%20Saudi%20Arabia.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Adam Erel, “Bahrain’s new strategic pact with the US is just the beginning for the Gulf,” Atlantic Council New Atlanticist, September 13, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/bahrain-us-strategic-pact-gulf>.

⁵⁰ Suzanne Maloney, “The End of America’s Exit Strategy in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 10, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/israel-hamas-end-americas-exit-strategy-suzanne-maloney>; Erel, “Bahrain’s new strategic pact.”

⁵¹ Mohammed Soliman, “Tech Containment Is Core to Washington’s Cold War 2.0 Strategy,” *The National Interest*, October 27, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/techland-when-great-power-competition-meets-digital-world/tech-containment-core-washington%E2%80%99s>.

⁵² Mohammed Soliman, “The GCC, US-China tech war, and the next 5G storm,” Middle East Institute, September 1, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/gcc-us-china-tech-war-and-next-5g-storm>.

ambitions to showcase their expanding influence, such as when Qatar hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2022. Amid these developments, Huawei was deemed a security risk by both the Trump and Biden administrations, which have warned that sensitive information could be leaked to China, allegations that both the company and the Chinese Communist Party have denied.

The “wars” between Washington and Huawei erupted against a backdrop of great-power competition between the United States and China. They first emerged in the public view in December 2018, when the company’s chief financial officer, Meng Wanzhou, was arrested on charges that she misled banks about business connections in Iran.⁵³ The United States accused Huawei of installing backdoors on its equipment that permit the Chinese government to collect trade data and intelligence, as well as to “shut down critical infrastructure networks” in other countries, creating a “Beijing-centered global tech ecosystem that advances China’s geopolitical and geoeconomic interests.”⁵⁴ Responding to China’s ambitions of becoming a tech superpower, the Trump administration in August 2020 introduced the Clean Network program, which rallied American allies against Huawei and sought to safeguard US assets, including citizens’ privacy and companies’ sensitive information, from threats by “malign actors” such as China.⁵⁵

Under Biden, Washington continued to dissuade its Gulf partners from using Huawei technologies as part of its strategy of “tech containment” against Beijing in the region.⁵⁶ The administration’s launch of its “Declaration for the Future of the Internet” in April 2022 reflected unease with China’s global expansion, especially its increased influence over strategic technologies in Gulf states with advanced US weapons systems.⁵⁷ Several Gulf allies using Huawei’s technology for their 5G mobile infrastructure, including the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, were warned that continued use of the equipment could impact US-Gulf defense cooperation, as Washington threatened to stop its intelligence sharing. For example, in midsummer 2021, Washington pressed the UAE to remove the Chinese tech giant from its networks by 2025 or risk losing out on the purchase of F-35 jets and military drones. The reality that the F-35 deal has yet to be revived, while Beijing has offered to “upgrade UAE’s telecom infrastructure” with 5G equipment made by Huawei, suggests a readjustment of US-Emirati relations as Abu Dhabi “hedges its bets” amid a shifting global order.⁵⁸ This recalibration can be viewed as a US goal change in the region.

By contrast, Riyadh acquiesced to Washington’s demands. Following Biden’s visit in July 2022, Saudi officials announced they would invest in “US-led” technology to develop their next-generation telecommunications networks.⁵⁹ The US-Saudi cybersecurity partnership, which

⁵³ Robert Gillies, “Lawyers for Huawei CFO ask Canadian justice minister for help,” AP News, June 24, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/d0fb7dcb528e4045b8fbe74928c94f88>.

⁵⁴ Soliman, “Tech Containment.”

⁵⁵ US Department of State, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at a Press Availability,” remarks to the press, Washington, August 5, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-at-a-press-availability-10/index.html>.

⁵⁶ Soliman, “Tech Containment.”

⁵⁷ Konstantinos Komaitis and Justin Sherman, “The US must broaden its internet strategy beyond China,” Brookings Institution, February 11, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/the-us-must-broaden-its-internet-strategy-beyond-china/>; Jonathan Fulton, “China’s Changing Role in the Middle East,” Atlantic Council Rafik Hariri Centre for the Middle East, 2019, 16.

⁵⁸ Gopal Ratnam and Rachel Oswald, “Briefings on UAE-China ties revive lawmakers’ worry about Mideast ally,” *Roll Call*, May 2, 2023, <https://rollcall.com/2023/05/02/briefings-on-uae-china-ties-revive-lawmakers-worry-about-mideast-ally>.

⁵⁹ Eric Geller, “Will the Saudis help the US beat Huawei?” *POLITICO*, July 18, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/weekly-cybersecurity/2022/07/18/will-the-saudis-help-the-u-s-beat-huawei-00046280>.

seeks to develop secure 5G and 6G networks through open radio access networks, was a diplomatic victory for Washington, as the partners agreed to promote Western 5G technology in a region dominated by China.⁶⁰

The US efforts to dissuade allies like the UAE and Saudi Arabia from using Huawei equipment suggests that Washington still retains considerable influence over its Gulf partners. However, China's growing influence has complicated US-Gulf relations. Washington has feared that the geopolitical objectives of the Communist Party and Huawei's business goals are too intertwined in the Gulf, putting US interests at risk.⁶¹ Moreover, it has viewed Beijing's expansion of its "Digital Silk Road" across the Gulf as part of an effort to reimagine the region in its image. Meanwhile, Gulf partners have seen the benefits of using Huawei products, which are fast and relatively cost-effective, outweighing potential downsides. Nevertheless, Gulf states have been left feeling caught in the middle of a great-power rivalry and struggling to pick a side in the Sino-American "digital cold war."⁶²

Currently, there does not appear to be a clear way out of the Huawei 5G storm, so Gulf states are forced to evaluate their economic and security interests as they seek to maintain strong ties with both Washington and Beijing. On the one hand, these countries are becoming increasingly tied to the Chinese economy, supplying 28 percent of China's oil imports.⁶³ On the other hand, the Gulf depends on its strategic partnership with the United States, which continues to provide security and deterrence against Iran and proxy groups. In light of Shi Yinhong's work on pericentrism and "middle ground" actors, Gulf states' efforts to strengthen or to break ties with Huawei could potentially force the major powers to make important concessions.⁶⁴ This suggests that Gulf states have greater agency than Washington or Beijing might think and are capable of exercising greater geopolitical power. Nonetheless, the Biden administration's reassessment of relations with Gulf partners over their use of Huawei technologies suggests that the United States is prepared and willing to recalibrate its key relationships in the region to mitigate what it deems as risks to national security.

THE MYTH OF A POST-AMERICAN MIDDLE EAST

The narrative that China is eclipsing American power in the Gulf and that we are entering a post-American Middle East has been overblown. Recent events, including Hamas's assault on Israeli civilians in October 2023 and Washington's provision of weapons and support, and the deployment of two of its aircraft carriers to the Mediterranean Sea, prove that American decline in the region is illusory. While it is true that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ambitions have led Beijing to strengthen economic and political relations with the Gulf states, Jonathan Fulton argues, "Nobody expects China to replace the United States in military terms."⁶⁵ However, with the Asia-Pacific increasingly becoming a priority theater for Washington, "a deep American

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ John Calabrese, "The Huawei Wars and the 5G Revolution in the Gulf," Middle East Institute, July 30, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/huawei-wars-and-5g-revolution-gulf>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Soliman, "GCC, US-China tech war."

⁶⁴ Enrico Fardella and Brandon Friedman, "Dragon unbound? Regional influences on China's policies in the Middle East," *Global Policy* 14 (2023): 4–6.

⁶⁵ Fulton, "China's Changing Role," 13.

footprint” in the Gulf has become less of a strategic imperative than it was in the post-9/11 period, when counterterrorism guided US defense and security policy.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, a scaling down of US capabilities and a redirection of resources does not entail a complete withdrawal from the Gulf.

In the case of Iran, while deterring aggression has remained a top priority for the Biden administration, Washington has readjusted its posture by demonstrating a willingness to engage diplomatically with the regime. Moreover, it has welcomed Beijing’s diplomatic efforts to smooth relations between Riyadh and Tehran, a development that, while it has yet to produce material results, would ultimately benefit US national interests in the region. By contrast, Washington has not reacted positively to what it perceives as Beijing’s increased meddling in the defense and security matters of America’s Gulf partners. Against the backdrop of China’s efforts to intensify defense cooperation with Saudi Arabia on arms and military exercises, the Biden administration approved security agreements with Riyadh, including the sale of air-to-air missiles for security purposes despite Biden’s previous halt of US support for “offensive operations” in Yemen. Relatedly, the US halt to the sale of F-35 jets to the UAE amid concerns over Abu Dhabi’s growing relationship with Beijing, particularly the use of Huawei 5G technology, illustrates US goal changes in the region. The United States remains committed to strengthening the security of its Gulf allies, but not at the expense of national interests, which Washington has perceived to be at risk of Chinese predatory technology.

Despite increased PRC-GCC interactions, the United States has continued to act as the region’s defense guarantor and has provided a security architecture in which Gulf, as well as Chinese, interests have remained secure.⁶⁷ Rumors of Washington’s and Beijing’s heading toward a collision course may abound, but Chinese economic interests, specifically in energy security and access to markets in the Gulf, have benefited from the security umbrella that the United States has provided in the region.⁶⁸ Beijing may offer Gulf partners economic opportunities and business investment through the BRI, but Washington has guaranteed security and stability for its Gulf partners through the presence of physical military infrastructure and defense cooperation, combined with a foreign-policy approach built around the tenets of democracy and human rights. As Washington reorients toward the Asia-Pacific, the region may not feature as prominently in US grand strategy as it did from the early 1990s to mid-2000s. As such, Gulf states have hedged their bets, trying to maintain relations with Washington while engaging more deeply with China, which has positioned itself as a favorable external great-power partner.⁶⁹ However, this article asserts that a recalibration of US policy goals in the Middle East does not entail a complete withdrawal from the region; the United States has stabilized and will continue to stabilize the Gulf politically and militarily.

CONCLUSION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR SINO-US COOPERATION?

Despite their strategic rivalry, Washington and Beijing share interests that are largely compatible: containing Iran’s nuclear capabilities and deterring its aggression, countering terrorism and piracy, ensuring the flow of oil supplies, and advancing economic and investment opportunities

⁶⁶ Jonatan Fulton, “US-China Competition in the MENA region,” Italian Institute for international Political Studies, November 23, 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/us-china-competition-mena-region-32435>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Yoshihara and Sokolsky, “United States and China,” 73.

⁶⁹ Fulton, “China’s Changing Role,” 13.

with Gulf allies to promote greater security and prosperity in the region. Neither party benefits from a Middle East made increasingly unstable by Iranian activities, especially China, whose economy depends on energy from the Gulf; in 2021, the Asian power imported \$128 billion worth of oil from Gulf states.⁷⁰ China's cooperation on an initiative that prevents Iran from ascending to regional hegemony and escalating tensions in the region would safeguard its commercial interests and energy security.

Previously, the Biden administration raised concerns about China's growing prominence in the region; however, it has viewed the Saudi-Iran deal as a positive development. Even if Washington were kept out of the picture, achieving greater stability in the Middle East has ultimately benefited US interests. As Senator Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut), who leads the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Middle East panel, stated: "Not everything between the US and China has to be a zero-sum game."⁷¹ Moreover, amid growing fears of great-power conflicts, piggybacking off a Chinese diplomatic win between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a useful move for Washington. A reduction in regional tensions and movement on Iran's return to the JCPOA would allow the United States to pivot to Asia to confront China's increase in strength.⁷²

Nevertheless, the crisis unfolding in the Middle East, triggered by Hamas's attack on Israel, will put China's regional ambitions to the test.⁷³ Unlike Washington, Beijing has fostered good relations with the majority of powers in the region, including Iran, a supporter of Hamas and Hezbollah. China's using its clout to prevent the Israel-Hamas conflict from expanding into a full-blown regional war is almost unthinkable. The reactions of officials in Beijing to the Hamas assault, which have been deemed "inappropriate" by Israel's foreign ministry, certainly do not aid China's hope for a regional de-escalation.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, discussions between Blinken and China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, about promoting regional stability and "discouraging other parties from entering the conflict"⁷⁵ have revealed that Washington and Beijing are presented with another opportunity to cooperate in the region.

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<https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12726>

⁷⁰ Matthew P. Funairole, Brian Hart, and Lily McElwee, "Dire Straits: China's Push to Secure Its Energy Interests in the Middle East," CSIS, February 3, 2023, <https://features.csis.org/hiddenreach/china-middle-east-military-facility>.

⁷¹ Alexander Ward, "Win-win: Washington is just fine with the China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal," *Foreign Affairs*, April 6, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/04/06/china-saudi-iran-deal-00090856>.

⁷² Gregory Aftandilian, "Why President Biden Wants to Revive the Iran Deal," Gulf International Forum, August 15, 2022, <https://gulffor.org/why-president-biden-wants-to-revive-the-iran-deal>.

⁷³ Joe Leahy, Edward White, and Andy Lin, "Israel-Hamas war tests China's Middle East ambitions," *Financial Times*, October 15, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/dbb1c37f-d261-4338-b585-04dfd93d9e55>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.