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Sino-Russian Strategic Alignment in the Middle East: Challenges and Implications for the US

Abstract: This article analyzes the growing strategic alignment between China and Russia in the Middle East and its implications for US interests in the region. It examines the economic, political, and military dimensions of their cooperation, highlighting challenges such as diverging regional priorities and the potential for increased instability. The article also discusses the implications for US foreign policy, including the need for strategic recalibration and diplomatic engagement to navigate this evolving geopolitical landscape effectively. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers seeking to maintain stability and influence in the Middle East.

Key Words: Sino-Russian alignment, Middle East, Political Engagement, Economic Engagement, Security Imperative, US Response.

Introduction

The Middle East has once again become an arena of rivalry between the great powers. China and Russia have emerged as a potential competitor of the US in the region. The shared values and perceptions of embracing the multipolar world have brought the two great powers into conflict with the US-led liberal world order. The revisionist ambitions of these actors have been recognized by the US as the priority of terrorism and have been replaced by the 'great power competition'. The interim security strategic guidance under Biden's administration has termed Russia and China as a revisionist power eager to turn the world order established by the US and its allies after the Cold War. (White House, 2021) Similarly, the Pentagon's 2+3 paradigm designates North Korea and Iran as a secondary menace to US interests globally, and China and Russia as a core threat (Iyer, 2021).

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are also becoming a geopolitical hotspot as China and Russia have openly clashed with the US interests in the region. The vetoes over Syria,

mutual frustration over Libya, arms exports to the US allies and recent cooperation with Iran despite the international sanctions fuels the perception that both states are eager to push US out or counterbalance its hegemony in the region (Al-Jazeera, 2020) It is evident through the speech of General Kenneth F. McKenzie in which he mentioned the growing Sino-Russian partnership and their use of wide array of political, diplomatic, and military tools to counterbalance and influence the US dominance in the region. (Department of Defense, 2021) Therefore, given these factors, the study has incorporated the qualitative methodology to analyze the existing patterns and provide insights into the geopolitical competition in the region. The study argues that the emerging poles in the international order are paving the way for multipolarity which attains pertinent impacts on the rule-based order established and preserved by the US and its allies in the region (Foot, 2020).

Motivations for Sino-Russian Alignment in the region

China and Russia have significantly increased their

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presence and activities in the Middle East. The engagement of both actors is multifaceted which encompasses trade, energy security, geopolitical considerations, flexing their muscles and counterbalancing the US hegemony in the region. During the last 10 years, China has significantly increased its footprint in the region due to its appetite for energy needs, energy security and fear of geopolitical entanglement by the US and its allies in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific. Likewise, since 2015, Russia has also enhanced its presence in the region by intervening in Syria. (Wormuth, 2019) The growing Sino-Russian strategic engagement signals that the US is heralding in the new era of strategic competition which is not only limited to Europe and Asia but also to the Middle East and North Africa.

The rationale behind the strategic engagement is as simple as easy. The US desires energy security, economic prosperity and maintaining its status as a global leader in the emerging complex multipolar world. On the other hand, Russia possesses one of the strongest militaries, and the largest stockpile of nuclear weapons yet due to its deteriorating economy and draining energy reserves prompted it to save its status as an energy superpower. Meanwhile, the rising and risk-tolerant China desires to enhance its geopolitical influence, undisrupted supply of oil and gas from the Middle East and seek its status as a civilizational great power (Al-Jazeera, 2020).

Keeping in view the growing strategic engagement, the Middle East is a critical theatre for the great powers. The immense geostrategic location, vast abundance of oil and gas and its significance on the geopolitical chessboard make the region crucial in the strategic calculus of Russia and China. Although China and Russia are misperceived as allies their common perceptions, shared views on multipolarity and mutual goals in various areas make their partnership a 'marriage of convenience'. In the era where US hegemony and its role as a global leader is being questioned, understanding the strategic mindsets of both states particularly Russia is necessary for it to address their presence and growing influence in the region (Ahmad, 2023).

Sino-Russian Cooperation in the Middle East:

The Sino-Russian engagement in the Middle East runs across the shared animosity with the US, geopolitical goals, and economic considerations. The following section will discuss the wide array of cooperation in the political, economic, diplomatic, and military realms.

Political Engagement

In recent years, both Russia and China have increased their political presence in the Middle East and North Africa. The engagements in multilateral forums, mediating conflicts, and crafting regional partnerships have affected the existing geopolitical equation. The Middle East provides more convergence of goals of both great powers. Both states are eager to overturn the universal Western norms and replace them with relativistic and non-western structures. The authoritarian systems of governance have provided a sympathetic audience to the appeal FOR both actors. Iran became a permanent member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in September 2021, joining Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Qatar as discussion partners. Likewise, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was also included in the New Development Bank; an organization created by China, Russia, India, Brazil, and South Africa (Al-Jazeera, 2020).

The engagement policy of China in the Middle East differs substantially from the US way of dealing. China maintains a hierarchy of partnerships with a focus on non-alliances. In the hierarchy of partnerships, the comprehensive strategic partnership stands at the top of the pyramid while the friendly cooperative partnership stands at the lowest (SCMP Reporter, 2016). The countries having the comprehensive strategic partnership are considered important in Chinese regional strategic calculus. The eligibility criteria for this status are to offer more for China's economic and political needs. (Struver, 2017) For example, Egypt has a significant position in the worldwide Islamic community due to its control over the Suez Canal. inside the MENA area. Five states—China, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Iran, Egypt, and the UAE—achieved the status of a

comprehensive strategic relationship. Israel has the distinct distinction of being an inventive strategic partner, even if the other eight states are also regarded as strategic partners.

China's larger economic size grants it leverage in any state-to-state encounter. The asymmetry in power relations grants China an overarching edge in governing bilateral relations. However, Beijing is ambitious in creating multilateral forums in the Middle East to generate a consensus by the sympathetic audience on non-Western norms. Furthermore, China will probably receive support from these forums or blocks at international organisations, most notably the UN. It was made clear when MENA nations and Arab League members signed a declaration supporting China's position over its policies in Xinjiang during the 47th session of the UN Human Rights Council. (Joint statement of 69 countries at the Interactive Dialogue on High Commissioner's annual report at the 47th session of the Human Rights Council, 2021).

China has broadly established the following multilateral forums in the region. China Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and China-Arab State Cooperation Forum (CASCF) Strategic Dialogue. The CASCF was established in 2004 during President Hu Jintao's visit to Egypt. The aim of the platform is to establish coordination of policy among China and the Arab states. (Murphy, 2022) The ministerial meetings of the forum are held every second year where the foreign ministers meet and discuss the policy priorities for the forum. China is a permanent seat of the forum and has designated an ambassador having significant experience in the Arab world. Israel, Turkey, and Iran are not part of the organization as it is confined to the Arab states only, therefore making it easier for China to engage them on bilateral levels (Al-Jazeera, 2020).

However, because of a number of limitations, Russia is less influential in the region than China. The goal of Russia and Turkey to strengthen their bilateral strategic alliance was stated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in 2018. Putin also mentioned that the bilateral cooperation in the matters of nuclear energy is heralding an era of a strategic partnership yet there is no formal agreement existing between Ankara and Moscow

over the intentions (Yinglun, 2018). In the case of Syria, the engagement of Russia is due to the strategic necessity of protection of the Tartus base and there is no formal agreement on the strategic partnership between both states. However, the states like Saudi Arabia and UAE have significant strategic ties with Russia. The formal engagements between the respective bureaucracies have prevented the emergence of personal ties between the heads of states. Russia's policy posture towards the Middle East is driven by its intent to pacify its image following the brutalities in Chechnya. Apart from creating the multilateral forum, Russia's engagement in the region is followed by its idea of defending its concept of justice as a great power on the global scale. Russia has dispatched special ministers to monitor the situation in the Middle East. Russia believes that the presence of the multilateral and bilateral forums will facilitate the greater Russian presence in the Middle East (Ahmad, 2023).

Despite the conflict in the interpretations and policies of both states, they still share avenues of cooperation in the Middle East. The shared animosity towards the US and the anti-western postures draw to great powers in the same sphere. Likewise, the autocratic structure of governments in the Middle East also provides a conducive environment and sympathetic audience for the Russian and Chinese designs. These shared perceptions, beliefs and values are heralding the collaboration between both states as a strategic partnership which is threatening the US interests in the region. China aspires to seek its role in the global leadership. In this regard, Chinese Premier Xi Jinping is pursuing active political and diplomatic measures. Russia on the other hand is aimed to revive its revanchist ambitions. To maintain its relevance as an imperial power, Russia is flexing and stretching its outreach in the Middle East. Together these states pose a threat to US hegemonic designs. The growing strategic engagements between the great powers, especially in the Mediterranean zone, are a serious threat to the West's southern flank. The regional dynamics of the region embolden these actors to strengthen Iran, exploit the Saudi-Iran rivalry and compel Israel to pursue strategic hedging in the great power competition (Al-Jazeera, 2020).

Economic Engagements

Both states in the Middle East are pursuing different economic policies. China utilizes its economic statecraft by using its economic potential in conducting its policies in the region. The economic size of China grants it a considerable advantage in dealing with the states in the region. Russia on the other hand views the Middle East as a place for its oil market coordination. Russia's priorities are primarily focused on growing its food exports, nuclear technology exports, hydrocarbon exports, luring foreign direct investment, and shifting its positions in the world oil market (Ahmad, 2023). Trade is considered a foremost step by China in the region. Even during the catastrophe of COVID-19, China remained to be one of the largest exporters of the Middle Eastern states. Energy is also a deciding factor in China's economic policy towards the Middle East. Middle Eastern producers notably Saudi Arabia is the net energy provider accounting for nearly 44% of the Chinese energy needs. This abundance made the Middle East a net energy security provider for China (Country Analysis Executive Summary, 2022).

The geopolitics of petro-power is also a deciding factor in the region. China is benefitting from the discounted price of Russian oil and consuming Iranian and Saudi products. Sino-Russian cooperation here presents a picture of a tactical alliance which will benefit China in the longer run. The tribal and ethnic belt of the Middle East provides a conducive ground for both China and Russia to present a counterweight to the Western designs. The cooperation with Iran is also an indication of exploiting the autocratic grievances against the Western liberal models. The Chinese financial model is likewise thought to be on the rise. The main state-owned banks in China are visible in the area. The Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), Agriculture Bank of China, China Construction Bank and Bank of China are used for the purposes of the currency revamps. China's increasing investments are an indicator of its increasing footprint in the region. Due to its approximately 32 per cent foreign direct investment in the MENA in 2016, China emerged as the region's top extra-regional

investor. (China is the largest foreign investor in the Middle East, 2017)

On the other hand, Russia desires effective participation in OPEC+ to coordinate the oil production issues and negotiate the oil prices at affordable cost. (Sim, 2020) The agreement is significant for Russia's budget as 35% of it is made up of the revenues generated by the hydrocarbons. Russia with other Middle Eastern parties is poised to keep the prices of oil at \$85 per barrel to lure its competitor US Shale oil. Another crucial aspect of Russian ingress is the grain trade in the Middle East. From being a grain importer to the largest exporter of wheat, Russia has come a long way in the grain trade. The growing population of the Middle Eastern region compels these states to look towards Russia for wheat import. In 2019, the region amounted to two-thirds of Russia's grain exports (Country Analysis Executive Summary, 2022).

Nuclear energy is another sector of Russia's engagement with the region. Russia has helped Iran in completing its Bushehr nuclear plant. It is also working on the same projects with Turkey and expressed its interest in undertaking similar projects in Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The regular maintenance, operating costs, and fuel deliveries make these states a long-term partner of Russia. Likewise, tourism is also a promising source of revenue for the tourism-dependent economies of Turkey, Egypt, and Dubai. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, tourism amounted to 12% of the GDP of Turkey and Egypt and 18% of Dubai. In 2019, Dubai received more than 7 million tourists from Russia, Turkey more than six million, and Egypt received 3 million Russian tourists annually. These all indicators show a potential for a greater partnership in the region.

Russia and China, both have presented themselves as a reliable partner and counterweight to the US hegemony. Both states do not give lectures on human rights issues and individuals, instead they are more concerned with solving the issues related to trade, energy, and investments. Together, Russia and the Middle East produce nearly 50% of the world's oil and gas which provides these states a conducive mechanism and platform for fostering cooperation. Likewise, China's investment in the region under the flagship

of BRI is welcomed by the autocratic states of the Middle East. Despite the concerns raised by the Western policymakers, the pace of the project is rapid and sustainable which acknowledges the consent of the Middle Eastern states. The common concerns shared by Russia and China over the region are heralding a new era of strategic partnership (Country Analysis Executive Summary, 2022).

Security Imperatives

The security architecture of the Middle East brings different approaches from Russia and China. Russia is more concerned about the spillover of instability and terrorism in its strategic backyard. It is also concerned with weakening the US-led security partnerships and opening grounds for Russia's security engagement in the region. China on the other hand is content in free riding over the rule-based order in the region. However, given the bulk of investments and trade, the PRC needs to pursue a more proactive and increasing security role in the region (Secrieru, 2018).

The arms sale remains to be one of the central parts of Russian strategy to engage with the Middle East. In 2015, Russian arms sales to the Middle East grew from 36% to 50% which shows the reliability of Russian equipment in terms of cost-effectiveness and maintenance. Russian involvement in Syria allowed it to use the battlefield as a test case to experiment with its inventory. Although US military equipment is still on the medallion standard for the Middle Eastern states, nonetheless, the conditions, foreign policy decisions and slow process of arms delivery prompt the Middle Eastern states to look towards the alternative partner, Russia. In 2014, Egypt inked a \$ 3.5 billion arms deal with Russia which included comprehensive defense packages. Similarly, Iraq became the second largest importer of Russian arms after India. Moreover, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE are reportedly engaged with Russia in purchasing the renowned S-400 system (Bensaid, 2019).

On the other hand, China's security engagement in the region is more concerned with preserving its economic investments. Given the complexity of the region, China desires the posture of strategic hedging in the Middle East which

implies that friend of all an enemy to none. The policy posture of strategic hedging has enabled the dragon to freeride on the rule-based order maintained by the US and its allies. China is also capitalizing on the Saudi-Iran rivalry and is trying to resolve the differences between them and maintain its interests pertaining to energy security, trade, and investments. The growing economic profile of China in the region is also bringing greater security responsibilities to China. (Nader, 2016) More than 550,000 Chinese workers still work in the Middle East and the complexity of the region prompts China with greater security responsibilities (Xinchun, 2014).

Despite the competitive stances in the Middle East, Russia and China are overturning the region's security architecture. The arms sales and growing military footprints indicate that the power vacuum created by the US withdrawal from Syria is now being filled by these two great powers. Both states are engaging nearly all the states in the region despite the complex landscape. The growing security footprints and activities in the region are signalling that the era of unipolarity is fading. Geopolitical tectonic plates are shifting and the transition is heralding from unipolarity towards the dawn of multipolarity globally (Secrieru, 2018).

Implications for the US

The geostrategic dynamics of the Middle East are sifting and fluctuating at an unprecedented speed. This time the geopolitical tilt is not in the favor of the United States but the other great powers Russia and China. The growing animosity between the US and Iran and the realization among Arab states regarding the reliability of the US as an ally is providing grounds for Russia and China to deepen their interests in the region. Williamson Murray has termed the geopolitical shocks as unpredictable. The same is happening in the Middle East with the foremost development being the deepening of the Russo-Iranian and Sino-Iranian partnerships. The bilateral military trade among Russia and Iran has increased dramatically from \$4 billion to \$40 billion in 2021.

More recently, the bilateral military partnership has entered a new era where Iran has ordered 24 Sukhoi-35 fighter jets, one of the most advanced in the Russian air inventory. Iran has

supplied hundreds of thousands of UAVs to Russia which have been effectively used in the bombing of Ukraine war. The joint training programs have reportedly been started and Iran is also establishing a joint production factory of drones in the Crimean Peninsula (Secrieru, 2018).

On the other hand, Sino-Iranian trade and deepening partnership are also talk of the town. In 2021, both sides signed a 25-year cooperation agreement to improve their ties and take the bilateral economic, technical, and technological partnership to newer heights. The agreement has increased Chinese investment and participation in the Iranian technical and technological sector. In this process, China has ignored the US sanctions over Iran, continued to import Iranian oil and used its diplomatic muscles to mediate a deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iran is also joining the China and Russia-led SCO which makes Iran a vital link to China's proposed BRI. By the same token, Saudi Arabia, the most reliable ally of the US, is also joining the SCO which is increasing the influence of China in the wake of the US. China has also improved its relations with Saudi Arabia in the wake of the disillusionment of Muhammad Bin Salman with the US following Biden's comments on human rights violations during its military campaign in Yemen. On the other hand, the most reliable ally of the US, Israel is also witnessing a right-wing government which is not only destabilizing the political situation but also leaving the Biden administration no choice but to be cautious about the actions of the Israeli premier (Saikal, 2023).

Keeping in view the growing Sino-Russian engagement in the region, it is evident that the US is losing ground to the authoritarian powers. The region is witnessing a strategic transition and it is hard to predict whether the great power competition will be confrontational or not. However, it is certain that the region fraught with complex geopolitics continues to be a headache for the US and is causing anxieties in US policy circles following the growing assertive and risk-tolerant actions by Russia and China (Secrieru, 2018).

US Response

The US needs an overarching vision of Middle Eastern politics. The receding influence of the US

coupled with the growing presence of Russia and China is demanding some counter strategies from the White House. In the new era of strategic competition, the US strategy should be on the following course of action. The US needs to improve its economy in a more vibrant and innovative way with a keen focus on quantum computing, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology. The role of the US as a global leader is important therefore maintaining and strengthening the existing role demands an influence and say in the international institutions. Also, it needs to adapt to the changing realities of the world. Moreover, the US also needs to strengthen its relationship with the allies and work together with them to address the challenges to the rule-based order by the 'rogue' powers. Furthermore, the upholding of US military prowess is also necessary to maintain the prestige of power in the region.

To date, the competition with Russia and China is focused more on military dimensions, however, it is necessary for the US to develop a comprehensive national strategy and allocate all the elements of its comprehensive national power to address the demands of the strategic competition. Moreover, the US also needs to work in close collaboration with allied partners in nearly all dimensions whether it is addressing Russian aggression and espionage or incentivizing them in the face of China's BRI. The Middle East is a complex region, and the US should demonstrate that it is not leaving the entire region due to its vested national interests. This move will prevent the hedging from the Middle East states with regard to China and Russia. Lastly, given the lessons from Libya and Iraq, the US needs to focus more on its core national interests and calculate its decision on the use of force in the region (Secrieru, 2018).

Conclusion

Conclusively one can argue that the growing Sino-Russian engagement in the region is a prelude for the US to review and revisit its strategic designs in the region. The growing influence in the economic, political, and strategic dimensions is calling for the US to increase its influence to counter Russian and Chinese influence in the new era of strategic

competition. The current dynamics of the region signal that both China and Russia are edging out the US from the region. In this regard, the US needs to strengthen its partnerships in the region to prevent strategic hedging by the Middle Eastern states in favour of China and Russia. Likewise, it also needs to invest more in emerging and disruptive technologies to maintain its lead as a global leader. China's ingress through BRI is

alarming, henceforth it needs time to incentivize the allies and address the issues of common concerns. Bilateral partnerships in this regard are an asset for the US to formulate any comprehensive strategy in response to Chinese and Russian actions in the region. Lastly, understanding the strategic mindsets of both powers is necessary to avoid any miscalculation in the complex geopolitics.

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