

The Role of the Gulf in the Longue Durée Of China's Foreign Policy

Enrico Fardella | Gangzheng She

Dr. Fardella is associate professor at the University of Naples "l'Orientale" and director of the ChinaMed.it research platform. Dr. She is associate professor in the Department of International Relations and director of the Center for Overseas Security at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

Correspondence

Gangzheng She

shegangzheng@tsinghua.edu.cn

Abstract

This article examines the evolution of China's policy toward the Persian Gulf, linking its contemporary strategies to its historical principles of diplomacy, particularly those rooted in Maoism. It first outlines a conceptual framework that connects China's Gulf policies to the enduring Maoist tradition in its foreign policy. The analysis then delves into Mao Zedong's theory of intermediate zones and its influence on China's strategic posture in the Middle East from the mid-20th century to today. The focus shifts to the increasing importance of the region, especially the Gulf, in the current iteration of China's intermediate-zones strategy. Situating China's policies within the context of Mao's anti-hegemonic stance and the concept of intermediate zones provides a nuanced perspective on the Chinese approach to the Middle East. The authors argue that China's longstanding anti-hegemonic strategy has hindered the development of a more independent and assertive regional policy. However, they suggest that the recent intensification of the Sino-American rivalry, the perceived decline in US regional influence, and the "new centrality" of the Persian Gulf may prompt China to adopt a more proactive role in the region, moving beyond its traditional strategy of active defense. This article is part of a special issue examining the responses of Gulf countries to rising Sino-American competition, edited by Andrea Ghiselli, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Enrico Fardella.

INTRODUCTION: CONTINUITY IN BEIJING'S REGIONAL POLICY

A widely popular narrative identifies, among the main systemic shifts of the last decade, China's growing ascent to the global stage as both cause and effect of a wide-ranging decline of Western influence.¹ The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, has become the symbol of this dynamic.

The widening gap between Chinese activism and Western passivity in the international arena has manifested itself vividly in the Middle East, a region traditionally affected by direct and indirect forms of European and American intervention. Since the beginning of the last decade, the Middle East has become the main “laboratory”—outside of Chinese neighboring areas—for Beijing's new proactive diplomacy, aimed at securing and expanding the growing strategic nexus between China's rising thirst for energy and the capacity of regional suppliers to satisfy it.²

In the last decade, therefore, mutual interests have increased among China and states in the Middle East, foremost those in the Gulf, given their central roles in energy markets. This has contributed to a “new centrality” of the Gulf to global dynamics and has offered local actors a larger set of strategic options, boosting their capacity to hedge and reducing their traditional dependence on Western markets and finances.

This new renaissance of the Gulf, coupled with China's growing activism, has generated an interest among academics in Beijing's regional policies and their role in Xi's global strategy.³ The general focus of this scholarship is on the economic drivers of Beijing's policies in the region, an approach that tends to favor the new, quantitative components of China's regional presence—such as investments, loans, and trade volumes—over the long-lasting, qualitative components.⁴ But this risks overemphasizing change versus continuity, confusing tactics with strategy, and interpreting actions irrespective of intentions.

Although tracing current policies back to the traditional framework of Chinese strategy may produce less-striking results—by depriving “change” of its explanatory glory—it may provide a more reliable framework for analyzing China's regional actions. The space, and pace, of policy innovation within the Chinese political system in fact has always been shaped by

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 research platform (www.chinamed.it) of the Torino World Affairs Institute (T.wai) and by the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme at Durham University. Enrico Fardella is the author of the introduction, the first section on the long durée of Chinese foreign policy, and the conclusion; Gangzheng She is the author of the second section on the Gulf's “new centrality” to Chinese policy.

² Enrico Fardella, “China's debate on the Middle East and North Africa: a critical review,” in “A sea of opportunities: China's growing presence in the Mediterranean region,” ed. Enrico Fardella and Constantine Pagedas, *Mediterranean Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2015): 5–25.

³ Tim Niblock, “Problems and Opportunities for China in Developing Its Role in the Gulf Region,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11, no. 3 (2017): 1–11; Degang Sun, “China's ‘Zero-Enemy Policy’ in the Gulf: Dynamics and Tactics,” in *Asian Perceptions of Gulf Security*, ed. Li-Chen Sim and Jonathan Fulton (London: Routledge, 2022), 30–49; Alam Saleh and Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas, “China-Iran Strategic Partnership and the Future of US Hegemony in the Persian Gulf Region,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2023), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13530194.2023.2215188>; Gangzheng She, “Changing Focus while Maintaining Balance: Strategic Adjustments behind the Developing Sino-Saudi Relations,” *Mediterranean Politics* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2229647>.

⁴ Xuming Qian and Jonathan Fulton, “China-Gulf Economic Relationship under the ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11, no. 3 (2017): 12–21; Chuchu Zhang, Sujata Ashwarya, and Shaobiao Wen, “The Interplay of China and Gulf Countries in Third-party Market Dynamics: An Asymmetric Competition Perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative,” *The Pacific Review* (2023), 10.1080/09512748.2023.2299836.

the necessities of stability and self-preservation. This has generated a structural tendency to favor continuity, upholding Maoist traditions, through a process of change based on post-Mao innovations.⁵

This article therefore aims to locate China's pivot to the Gulf within the continuity of its regional policy, and at the same time to reconnect Beijing's regional policy within the *longue durée* of its traditional foreign-policy strategy. It does so by tracing the origin of China's Middle East policies to Mao Zedong's theory of intermediate zones and examining its resilience in China's foreign policy from Deng Xiaoping to Xi.

The idea of an intermediate zone, middle ground, or buffer zone has long been valued by Western strategists and scholars. Initially, the concept referred to a territory sandwiched between two or more political entities, but it has gradually been expanded to indicate all areas coveted by great powers competing in an international system. Halford Mackinder, Karl Haushofer, Nicholas J. Spykman, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and other geopolitical theorists distinguished between Eurasia's center and periphery, proposing intermediate zones that major powers like the United States, Britain, and Germany should control, either to win or to prevent a power transition.⁶

However, Mao's notion of intermediate zones has never attracted the attention of Western scholarship. In a rare exception, John Garver describes the concept as the effective implementation of the anti-imperialist united front in the colonies and semi-colonies presented in 1921 by the Communist International. The strategy foresaw a united front with nationalist, anti-imperialist, and noncommunist movements, such as Sun Yat-sen's Kuomintang.⁷ In Garver's analysis, however, Mao's attempt to expand the revolution into the "intermediate zones" appears to have been more a defensive measure to protect socialism from imperialist aggression than a long-term, defining component of Chinese revolutionary strategy, as several prominent Chinese historians have claimed.⁸

Garver's analysis does not explore the connection between Mao's intermediate-zone theory and China's policies in the Middle East. The most notable example in this direction is the excellent work by the renowned Israeli scholar Yitzhak Shichor in 1979. Shichor argues, based on a careful assessment of Mao's concept, that China's regional policies have to be seen through the prism of China's enduring global, anti-hegemonic strategy. "The Chinese have always been concerned with developments in the Middle East not merely as an important centre of international activity

⁵ Yaqing Qin, "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China's International Strategy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 3 (2014): 285–314; Andrew Scobell, Edmund J. Burke, Cortez A. Cooper III, Sale Lilly, Chad J.R. Ohlandt, Eric Warner, and J.D. Williams, *China's Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2798.html.

⁶ Halford John Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (London: Constable & Co., 1919), 194–205; Nicholas John Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1944), 25–53; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

⁷ John Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 94–95.

⁸ See Niu Jun, "Reconstruction of Intermediate Zone: the Origin of China's Asia Policy," *The Journal of International Studies*, no. 2 (2012): 61–80; 唐洲雁 Tang Zhouyan "纸老虎"、"中间地带"、"两个阵营"——毛泽东"转折年代"的美国观, in *Modern Philosophy* (2008), 中共中央文献研究室北京 100017; "Paper Tiger," "Middle Zone," "Two Camps," "Mao Zedong's American View of the 'Turning Era,'" in *Modern Philosophy* (2008), Central Literature and Research Office of the Communist Party of China, Beijing.

in its own right,” he says, “but primarily as a part of the general historical development of the world which affected and involved China’s own interests.”⁹

This article humbly aims to expand Shichor’s interpretative framework to assess the continuity of China’s Middle East policy from Mao to the present and to detect its influence over Beijing’s recent actions in the Gulf. It first examines the specifics of intermediate-zones theory and highlights its resilience in the strategic evolution of Chinese Middle East policy from the 1940s to the present. It then assesses the role that the new centrality of the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf at its core, plays in China’s new articulation of the strategy of intermediate zones.

The authors conclude that the dominance of China’s anti-hegemonic strategy has so far prevented Beijing from developing a more independent and assertive regional policy. However, the rise of the Sino-American rivalry into a new form of cold war, the perceived decline of US hegemony, and the emergence of a new centrality of the Persian Gulf may influence the future of China’s regional approach. In the attempt to consolidate its influence, Beijing may depart from the traditional form of proactive defense, as expressed in the logic of intermediate zones, and step into an unprecedented role that combines the newly acquired centrality with traditional forms of dominion.

INTERMEDIATE ZONES AND THE LONGUE DURÉE OF CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY

Since the People’s Republic of China’s inception in 1949, leaders from Mao to Xi have aimed to change the world’s political map. This would heal the “humiliation” wrought by Western imperialism and carve out a “legitimate” space and status for China that could bring back lost prestige and restore Beijing’s regional and global authority—“rejuvenating” the Chinese nation. This effort to regain “centrality” in the global arena translated into a consistent and continuous effort to blunt the hegemony of the superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—and carve out a China-led, alternative pole that could progressively shape global governance and create the conditions for the country’s security and prosperity.

The People’s Republic therefore never fully identified itself with the dominant orders—the bipolarity of the Cold War or the liberal order that followed—but shaped its position within them to maximize its gains. At the same time, Beijing tried to alter those orders from within, both to neutralize their influence on its political stability and to favor the creation of a newer version of a system that could enhance China’s global status.

The enduring corollary of this strategy has been the anti-hegemonic logic of Beijing’s foreign policy. Since its foundation, China has shaped policy around a global effort to blunt the hegemony perceived by party leaders as a deadly threat to the legitimate space they strove to create. This has translated into two core projects. One is the building of a large, anti-hegemonic united front, grounded on China’s instrumental identification with the developing world and aimed at isolating the most hostile powers. The other is the advancing of a new order—liberated from antagonistic forms of hegemony—through the promotion of national independence worldwide.¹⁰

⁹ Yitzhak Shichor, *The Middle East in China’s Foreign Policy, 1949-1977* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1.

¹⁰ 孙建社Sun Jianshe, 中间地带思想与三个世界理论的内在关系 “The intrinsic relationship between Mao’s intermediate zone theory and three world theory,” *JOURNAL OF JIANGSU RADIO & TELEVISION UNIVERSITY* 14, no. 1 (February 2003: 37-41; 巨永明Ju Yongming, 从“中间地带”到“三个世界”——兼论毛泽东国际统一战线思想” (“From ‘intermedi-

To appreciate the dominant influence of this global outlook over China's regional policies in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, one has to look first at the source of China's anti-hegemonic rationale: Mao's theory of intermediate zones. After the anti-Japanese war, most leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agreed that the rivalry with the nationalist Kuomintang reflected US-Soviet antagonism. As explained by Niu Jun, this perception had two levels of meaning. First, the CCP and the USSR were closely aligned, regardless of any divergences in their interests. Second, the CCP was supposed to coordinate with the Soviets and adapt to their policies toward China.¹¹

In Mao's view, however, the supposed bipolarity of the international order did not reflect the real nature of global power dynamics. Between April and August 1946, in a short essay and an interview with American journalist Anne Louise Strong, Mao decoupled the Chinese revolution from the bipolar prism of the Cold War, rejecting the preoccupations of his comrades with the potential outbreak of a Third World War between the United States and Soviet Union, which could threaten China's stability and jeopardize the CCP's struggle for power.¹²

Mao claimed instead that the main contradiction in the global system was not the antagonism between the opposite poles of the Americans and the Soviets, as his comrades feared. Instead, it was the hegemonic attempt by the US reactionaries to expand and consolidate their control over a vast intermediate zone composed of former colonialist powers in Europe and semicolonial and colonial countries in the Southern Hemisphere, Middle East, and Asia, including China. This would allow them to encircle and defeat the Soviet Union, the strongest obstacle to the completion of the American hegemonic design. Therefore, the primary contradiction, in Mao's view, was the struggle between US reactionaries and the struggle for independence among the actors within the intermediate zones. Mao saw his revolution, therefore, as playing a transformative role within this historical trend: American reactionaries were just "paper tigers," and their hegemonic design could be thwarted by the CCP's success.

Intermediate-zone theory became the party's mainstream discourse. Any emphasis of the conflict between the United States and the USSR was labeled an "arbitrary propaganda of the reactionaries" that tried to use the anti-Soviet struggle as a justification to expand American hegemony over the intermediate zones and achieve global dominance.

This theory had a twofold impact on the course of Chinese Middle East policy. First, it revolutionized Chinese nationalism in a way that eventually became incompatible with a Soviet orientation.¹³ Support for movements of national liberation in the Southern Hemisphere was conceived as a proactive defense of the Chinese national interest. While Moscow judged regimes according to their domestic politics, the CCP looked at them through the prism of their international orientations. As a *People's Daily* editorial declared in 1951:

ate zone' to 'three world theory'—with analysis of Mao's international United Front Ideology," *Henan Normal University Journal* 20 (1993) 20-23.

¹¹ See 牛军Niu Jun, "重建'中间地带'——中国亚洲政策的缘起(1949—1955年)," "Reconstruction of Intermediate Zone theory—the origin of Chinese Asian foreign policies," *The Journal of International Studies* 2 (2012): 61–80.

¹² 毛泽东:《关于目前国际形势的几点估计》,1946年4月,《毛泽东选集》第四卷,人民出版社2001年版,第1184–1185页; "Talk with the American Correspondent Anna Louise Strong," Wilson Center Digital Archive, August 6, 1946, in <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/talk-american-correspondent-anna-louise-strong>. See also 毛泽东:《要胜利就要搞好统一战线》,1946年11月21日,中共中央文献研究室编:《毛泽东文集》,第四卷,人民出版社1996年版,第197页; 陆定一:《对于战后国际形势中几个基本问题的解释》,1946年1月2日,《解放日报》,1946年1月4日。

¹³ 牛军Niu Jun, "重建'中间地带'——中国亚洲政策的缘起(1949—1955年)," "Reconstruction of Intermediate Zone theory—the origin of Chinese Asian foreign policies," 66.

The key to victory in the movement of the peoples of Egypt and the Middle East for independence and sovereignty lies in rallying and uniting the broad masses of people within their respective countries and in joining up with other peace-loving peoples throughout the world in resolute struggle against both British and U.S. imperialism. In this struggle against imperialism, the masses are the foundation which must be relied upon.¹⁴

Therefore, the main contradiction that CCP foreign policy aimed to address was anti-imperialist liberation, not proletarian revolution. China did not develop—and did not have the knowledge and intellectual capital to craft—independent regional policies. Nor did it interfere in local controversies: Such conflicts were considered “secondary” contradictions that could only absorb China’s limited capital and distract from its main focus. It localized regional approaches through the prism of its anti-hegemonic rationale.

Second, the theory signaled Mao’s original vision of an alternative pole, characterized by a search for independence and the consequent anti-hegemonic stance, with China’s playing a prominent role and regaining the center of the global stage. If the intermediate zones were the main battlefields for opposing American hegemony, the CCP could lead both the defense of the socialist camp against the United States and, by inference, the global struggle for independence.

Mao initially played down his emphasis on intermediate zones, given the CCP’s material weakness. From the Yangjiagou conference in 1947 to the foundation of the PRC, he sought to facilitate China’s ascendancy in the post-Yalta, pre-structured international system. He tactically adopted the Soviets’ “two camps” vision, which was used to indicate the connection between Chinese and world revolution, and leaned toward the Soviet Union.¹⁵ This allowed Beijing to safeguard its security, accelerate economic construction, compact the internal front, join the socialist international community, capitalize on China’s geopolitical relevance within it, and enhance its global status. However, as soon as the United States intensified its anti-China containment after the Korean War, Mao revitalized the discourse of intermediate-zones theory to maximize the expansion of its diplomatic outreach. Beijing toned down its proletarian internationalism and started to reach out to global allies based on national interest and common vision for world peace (i.e., the five principles of coexistence).¹⁶

Mao’s transformation of the CCP into a successful political and military machine represented an alternative model, in stark competition with the Soviet one, for those movements of national liberation in semicolonial and colonial countries that were trying to achieve independence in the Southern Hemisphere. China’s geopolitical relevance and its huge domestic market also represented an appealing partner for colonialists—especially for European powers, like France and the United Kingdom, possessing a strong foothold in Asia—that wanted to hedge their political and economic bets beyond US-controlled structures.

Mao’s vision then translated into a two-pronged strategy: investing political capital—the only currency Beijing could really afford at the time—in the intermediate zones to reinforce China’s relevance, and consolidating the anti-hegemonic forces. This maintained the formal unity of the socialist camp and gained Soviet economic and political support, while China progressively

¹⁴ Commentary in *Renmin ribao* (*People’s Daily*), October 22, 1951, in *SWB/FE*, no. 132 (October 30, 1951), 25–6, quoted in Schichor, *Middle East*, 17.

¹⁵ 唐洲雁 Tang Zhouyan 纸老虎, 53; “Paper Tiger,” 53.

¹⁶ See 李潜虞 Li Qianyu, 从万隆到阿尔及尔——中国与六次亚非国际会议 (1955–1965) “From Bandung to Algiers—China and six Asia-Africa international conferences” (World Knowledge Press, 2016).

challenged the hegemonic dominance of the Soviet Union to shape the movement and strengthen China's international prestige.

From this perspective, 1956 can be seen as a watershed. That year, implementing the first part of the strategy, China coordinated with France, Britain, and Italy to bypass an economic blockade imposed by the US-led Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls. It also strengthened relationships with seven countries in the Middle East—Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Morocco, Sudan, and Algeria—through actions like support for Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal, Abdel Karim Kassem's revolution in Iraq, and the Algerian government-in-exile's struggle for independence. The second component of China's strategy can be seen in its criticism of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's policies and its playing the paternalistic role of a wise mediator in the crises between the USSR and Poland and Hungary late that fall.

The second half of the 1950s and first half of 1960s demonstrated China's growing activism in the intermediate zones. The acceleration of decolonization through the spread of national-liberation movements—foremost within Africa—gave Beijing an opportunity to expand its anti-hegemonic actions, dilute the anti-China policies of the superpowers, and weaken international support for Taiwan in the United Nations.

The simultaneous increase of ideological tensions with Moscow progressively degenerated into a complete split between the two socialist giants. This turned into the main security challenge for China, at both domestic and foreign-policy levels. The emergence of Soviet "revisionism" threatened the course of Mao's revolution as he struggled against other Chinese leaders in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, and it poisoned Mao's promotion of a global revolution. This had a direct impact not only on Sino-Soviet relations but also on the configuration of the intermediate-zone theory.¹⁷

To counter the rapid deterioration of the security environment through the US military intervention in Vietnam and the USSR's anti-China policies, Mao increased his emphasis on cooperation with the "developed countries" in Europe, North America, and Asia that he perceived as being in contradiction with both superpowers. In so doing, he expanded the intermediate zone:

In my view, there are two intermediate zones: the first, Asia, Africa and Latin America and the second, Europe. Japan and Canada are not happy with the United States. The six-nation Common Market, represented by [French President Charles] de Gaulle, is made up of powerful capitalist countries. Japan in the East is a powerful capitalist country. They are unhappy with the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Are the Eastern European countries that satisfied with Khrushchev of the Soviet Union? I don't believe so.¹⁸

Supporting world revolution was still China's priority among the "direct allies" (zhijie tongmeng jun) in the first intermediate zone. But strengthening relationships with "indirect allies" (jianjie tongmeng jun)—the advanced countries of the second intermediate zone—became crucial to

¹⁷ 《中国共产党第八届中央委员会第十次全体会议的公报》("Communique of the 10th Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China"), 1962年9月27日 (September 27, 1962) 国防大学党史党建教研室编:(edited by the Party History and Party Building Teaching and Research Section of the National Defense University)《中共党史教学参考资料》("Teaching Reference Materials for the History of the Communist Party of China")第24册,第166页。(volume 24, 166).

¹⁸ Mao Zedong, "There Are Two 'Intermediate Zones,'" September 1963, in *Mao Zedong on Diplomacy*, translation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China and the Party Literature Research Center (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1998), 387–389, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121207>.

waging the international anti-hegemonic campaign and resisting the growing security threat to Chinese domestic security posed by the superpowers.¹⁹

Chinese action in the first intermediate zone increased sharply during the first half of 1960s. Premier Zhou Enlai's historic visit to Egypt in 1963 was followed by a surge of foreign aid to the Middle East; indeed, it represented one-third of China's total aid in 1964.²⁰ This was coupled with initiatives toward the "indirect allies" of the second intermediate zone, demonstrated by the establishment of Sino-French diplomatic relations in 1964 just after the Evian peace accords between France and Algeria.

The rise and demise of the Cultural Revolution in the second half of 1960s had a twofold effect. On the one hand, it erased the logic that had inspired Beijing's alliance with Moscow by turning the Soviet Union into China's main hegemonic threat. On the other, as had already occurred after the Korean War, it manifested the need for China's revolutionary model to better tune its codes to the common interests of the "direct" and "indirect" allies in the intermediate zones.

The demise of revolutionary tension worldwide in the early 1970s shifted the focus toward development and reform of the international economic order as the main priorities of the Southern Hemisphere. Mao promptly adapted his vision to this new zeitgeist and favored a "secularization" of Chinese diplomacy, characterized by a stronger emphasis on "development" instead of "revolution."²¹

In 1974, Mao instructed Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping to introduce at the UN General Assembly, for the first time in public, his vision of the intermediate zones, now labeled the Three Worlds Theory. While Mao's first vision was characterized by a conception of political revolution as an instrument of liberation against the hegemony of reactionary classes, the second focused on the importance of economic development as a tool of resistance against imperialist oppression. The globe, according to the Chinese leader, was divided into three areas: a Third World of developing countries, with China at its core; a Second World of developed countries, such as European states, Japan, and Canada; and a First World composed of superpowers. These behemoths each had hegemonic designs, but one, the Soviet Union, represented the main threat to international peace and the achievement of development by the Third World.

Indeed, the USSR was now labeled a "social imperialist" country and seen as an aggressive and imminent risk to the independence and rise of China, given its dual nature as a socialist and a developing country. Given this new theory, the People's Republic, which had gained a permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 1971, could both represent the interests of the Third World and forge a more balanced and fruitful cooperation with the Second World. The Chinese could work with this latter group to improve economically and minimize First World hegemony.

As argued in a top-secret speech by Geng Biao, director of the CCP's International Liaison Department, China's central role in the Third World was merely instrumental to its pursuit of a more efficient anti-hegemonic struggle:

¹⁹ 毛泽东 (Mao Zedong) 《中间地带有两个》(The Two Intermediate Zones), 1963年9月, 1964年1月、7月 (September 1963, January and July 1964) in 《毛泽东外交文选》("Selected Diplomatic Works of Mao Zedong") 中华人民共和国外交部、中共中央文献研究室编 (edited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China and the Documentation Research Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China:), 第506-509页。(pp. 506-509).

²⁰ Schichor, *Middle East*, 114.

²¹ Chen Jian, "From Mao to Deng: China's Changing Relations with the United States," working paper 92, Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, November 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/mao-to-deng-chinas-changing-relations-the-united-states>.

We say we are in the Third World; this is not to degrade us to the level of a nationalist country. It promotes more efficient working conditions and unity with the Third World, the aim of which is to oppose the two hegemons. . . . It is for the need for opposing the two hegemons that China is included in the Third World. This is for internal discussion; we mustn't mention it in public. . . . If we want to oppose the two hegemons, we must gather support and unite 95 percent (of the Third World). We will defeat imperialism. We will also defeat the bourgeoisie. However, there are priorities that are more important than others. Some countries are the agents of bourgeoisie, but we cannot say that. If we want to oppose the two hegemons, we should try to unite with the remaining 95 percent. Imperialism we are going to defeat. The bourgeoisie we are also going to defeat. . . . We should concentrate on striking the Soviet revisionists.²²

Soviet revisionism was an internal threat to Chinese revolution, and its influence in the intermediate zones directly challenged China's capacity to elevate its status and leverage those spaces for its anti-hegemonic struggle. The perception of US decline after the Vietnam War, and Washington's expressed interest to partner with China and reinforce its geopolitical containment of the USSR, gave Beijing the opportunity to bolster its anti-Soviet campaign, expand its outreach to the intermediate zones, and reinforce its economy through cooperation with the developed world.

Beijing's "leaning toward" the United States, inaugurated by President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 and structured by the diplomatic normalization of 1979, was meant to safeguard Chinese security against the Soviet threat and guide the economy toward modernization. At the same time, it prepared the ground for the creation of the post-Cold War economic order, based on a symbiotic connection between the US-led liberal order and China's central role in the globalized industrial supply chain, under the banner of "peace and development."

However, China's main foreign-policy orientation did not change. "China's foreign policy consists mainly of two sentences: one sentence is to oppose hegemonism and safeguard world peace, and the other sentence is that China will always belong to the third world," Deng emphasized in the 1980s. "China now belongs to the third world. In the future, it will become prosperous and strong, and it will still belong to the third world."²³

As had happened with the Soviet Union in the 1950s, the Chinese leadership progressively framed the dominant US role as an obstacle to the realization of China's "rejuvenation." Western engagement, in fact, favored a process of economic and political liberalization of the society that threatened to challenge the CCP's leadership role. Starting in the 1990s, Beijing smoothly implemented a series of tactics aimed at blunting US power projection at regional and global levels, while China's entry into multilateral organizations like the World Trade Organization reinforced its international status and its capacity to influence global institutions from within. In the eyes of the state's leadership, the rise of China's economic and political influence worldwide seemed to mirror—especially after the Lehman Brothers crisis of 2007—the decline of US hegemony. From there, Beijing activated a more proactive foreign policy, aimed at diluting American influence and

²² Speech by Comrade Geng Biao of the CCP CC International Liaison Department at the Symposium on National Tourism Work, March 6, 1975, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/speech-comrade-geng-biao-ccp-cc-international-liaison-department-symposium-national>.

²³ Quoted in 赵毅:《“三个世界”理论与中国外交的转型——兼论邓小平对毛泽东国际战略思想的继承与发展》, 山西高等学校社会科学学报. 2004年08期 第7-10页。ZHAO YI, "The 'Three World' Theory and the Transformation of China's Diplomacy," 56.

at creating new markets and alternative structures to reinforce China's global power, especially in the Third World (today called the Global South).

The portentous rise of China's economic strength since Deng's reforms and opening to the world added a powerful economic dimension to Mao's political vision of the intermediate zones, making them once again primary areas for China's implementation of its anti-hegemonic strategy. The Middle East plays a central role in this dynamic. Since the 1990s, this region, with the Persian Gulf at its core, became crucial for Chinese energy security. The rise of China's economic footprint, and the need to protect new "interest frontiers," led to the expansion of its security footprint in the region and its political cooperation with regional actors.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the signature foreign-policy strategy of Xi Jinping, demonstrates and organizes this process. Its geography incorporates both the developing Third World—the "direct allies" of the first intermediate zone—and the advanced Second World's "indirect allies." The BRI thus combines Mao's anti-hegemonic vision of the intermediate zones and Deng's logic of peace and development into a comprehensive and proactive strategy. This allows China, for the first time, to shape regional dynamics away from the hegemonic influence of traditional powers like the United States and provide local actors with a powerful hedging alternative aimed at securing regional autonomy.²⁴

THE GULF'S 'NEW CENTRALITY' TO CHINESE POLICY

Located in the intersection of Asia, Africa, and Europe, the Gulf region has great geopolitical importance, impacts trade routes, and—with nearly half of the world's oil reserves and a significant share of world petroleum exports—stands at the center of international energy supply. Four out of the 10 biggest oil exporters in the global market are Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia—the world's second-largest oil producer—accounted for approximately 14.5 percent of the world's exports in 2021, and with Iraq, the UAE, and Kuwait made up more than 32 percent of the global total.²⁵ The central role of the Gulf in energy markets has been further boosted by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, as European countries seek to fill their energy gaps by strengthening ties with the region.²⁶

The Gulf's vital importance has been accompanied in the last decade by increasing political stability, an expanding consumer market (the combination of positive demography and a high GDP per capita), and widespread reforms for economic diversification to turn the region into one of the world's most attractive areas for foreign direct investment.²⁷ The Gulf countries are funding emerging-technology and infrastructure-construction projects, including 5G, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing, striving to become leading players in the digital era.

These dynamics have allowed Gulf states to enhance their roles in regional politics. As key members of transnational organizations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab

²⁴ Jin Lixiang, "China's role in the Middle East," China-US Focus, June 21, 2023, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/chinas-role-in-the-middle-east>.

²⁵ Alexandra Twin, "The World's 10 Biggest Oil Exporters," Investopedia, July 28, 2023, <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/company-insights/082316/worlds-top-10-oil-exporters.asp>.

²⁶ Caleb Ecarma, "We've Come a Long Way From Joe Biden Calling Saudi Arabia a 'Pariah' State," *Vanity Fair*, June 2, 2022.

²⁷ Investment Monitor, "Greenfield Foreign Direct Investment into Middle East and Africa 2022," https://www.investmentmonitor.ai/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2023/05/Investment-Monitor_FDI-in-MEA-REPORT_2023.pdf.

League, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Gulf countries have increased their influence on political and security agendas in the broader Middle East, including civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya.²⁸ The normalization between several Gulf countries and Israel since 2020 has also profoundly affected the regional-security structure, and serves as a crucial background for the deadly Hamas attack in October 2023.²⁹ The international community has widely accepted the Gulf states as indispensable in a variety of regional issues, in particular the reshaping of the Arab world.³⁰

The increasing influence of Gulf countries has also manifested beyond the region, as they act as mediators in a broad range of conflicts. For instance, Saudi Arabia, together with Turkey, brokered the largest Russian-Ukrainian prisoner-of-war exchange to date, and other Gulf actors have engaged in talks between Moscow and Kyiv. Qatar hosted negotiations between the United States and the Taliban before the American pullout from Afghanistan, and it has tried to broker cease-fires between Israel and Hamas.³¹ The Gulf states have also tried to improve their images by hosting major international events, such as the 2020 World Expo in Dubai and the 2022 Qatar World Cup, and making efforts toward social reform and secularization. In 2019, Pope Francis traveled to the UAE, becoming the first pontiff to visit the Arabian Peninsula. Additionally, Dubai held the United Nations Climate Change Conference in late 2023.³²

The People's Republic of China has played a strategic role in the Gulf's growing influence and independence in economics and politics, at both regional and global levels. Since the end of the Cold War, China's extraordinary rise and its growing need for energy—it imports half its oil from the Persian Gulf—have been the main drivers of its economic outreach to the Middle East.³³ Moreover, Beijing has become a key partner not only in the region's upstream, midstream, and downstream sectors, but also its energy transition.³⁴

Along with its rising energy imports, China has dramatically boosted its export of goods and capital to the Gulf, becoming the region's main trading partner in 2018, surpassing the European Union. A similar trend can be seen in Chinese foreign direct investment, which has helped the region's economic diversification. China and the Gulf states have cooperated on more than 200 large-scale construction projects, including energy-storage facilities for new city projects along the Red Sea in Saudi Arabia and the Al Dhafra solar power plant in the UAE. The opening of the Middle East market for Chinese electric buses and clean-energy vehicles likewise gives

²⁸ Jason Pack, "Qatar Is the Key to Middle East Peace," *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/07/qatar-israel-hamas-gaza-war-middle-east-peace>.

²⁹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Saudi-Israeli Normalization and the Hamas Attack," Arab Center Washington DC, October 11, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/saudi-israeli-normalization-and-the-hamas-attack>.

³⁰ Marc Owen Jones, Ross Porter, and Marc Valeri, *Gulfization of the Arab World* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2018).

³¹ Reuters, "Russia, Ukraine announce major surprise prisoner swap," September 22, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-releases-10-foreigners-captured-ukraine-after-saudi-mediation-riyadh-2022-09-21>; Al Jazeera, "Qatar is an 'impartial mediator' amid Afghanistan evacuations," August 23 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/23/qatar-facilitating-movement-of-evacuees-to-kabul-airport-fm>.

³² Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of the Persian Gulf Is Reshaping the World," *The Washington Post*, June 16, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/06/16/saudi-arabia-gulf-reshaping-world>.

³³ Keith Bradsher, "China's Economic Stake in the Middle East: Its Thirst for Oil," *The New York Times*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/11/business/china-oil-saudi-arabia-iran.html>.

³⁴ The Paper, "Middle Eastern Money Floods into China," April 13, 2023, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_22668019, in Chinese; Faris Al-Sulayman and Jon B. Alterman, "China's Essential Role in the Gulf States' Energy Transitions," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 11, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-essential-role-gulf-states-energy-transitions>.

their enterprises opportunities to go global. By the end of 2023, China Development Bank had supported 99 projects and issued loans of more than \$17 billion in Arab countries.³⁵ And in a move demonstrating the new heights of China's relations with the Gulf, Xi paid a state visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, attending the first China-Arab States Summit and the first China-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit.³⁶

As China and the Gulf have grown closer, the United States has become increasingly wary. Washington has traditionally maintained strong military and economic ties with major regional players, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Facing the need to pivot to Asia during the Obama administration, the Americans in the past decade have redeployed many of their military assets away from the Middle East—particularly after President Donald Trump declared a withdrawal from Syria. As a consequence, regional partners have expressed dissatisfaction, fearing that US retrenchment may spark arms races and military escalation among antagonists.

To respond to these frustrations and counter China's growing political influence, the Biden administration introduced policies aimed at regaining the confidence of the traditional allies. But sudden shifts in the US posture on Saudi relations, on the Iranian nuclear negotiations, toward the war in Yemen, and especially regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict have deeply shaken the Gulf countries' perceptions of US wisdom and policy continuity.

Washington, with a carrot-and-stick approach, has exerted political and economic pressure to entice the GCC countries to steer away from Beijing. In 2023, the United States partnered with Israel, India, and the UAE to form the I2U2 alliance network, which presented itself as a security provider in “water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food” while restricting Chinese room for maneuver in the region.³⁷ Another attempt to counter the influence China has gained through its Belt and Road Initiative is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, a project aimed at bolstering economic development in and interconnectivity between Asia, the Gulf countries, Israel, and Europe. In addition, the Biden administration, fearing technology cooperation between China and the Middle East, has sent unambiguous warnings to countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE against partnerships with the East Asian power on AI development and chip exports.³⁸ Nevertheless, most Gulf states have no real incentive to sacrifice China ties in exchange for favor with the United States. Instead, they seek to hedge strategically between Beijing and Washington, and avoid choosing sides.³⁹

Beijing's political and economic initiatives fit perfectly with its traditional foreign-policy strategy of reducing the space for hegemonic influence and maximizing regional independence. Unlike Russia's apparent tendency, China is not interested in challenging American presence through military confrontation. Instead, it advances the dissolution of US hegemony in a subtle,

³⁵ China Development Bank, “The China-Arab Banking Consortium held its second board of directors meeting,” China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, December 8, 2023, http://www.chinaarabcf.org/zagx/wshz/202312/t20231208_11197029.htm, in Chinese.

³⁶ Wang Jin, “Xi's Visit Marks New Era for China-Arab Relations,” *The Diplomat*, December 13, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/xis-visit-marks-new-era-for-china-arab-relations>.

³⁷ Barak Ravid, “U.S., Saudi Arabia, others to discuss railway project connecting Middle East,” *Axios*, May 6, 2023, <https://www.axios.com/2023/05/06/saudi-arabia-india-railway-middle-east-biden>.

³⁸ Paolo Confino, “‘We cannot work with both sides’: A major Emirati AI company has picked a side in the U.S.-China tech war,” *Fortune*, December 8, 2023, <https://fortune.com/2023/12/07/emirati-ai-company-picks-side-against-china-g24-us-sanctions>.

³⁹ Jonathan Lord, “America Is Pushing Its Security Ideas on a Lukewarm Middle East,” *Foreign Policy*, July 11, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/11/middle-east-security-military-defense-us-congress-israel-saudi-arabia-uae-gcc-iran-biden-salman-zayed>.

flexible manner aimed at generating hedging opportunities for local actors. This yields a gradual detachment of these new intermediate zones from American regional designs and shapes their new geopolitical relevance in a way that favors Beijing's strategic and tactical interests.

Evidence of China's pursuit of such an approach can be seen in its brokering a peace deal between Riyadh and Tehran, as well as its relationship with the UAE. In March 2023, China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran stunned much of the world with a joint statement that Riyadh and Tehran agreed to restore diplomatic relations and engage in cooperation. Chinese State Councilor Wang Yi declared that the rapprochement would "drive a wave of reconciliation" in the Middle East.⁴⁰ The United States, surprised by the announcement, tried to balance against China's growing influence by seeking to incorporate Saudi Arabia into the I2U2 and pushing for Saudi-Israeli normalization. This effort may be shelved indefinitely due to the Israel-Hamas war. More important, the Gulf states are reluctant to simply take Washington's side and intend instead to hedge between the great powers.

The Saudi-Iran rapprochement demonstrates China's departure from lip service to more concrete political contributions toward regional peace. It establishes, to some extent, China's emerging role as "a promoter of security and stability in the Middle East, a collaborator in development and prosperity, and a promoter of unity and self-reliance," according to Beijing's narrative.⁴¹ China's move sends a clear signal to the United States, and to a lesser degree Israel, that it will not sit tight but rather defy the designs, such as Tel Aviv's partnership with Sunni states, aimed at regime change in Tehran. It also highlights Beijing's long-run interest in shaping a new regional framework of collective security. For now, the mediator role has bolstered Beijing's special relationships with countries on both sides of the Persian Gulf and its support for an "Islamic front" to resolve the Palestinian issue. This threatens to weaken the primacy Washington has held over the Arab-Israeli conflict since the Carter administration.

The increasing political and economic cooperation between China and the UAE reflects the same trend. The Emirates has for many years been Beijing's largest export market and second-largest trading partner in the Middle East.⁴² Their bilateral trade volume is expected to reach \$200 billion by 2030, quadrupling the current base of approximately \$50 billion.⁴³ However, the UAE maintains close economic and military ties with the United States. Roughly 3,500 American personnel are stationed at Al Dhafra Air Base, where they provide air- and missile-defense training to 2,000 participants from 10 different countries annually.⁴⁴ The two partners also conduct billions of dollars' worth of military sales.⁴⁵ The United States, therefore, has been sensitive toward any

⁴⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi: Reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran Has Set a New Example of Political Settlement of Hot-spot Issues," January 9, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjzbzd/202401/t20240109_11220467.shtml, in Chinese.

⁴¹ Cheng Xin and Wang Huihui, "Experts on the Middle East: Facilitating the Resumption of Diplomatic Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran Demonstrates China's Responsibility as a Major Country," China.org.cn, March 14, 2023, http://news.china.com.cn/2023-03/14/content_85165994.htm, in Chinese.

⁴² Stephen Blank, "Has the US lost the UAE to Russia, China?" The Hill, June 22, 2023, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/4061734-has-the-us-lost-the-uae-to-russia-china>.

⁴³ Emirates News Agency, "The UAE-China relationship in 2021: A golden year, a golden future: UAE Ambassador to China," December 2, 2021, <https://emirati.news/the-uae-china-relationship-in-2021-a-golden-year-a-golden-future-uae-ambassador-to-china>.

⁴⁴ United States Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation With the United Arab Emirates," June 25, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-united-arab-emirates>.

⁴⁵ Statista Research Department, "Value of total United States arms deliveries in the United Arab Emirates from 1970 to 2017," January 3, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1211623/uae-value-of-usa-arms-deliveries>; Middle East Eye,

military connections between China and the UAE. In November 2022, the US undersecretary of defense openly warned partners in the Middle East that close contacts with Beijing on security issues could undermine their collaboration with Washington.⁴⁶ And an April 2023 *Washington Post* report that China was building a military base near Abu Dhabi resulted in American pressure on the UAE and growing friction over the sales of F-35 fighters and advanced military drones.⁴⁷

However, the UAE's prospects for cooperation with Beijing on trade and investment, together with the allure of China's assistance on the development of advanced information technology, have created new dynamics allowing the UAE to exert its independence. Neglecting repeated US warnings, the Emirates, among other Gulf states, has even been engaging in military cooperation with China. In August 2023, Chinese and Emirati forces held their first joint exercises, shocking many in the West.⁴⁸ Some observers believe that maintaining a security alliance with the United States while training with the Chinese military illustrates the UAE's attempt to distance itself from the prospect of an increasingly polarized world order.⁴⁹ Others emphasize the view that the UAE is an independent, sovereign state with the right to make choices among partners.⁵⁰ Either way, the exercise demonstrates that China's influence has risen not only in the region's economy, but in its security, as well.

These developments should be seen as a natural extension of the Belt and Road Initiative, but they should be attributed more broadly to the successful implementation of the latest version of intermediate-zone strategy. The Gulf plays a central role in the BRI, and Beijing has established strategic partnerships with all regional states. These dynamics have generated a new narrative in the region and beyond that has stressed—at times too emphatically—China's expanding influence in inverse proportion to the decline of traditional US hegemony.⁵¹ China is a key economic player that favors the new centrality of the region, and this has facilitated coordination between Beijing and regional countries. This has in turn reinforced those states' independence and decreased the space for American hegemonic interference.

CONCLUSION

China's search for "new centrality"—the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation—has been based on a narrative of a glorious past structured through civilized regional harmony and guaranteed

⁴⁵ "US approves millions in arms sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE," December 5, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/us-approves-millions-arms-sales-saudi-arabia-and-uae>.

⁴⁶ Barak Ravid, "Top Pentagon official warns Middle East partners to limit China ties," November 18, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/11/18/pentagon-colin-kahl-warns-china-ties-uae-israel>.

⁴⁷ John Hudson, Ellen Nakashima, and Liz Sly, "Buildup resumed at suspected Chinese military site in UAE, leak says," *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/26/chinese-military-base-uae>.

⁴⁸ Agnes Helou, "China, UAE to hold first-ever joint military drill, likely a 'message' to US: Analysts," *Breaking Defense*, August 2, 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/08/china-uae-to-hold-first-ever-joint-military-drill-likely-a-message-to-us-analysts>.

⁴⁹ Nadeen Ebrahim and Aimee Look, "In the shadow of US-China rivalry, Arab allies tread delicate ground," *CNN*, August 17, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/08/14/middleeast/china-arab-gulf-states-cooperation-mime-intl/index.html>.

⁵⁰ Helou, "China, UAE to hold first-ever joint military drill."

⁵¹ Gangzheng She, "Asymmetric Competition on a New Battleground? Middle Eastern Perspectives on Sino-US Rivalry," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14, no. 2 (2021): 289–320; Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed, "Will Beijing end the 40-year-old conflict?" *Asharq Al-Awsat*, March 15, 2023.

by China's soft patronage. This narrative has historically sustained two corollaries: the equation of China's return to centrality—and therefore the healing of its humiliation by Western imperialism—with the rise of a more harmonious and peaceful order, and the notion that China's centrality does not overlap with any form of traditional dominion.

These corollaries implied that the course of such a rejuvenation was inversely proportional to the resilience of any alternative form of order that aimed to assimilate China as a junior partner. The juxtaposition of China's rise with the rules of the order—either Soviet or American—eventually became contradictory, turned into an explicit threat to Chinese national security, and stimulated an assertive response by leaders in Beijing.

The Maoist notion of how to develop an effective strategy is to identify the correct contradictions in a system and allocate a limited amount of resources to exploit them and produce the maximum results. The anti-hegemonic rationale of the intermediate-zone strategy was therefore its efficient, proactive defense that relied on the shared interests of several countries in preserving their independence. Together, they would obstruct the spread of hegemonic designs around the world. From its inception, Mao's approach identified the Middle East, and its strategic energy resources, as crucial. Since then, the measure of Beijing's success has been its capacity to invest political capital in those forces of resistance that prevent external hegemonic forces from taking control of the region.

Niu Xinchun contends that this focus on external hegemony has prevented China from developing an independent regional policy.⁵² During the Cold War, in fact, China's approach to the region was mostly one of "differentiation"—similar to its approach to the countries of the socialist bloc—calibrating policies to local actors' relations with the main hegemonic force identified by Beijing's leaders, first the United States and later the USSR.⁵³

China's capacity to turn itself into the powerhouse of the US-led, post-Cold War order generated an unprecedented material strength that eventually allowed its leaders to implement a new intermediate-zone strategy. This development, demonstrated by the launch of the BRI, signaled China's confidence in accelerating the transition to a post-hegemonic order through the use of its economic power. This transition was rooted in a widespread belief among Chinese policy makers in the decline of American global hegemony. That perception was eventually confirmed by multiple setbacks for American influence in the Middle East, culminating in a debate over the withdrawal of the United States from the region.⁵⁴

We now observe a potential shift of China's enduring anti-hegemonic rationale as the main driver of its Middle East policy. Beijing's actions in the region, as shown by most of the analysis in this special issue, are providing a new, powerful set of hedging alternatives to local actors, intensifying their independence in the international arena. As the recent Saudi-Iranian agreement indicates, China is still inspired more by its anti-hegemonic orientation than by an ambition to propose—as the Soviets did during the Cold War—an alternative to traditional US leadership. The rise of the Sino-American rivalry, the Chinese leadership's self-reinforcing conviction of the demise of US hegemony, and the Middle East's new relevance in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion may tempt analysts to interpret China's successful anti-hegemonic tactics as a new form of dominion. However, the shift from blunting to building regional strategies will require a more

⁵² Niu Xinchun, "Myth and Truth: China's Middle East Policy," *West Asia and Africa*, no. 4 (2021): 32–33.

⁵³ Peter Vamos, "China and Eastern Europe in the 1980s: A Hungarian Perspective," CWIHP e-Dossier no. 69, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/china-and-eastern-europe-the-1980s-hungarian-perspective>.

⁵⁴ Niu Xinchun, "Coexistence with the United States: New Challenges Facing China's Middle East Policy," *Contemporary International Relations* 33, no. 1 (2023): 26–50.

independent foreign policy that avoids the historical overemphasis on superpower influence. It may rest upon the creation of a new form of hegemony, with or without “Chinese characteristics.”

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