

China and the Middle East: An Economic Partner or an Alternative to America?



Since the outbreak of the war in Gaza in October 2023, it has become clear that the Middle East has entered a phase of profound transformation paving the way for a broad geopolitical reconfiguration, redrawing maps of influence, balances of power, and the regional and international roles active in the scene. Then came the US-Israeli war against Iran to entrench this transformation more clearly, confirming that the regional order in its traditional form is approaching its end, at a time when international assessments are increasingly speaking of a broader tremor affecting the structure of the global order itself something Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney pointed to when he spoke of the end of the world order in its current form.

The ongoing war and the political, security, and economic repercussions it has left behind have revealed that stability in the Middle East has become more fragile than ever, and that the traditional pillars of influence that governed the region for decades are no longer capable of ensuring continuity or reproducing the previous balance. At the same time, they have shown that the region stands before a phase of comprehensive redrafting of the map of powers and alliances, amid an international race to reposition in preparation for what comes after these

transformations.

Amid this changing landscape, China has emerged as one of the international powers most likely to expand its presence and engagement in the Middle East. Beijing, which has not yet been tested as a principal actor in managing the region's complex crises, is now being strongly suggested as a potential player in the new equations of influence.

This has opened the door to growing questions about its ability to play such a role, the possibility of its becoming an alternative to or competitive partner with America, as well as the nature of the tools it possesses to achieve that, and the scale of the political, security, and strategic challenges it may face if it decides to move from the role of economic partner to that of a full geopolitical actor in the region.

Declining Confidence in the American Role

Since the Second Gulf War, the United States has succeeded in entrenching a regional map of influence that made it the most present and influential player in the Middle East indeed, the effective hegemon over regional security equations for many decades. Washington strengthened its presence through a wide network of military bases spread across the Gulf and the region, and tied the Gulf states to its security umbrella in a way that made Gulf security largely linked to American will and military capabilities.

At the same time, the Gulf states became one of the largest strategic markets for American defense industries, as Gulf military arsenals came to rely almost entirely on US weaponry. This deepened the security and political bond between the two sides and entrenched a Gulf conviction that American protection represented a permanent guarantee of stability and deterrence against regional threats.

For more than three decades, the belief prevailed in the Gulf that this security umbrella was capable of providing sustainable protection, especially since the American presence was not subjected to direct strategic tests that genuinely threatened its effectiveness throughout that period. This opened the way for the expansion of American influence across the region's political, security, and military spheres.

However, the recent war against Iran has revived fundamental questions about the effectiveness of that security system. Developments showed that American bases, once viewed as a factor of stability and deterrence, can in moments of escalation turn into targets and direct sources of threat. They also revealed that the American security umbrella is not immune to penetration or attrition, something that has been reflected in the level of regional confidence in

Washington's ability to manage security balances and protect its allies from the repercussions of major confrontations.

As tensions escalated, a growing conviction began to take shape among some regional powers that absolute reliance on American protection no longer provides the same certainty that prevailed for decades; indeed, it may at times become a factor dragging the region into complex conflicts that go beyond its direct interests.

Nevertheless, the decline in confidence in the American role did not begin only with the current war. It was preceded by many signs reflecting a gradual shift in Washington's strategic priorities. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 was one of the clearest of these indicators, as it was then seen as a clear message that Washington was reassessing its direct military engagement in the region.

This prompted many Middle Eastern countries to review their calculations regarding the viability of relying on the United States as the region's sole security umbrella.

China Strengthens Its Presence

While the United States worked to consolidate its military and logistical presence in the Middle East, China was moving according to a different approach based on economic expansion and strengthening influence through the tools of trade, investment, and infrastructure. Over the past two decades, Beijing has succeeded in becoming the leading economic partner for most countries in the region, after the volume of trade between it and the countries of the Middle East and North Africa in 2025 exceeded \$414 billion, compared with only \$170 billion in trade between the region and the United States, reflecting a widening gap in favor of China's regional economic presence.

This expansion was not merely traditional commercial activity, but came within a broader Chinese strategy aimed at entrenching a long-term foothold in the region through infrastructure, ports, energy, and logistics projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, which represented the main gateway for China's rising influence in the Middle East. Beijing also strengthened its presence through technological and digital partnerships with the countries of the region, whether in communications, artificial intelligence, or smart cities, giving it a growing sphere of influence not even available to traditional Western powers.

But Chinese engagement was not limited to the economy alone; it gradually developed to include political, security, and diplomatic dimensions. In 2002, Beijing appointed a special envoy to the Middle East for the first time, in a step reflecting growing interest in regional files. Then, in 2016, it issued its first

comprehensive policy paper defining its vision toward the Arab world, before returning in 2022 to present its conception of what it described as the “new security architecture for the Middle East.”

This approach is based on strengthening the concept of shared security, regional cooperation, and reducing dependence on external interventions, while encouraging regional powers to manage their security affairs more independently.

In the same context, China has emerged in recent years as a diplomatic player capable of contributing to the management of some of the region’s complex crises, enhancing its image as a rising international power possessing tools of influence that go beyond the economy. The clearest manifestation of this role was its sponsorship of the resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023, in addition to its contribution to easing the repercussions of the Gulf crisis that erupted in 2017. These moves gave Beijing growing room to be present in files that traditionally fell within the scope of direct American influence.

Beijing’s Cards

Naturally, China possesses a set of strategic drivers pushing it toward expanding its engagement in the Middle East and repositioning itself more effectively on the map of regional influence. Energy tops these motives, as China is the world’s largest importer of oil, while a large part of its energy needs depends on Gulf oil, making the region’s stability a direct part of Beijing’s economic and strategic security.

In addition, the Belt and Road project represents one of the main engines of China’s rising presence in the region, given that the Middle East is a central node in this global project, whether through vital ports, international trade routes, or logistics and infrastructure investments. This pushes Beijing to pay increasing attention to the region’s security and stability, since any large-scale disruption could threaten Chinese economic interests extending across those vital routes.

China also benefits from the shifts that have occurred in the regional environment in recent years, especially the relative decline in confidence in the American security umbrella and the resulting growing Gulf tendency to diversify international partnerships rather than confining them to the traditional Western framework. Beijing aspires to be one of the main poles in this new orientation, benefiting from its image as an economic partner with lower political costs and greater flexibility in dealing with regional regimes.

These drivers are accompanied by a broad package of capabilities that give China a growing ability to strengthen its presence in the region. Economically, Chinese

financial power has become a strategic tool of influence, especially as it tops the list of trading partners for most Gulf states, in addition to possessing huge investments in infrastructure, energy, ports, and technology. Chinese technology as well—encompassing communications networks, digital systems, and artificial intelligence technologies—has become one of the main instruments of penetration reinforcing China’s presence in Middle Eastern markets.

Politically, Beijing has succeeded in presenting itself as an acceptable mediator to a number of countries in the region, benefiting from a political discourse based on non-interference in states’ internal affairs and avoiding linking bilateral relations to human rights files or domestic political transformations, which gives it broader room to maneuver compared with Western powers.

In the same context, the economic pragmatism adopted by China makes it, for many regional regimes, a practical and comfortable partner capable of providing investment, technology, and economic support without direct political costs.

Militarily, China is one of the world’s strongest military powers, ranking highly in international army classifications and possessing the largest military force in terms of personnel, with more than two million service members, in addition to an advanced arsenal of air, naval, and missile capabilities, including intercontinental ballistic missiles, hypersonic and anti-ship missiles, as well as advanced nuclear and cyber capabilities.

In recent years, Beijing has also strengthened its investments in military technology, artificial intelligence, and electronic warfare, supporting its rapid transformation from a major regional power into an international military player capable of competing with the major traditional powers.

It Will Not Be a Substitute for Washington

Despite the enormous economic and military qualifications China possesses, which in theory enable it to expand its presence in the Middle East, its practical engagement as an influential player in the region’s crises has remained below expectations. During the war in Gaza, Beijing limited itself to general political and diplomatic positions without moving effectively to support the Arab position or push toward a path capable of ending the war.

The same scene was repeated later during the war with Iran, when Beijing preferred to maintain cautious diplomatic rhetoric and limited moves within UN frameworks, without that being reflected in the balance on the ground or in regional deterrence equations.

This hesitation in moving from economic influence to direct geopolitical impact raises growing questions about Beijing’s ability to be a real alternative to America

in the region, especially since Washington still possesses tools of influence that are difficult to compete with quickly, including a wide network of military bases, naval fleets, security alliances, and defense umbrellas, in addition to deep intelligence presence, compared with the limited direct Chinese military presence in the Middle East.

Some assessments had bet that the repercussions of the Gaza and Iran wars, and the relative shake in confidence in the American security umbrella resulting from them, might push Beijing to go beyond its traditional policy of neutrality and engage more boldly in the region's equations, on the grounds that the current moment represents a rare strategic opportunity to strengthen Chinese influence and present itself as an alternative or parallel international power to the United States.

However, developments have shown that China still prefers to move according to cautious calculations that balance protecting its economic interests with avoiding slipping into the burdens of the Middle East's complex conflicts.

Partnership, Not Hegemony

According to current indicators and data, it seems difficult to speak of China as a full alternative to America in the Middle East, and it also seems unlikely that the countries of the region will move to replace Washington with Beijing in the foreseeable future, especially in light of the cautious Chinese approach that prefers to avoid direct engagement or entanglement in the complexities of regional conflicts, relying primarily on economic and diplomatic tools more than on traditional military and security instruments of influence.

However, this does not mean that China will leave the field entirely to the continuation of American hegemony in its previous form. Rather, Beijing is expected to continue strengthening its gradual presence in the region through the economy, investment, technology, and diplomacy, at a time when American dominance appears likely to undergo a relative decline compared with what it was during past decades.

This may gradually push the Middle East toward a more multipolar phase in the balance of power, with the growing roles of other international and regional powers such as Russia, India, and Turkey, instead of the continuation of the pattern of sole American hegemony that prevailed since the end of the Second Gulf War.

Ultimately, recent developments have revealed that Beijing remains committed to its traditional approach of making the economy the main gateway of influence, while employing political and diplomatic presence cautiously, away from sharp polarizations and direct military alignments that could impose high strategic

costs on it.

In this sense, China may have missed an important opportunity to strengthen its presence as a player capable of filling the American vacuum in the region, but it is nevertheless continuing to consolidate its position as a “competitive partner” to the United States in the Middle East, rather than a “full alternative” to it in the near future.

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