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Review Paper

Strategic Polarities: Geopolitics, Digital Risks and the Multipolar Middle East – A Descriptive Analytical Review

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The last decade has seen an unparalleled convergence of forces. These forces are changing the rules of the game in global politics. The United States was the clear leader of the post-Cold War order, but now it faces new challenges. Internal political polarisation, technological lag and the growing role of regional players are all calling into question its ability to dictate global standards.

In response, Iran and its neighbours are actively exploring alternative ways to influence. They use proxy groups, complex networks to circumvent sanctions and cyber capabilities to fight indirectly against stronger opponents without engaging in open conflicts. At the same time, China is shaping its own version of globalisation. Through the Belt and Road Initiative and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), it is challenging Western norms and establishing itself as a key player in global supply chains.

Digital governance is becoming an equally important factor. Cyberspace is emerging as a novel domain in which governments, corporations and think tanks are endeavouring to establish the regulatory framework in response to legal, economic and security challenges. The emergence of cyber insurance, regulatory initiatives and the activity of research

centres has resulted in the creation of an additional layer of complexity in an already multi-layered global system.

When considered collectively, these processes – tensions between the US and Iran, economic strategies of the Gulf monarchies, China's new model of globalisation, and digital governance – form an interconnected network of factors that collectively shape the multipolar Middle East and determine the trajectory of global change. This region is becoming a microcosm of the new world politics, where traditional hierarchies are being superseded by complex and dynamic interactions of forces. In this article, the key factors that determine the current political, economic and digital configuration of the Middle East will be examined, as well as the influence of regional and global players on the formation of a new multipolarity.

Declining Dominance and the Rise of Competing Powers

In the 21st century, the United States began to experience a decline in its global leadership position. Despite the continued preeminence of the US military, the ability of the US government to enforce its agenda is undergoing a marked decline. In this context, the growing influence of China, with its state capitalism, and Russia, which builds relations pragmatically and often opportunistically, is evident. This shift in global power dynamics is evident in key regions.

The return of Donald Trump to the Oval Office in 2025 and the resumption of the 'maximum pressure' policy against Iran have demonstrated these changes in practice. Unilateral strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities initiated missile attacks on US bases in Qatar, compelling the involved parties to promptly initiate ceasefire negotiations. This demonstrated that direct military action was increasingly resulting in unintended consequences and regional escalation.

Beijing and Moscow are rapidly filling the vacuum by offering mediation while strengthening their own influence in energy, arms and infrastructure. The Middle East is emerging as a pivotal region for the exploration of a multipolar world order, with various states vying for influence and offering distinct models of security, economic connectivity, and trade.

Analysts have identified a number of potential risks arising from this multipolarity, including the possibility of local conflicts, unpredictable alliances and energy and trade manoeuvres that could alter the balance of power more rapidly than anticipated. In this new reality, no state can act independently, and regional players are gaining more and more opportunities to influence global processes.

Shaping the Agenda: Think Tanks, Factionalism, and Policy Outcomes

In the US, policy is increasingly being shaped not only by the government, but also by various think tanks that have their own ideology. These centres play an active role in the political decision-making process by offering their own unique perspectives on the country's direction. For instance, conservative centres advocate reduced regulation, business development and capital-driven economic growth. It is their belief that a free market economy will stimulate entrepreneurship and job creation. In contrast, progressive centres place a greater emphasis on social investment, the protection of workers' rights, and government support for vulnerable groups.

These think tanks frequently prepare draft legislation. This is advantageous for politicians as it saves time. However, it should be noted that this approach has the potential to intensify political disputes and make compromises more challenging. The political situation has become increasingly complex under the Trump administration. His 'doctrine' combined protectionist trade policies, immigration restrictions, and scepticism about international agreements. This has created a more challenging environment for the US to negotiate with both allies and opponents. For instance, negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme or peace initiatives in the Middle East are often delayed by changing majorities in Congress and donor influence.

In the UK, think tanks also wield significant influence over policy, although their impact differs to some extent. One such example is that of cyber insurance. The two leading centres, Chatham House and RUSI, adopt divergent approaches to this problem. Chatham House adopts an economic perspective in its analysis of cyber threats. For these entities, the primary concern pertains to the financial losses incurred by companies as a result of cyberattacks. The organisation proffers a range of solutions that are informed by market principles, including the provision of security ratings, the implementation of standardised contracts, and the facilitation of insurance discounts for companies that voluntarily adhere to the stipulated regulations. The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) adopts a national security-oriented approach when assessing the potential risks posed by cyber-attacks. It is evident that state attacks or sabotage of critical infrastructure are virtually uninsurable without government involvement. Consequently, RUSI proposes state guarantees, mandatory security standards and the involvement of defence institutions.

The examples provided illustrate how think tanks transform expert knowledge into concrete policy proposals, exert influence on legislation, and even facilitate collaboration between government and business entities. The discourse surrounding cyber insurance in the UK also underscores a broader issue: the question of who should assume responsibility for digital risks when private interests and the public good are not always aligned. A similar situation is evident in the US, where political and economic priorities frequently stand in opposition to international goals and the security of allies.

Negotiating Under Fire: Iran's Proxies and Regional Tensions

The regional strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is principally predicated upon asymmetric approaches to the assurance of its own influence and the deterrence of its adversaries. In an effort to avoid direct military confrontation with regional or global powers, Tehran is instead developing a network of allied militias and non-state armed groups in countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. This enables Iran to augment its political and military influence in the Middle East while circumventing direct confrontation with more powerful rivals.

Such structures enable Tehran to undertake a controlled escalation of conflicts. For instance, the targeting of US military installations by missile strikes or the utilisation of unmanned aerial vehicles in attacks on oil facilities within Saudi Arabia can be officially ascribed to non-state actors operating within local domains. This enables the Islamic Republic of Iran to repudiate any immediate involvement. This dynamic has been interpreted as a form of 'protective shield' for Tehran, thereby preserving its strategic flexibility in the region.

But this approach has some pretty serious drawbacks. It's making things worse between different groups and causing big problems for people, which is pushing the Gulf states and Israel to pressure Washington to take stronger action against Iran. So, any attempts at diplomacy to sort out Iran's nuclear programme can't just be about the number of centrifuges or how much uranium they're enriching. They should also include stuff on ballistic missiles and support for proxy armed forces.

Take the effort to renew the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2025, for example. The talks, which were indirectly mediated by Oman, included ideas like limiting uranium enrichment to moderate levels and moving some stockpiles abroad. But there were a lot of political issues at home that meant there wasn't much room for compromise.

The Iranian delegates were insistent: they demanded recognition of their sovereign right to a full fuel cycle and a comprehensive easing of sanctions. At the same time, US representatives, under pressure from hawkish lawmakers, demanded strict control and restrictions on Iran's missile programme. Furthermore, Israeli covert strikes on Iranian facilities and IAEA reports on violations of nuclear obligations strengthened Tehran's position in the negotiation process.

Iran's internal problems are making the situation more complicated. The country is facing economic mismanagement, a currency crisis and a growing outflow of intellectual potential. Young, talented graduates are emigrating en masse to escape repression and seek better opportunities abroad. This is a key issue as it leads to the loss of important human capital that is needed to diversify the economy and reduce dependence on hydrocarbons.

Monarchies of the Gulf: Navigating Globalisation

In the context of Iran's current geopolitical situation, characterised by international isolation due to its policies and sanctions, neighbouring monarchies such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia are strategically leveraging globalisation to consolidate their power and advance economic development. The United Arab Emirates, for instance, is a modern, cosmopolitan centre of business and tourism. The country has numerous free economic zones, large international airports, and a population that is 90% foreign-born, characteristics that collectively indicate a high degree of openness.

The UAE's economy is characterised by a high level of diversification, as evidenced by a GDP of approximately $350 billion. The primary domains of development pertain to the financial sector, real estate, and tourism. This suggests that the country's reliance on oil is less pronounced than that of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has a larger GDP of around $700 billion, and while the government is implementing an ambitious Vision 2030 plan that includes large mega-projects, entertainment districts, and green energy investments, the kingdom's economy is still heavily dependent on oil.

Both countries are working with investors from China, Russia and Western countries. This approach allows them to manage potential risks associated with the unpredictability of US policies, while also fostering a collaborative security partnership with Washington. In essence, they are endeavouring to diversify their strategic partnerships while maintaining a commitment to existing alliances.

Despite the cooperation, there are sometimes differences of opinion between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. This could, for example, include border demarcation, currency integration, and market share distribution. It is also worth noting that economic ties can be influenced by the unique structures of each nation's economy. The UAE has a strong trade relationship with Saudi Arabia, with exports to the country amounting to billions of dollars, while imports remain relatively modest.

However, it is important to note that both countries share a common concern about Iranian influence and the threat of transnational extremism. For this reason, they continue to cooperate within the framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council. This suggests that even in the presence of rivalry between states, there is potential for common security challenges to serve as unifying factors.

The experience of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia demonstrates an interesting effect of globalisation: namely, that it can assist authoritarian regimes in maintaining their power. Despite the economic growth experienced by many countries and the subsequent increase in revenues, this has not necessarily been accompanied by a corresponding rise in political participation. The pursuit of economic prosperity is employed as a means to consolidate rather than democratise control.

The example of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia demonstrates that globalisation encompasses more than merely the expansion and liberalisation of markets. It also highlights the capacity of authorities to adapt to novel circumstances and augment their influence in the contemporary world.

China's State-led Globalisation and the Multipolar Challenge

The rise of China is significantly changing global politics and the economy. It is affecting the United States and regional countries, which are also trying to adapt to the new conditions. China combines state capitalism with selective openness to maximise its influence on the global economy.

One of the main tools is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It finances the construction of railways, ports and energy corridors in Asia, Africa and Europe. This helps to reduce transport costs and promote Chinese technical standards. But there are also criticisms: opaque financing and large loans can burden countries with debt, provoke trade imbalances and geopolitical tensions.

Another key project is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), signed in 2020 by countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The agreement simplifies rules of origin, reduces tariffs, and boosts e-commerce. It does not include labour or environmental requirements, which are common in Western agreements. China is promoting flexible rules of origin and the gradual elimination of tariffs. This allows manufacturers to use components from all member countries while protecting important industries such as steel and energy. To comply with the RCEP, China has updated its digital payments and intellectual property laws and partially opened up its financial services market.

It is clear that China is carrying out internal reforms to strengthen its economy. It uses the concepts of Dunning's OLI and Porter's diamond model to attract investment, create special economic zones and strengthen supply chains. Trade and banking are more open, state-owned enterprises are being restructured, and new commercial laws are in line with World Trade Organisation standards. Let me be clear: strategic sectors remain under state control.

It is evident that China's global strategy is underpinned by an ideological component. The academic community engages in discourse surrounding the question of whether globalisation represents a conduit for the fostering of cooperation, a mechanism of capitalist domination, or a conduit for the implementation of Western cultural norms. The government's approach to globalisation is characterised by a simultaneous pursuit of economic growth and the limitation of foreign influence, as evidenced by the implementation of policies that restrict media and internet access, while concurrently promoting the 'Chinese Dream' as an alternative to Western values.

The success of China has compelled other Asian countries to adopt varied responses. India's approach is characterised by caution, with a focus on bilateral agreements and the development of the digital sector being prioritised over large-scale infrastructure projects. Japan's commitment to high-quality multilateral agreements is evidenced by its support for the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Furthermore, the nation is allocating resources to the investment in advanced technologies with the aim of mitigating the impact of an ageing workforce. ASEAN countries have been observed to demonstrate a range of strategies, ranging from active involvement in Chinese projects to selective protection of their national interests.

Consequently, China establishes a paradigm of a globalisation model in which the state assumes a pivotal function. It is imperative that other countries incorporate this approach into their respective policies and economic strategies, as it establishes the fundamental principles that govern the contemporary global landscape.

Cyber Risks, Governance and Protection Strategies

The increasing prevalence of cyber threats has a detrimental effect on the stability and economic resilience of regions. Research conducted in the Gulf and North Africa indicates that phishing, DDoS, MITM, zero-day exploits and backdoors persist as the predominant attack methods. It is estimated that almost one-third of organisations in the Middle East have been affected by cyberattacks, and in the UAE, more than 75% of internet users report losses estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars.

Mobile devices are becoming an increasingly common attack channel, with more than a fifth of attacks in North Africa being carried out via smartphones. Concurrently, Gulf countries are engaged in the active development of smart cities and digital financial services. The combination of personal and work gadgets, which is now widespread, creates additional risks.

In response to this growing threat, governments in the region are taking measures to enhance their cyber security. These measures include the adoption of new legislation, the establishment of specialised agencies, and the engagement of international security companies. However, the level of preparedness exhibited by these individuals varies significantly. Tunisia has been identified as the most prepared country in North Africa; Egypt has cybercrime laws, while Morocco and Libya lag behind in terms of enforcement. In contrast, Gulf countries have demonstrated a greater emphasis on surveillance and regulatory mechanisms as opposed to public awareness initiatives.

The British experience demonstrates a divergent approach to digital risk management. Chatham House employs a business continuity framework to analyse cyber threats. The organisation offers voluntary standards, security ratings with insurance discounts, and standardised contracts to increase transparency. The organisation is also responsible for the coordination of industry, government committees and rapid response mechanisms. The purpose of these mechanisms is to enable insurers to suspend exclusions and build reserves in crisis situations.

RUSI, on the other hand, believes that a complete solution to cyber risks is possible only with government involvement. It proposes classifying attacks according to the threat to national security, mandatory standards for critical sectors, state guarantee funds, and integration with defence structures. This dilemma - market initiatives versus state regulation - reflects broader discussions on the governance of new technologies and demonstrates how expert communities influence legal frameworks through debate, coalitions, and crisis response.

Anglo-American Strategies in Energy Security

Energy is a fundamental component of global geopolitical strategy, influencing the priorities of states in the domains of security and foreign policy. The United States and the United Kingdom's policies in the Persian Gulf region are centred on the assurance of uninterrupted transportation of oil and gas through strategically significant sea routes, notably the Strait of Hormuz. In order to ensure the security of these supplies, states actively conduct military patrols, maintain close diplomatic ties with the countries responsible for their production, and supply arms to serve as a deterrent against potential threats from both state and non-state actors.

In this policy, the priority of stability often prevails over the demand for political reform in the allied monarchies, as the US and UK governments prefer a secure and predictable energy environment. Concurrently, the emergence of renewable energy sources and the intensification of global climate initiatives may progressively diminish strategic reliance on conventional hydrocarbons. However, in the short term, oil and gas flows will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping military deployments, defence alliances and diplomatic strategies of the leading Western powers.

Balancing Interests and Strategic Choices

In order to reach a long-term agreement in the Middle East, it is necessary to understand how different issues and factors are interconnected. The US negotiators will have to address issues related to the country's nuclear programme, missiles, proxy support and cybersecurity. In doing so, they must take into account domestic political constraints and competing powers offering alternative partnerships.

It is imperative for Iran to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between its ideological tenets and pragmatic economic objectives. It is imperative that the development of its missile programmes and proxy groups is limited, whilst simultaneously seeking sanctions relief to support its economy.

The Gulf states must determine how to capitalise on Chinese investment without compromising their relationship with the United States. Concurrently, it is imperative that they fortify their cybersecurity measures and diversify their economies, moving away from a reliance on oil as the primary source of revenue.

The People's Republic of China is currently facing the need to maintain economic growth, reduce the level of debt, and take into account geopolitical reactions to its major Belt and Road projects. Concurrently, the nation is endeavouring to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between economic openness and regulatory oversight.

The UK case demonstrates the necessity of integrating market incentives with national security in the digital sphere, emphasising the ineffectiveness of solely relying on self-regulation by companies or on government control.

Conclusion

Today's Middle East is a region where old hegemonic powers that are losing influence and new regional powers that are gaining ground are intertwined. The United States is playing a complex chess game: it must balance domestic polarisation with foreign strategy, working with allies on cybersecurity, energy stability and nuclear diplomacy. Washington's ability to contain regional conflicts and shape stable rules of the game depends entirely on how well it coordinates with its allies.

Iran uses asymmetric strategies: through proxy forces and cyber tools, it influences the region without direct conflict. This approach is effective in a multipolar world, but it also leads to sanctions and hinders internal development. This balance between influence and vulnerability proves the limitations of asymmetric strategies in the long run.

The Gulf monarchies exemplify the capacity for globalisation to coexist with authoritarianism. The influx of foreign investment and technological advancement serves to fortify existing power structures, while concurrently allowing for the meticulous and strategic management of regional rivalries. The approach adopted by the aforementioned parties demonstrates that economic integration into global markets does not necessarily result in political change; rather, it engenders new instruments of influence.

The People's Republic of China offers an alternative model of global presence. Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and regional economic unions represent a combination of integration into the global economy with the formation of its own rules, whilst simultaneously benefiting from and challenging liberal norms. This strategy enables Beijing to consolidate its influence in regions where established Western models are being superseded by novel forms of global interaction.

The United Kingdom is a prime example of this, with its development of cyber insurance. Think tanks play a crucial role in policy making by identifying problems, building coalitions, and establishing legal frameworks for governments and businesses. It is clear that in today's world, expert networks hold more power to shape order than individual states.

Taken together, these processes reveal a world in transformation: power is becoming less centralised, technology is disrupting traditional structures, and policy is increasingly shaped by expert networks and competing national strategies. It is vital to understand these changes if we are to create sustainable and flexible policies in a world of rapid change.

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