Between Washington and Beijing: The Middle East's Strategic Gambit

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ABSTRACT: The strategic architecture of the Middle East is undergoing a fundamental reordering, marked by the decomposition of American hegemony and the emergence of a contested, multipolar landscape. This review analyzes this transition through a synthesized theoretical framework, integrating Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). It posits that the decline of U.S. primacy has not been succeeded by a new hegemon but has instead activated the region's inherent security dynamics, transforming it into an increasingly autonomous subsystem. Within this space, global power diffusion intensifies latent regional rivalries. The analysis examines the consequences of U.S. retrenchment, China's economically driven penetration, and the enhanced agency of regional powers particularly Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel in shaping diplomatic and security outcomes. It investigates key mechanisms of this transformation, including the discursive power of think tanks in securitization processes, the logic of Iran's proxy warfare, the omnidirectional hedging of Gulf monarchies, and the rising stakes of digital sovereignty. The review concludes that the emerging order will be defined less by stable alliances and more by fluid economic partnerships, technological capability,

and the adeptness of regional states in leveraging great power competition to advance their strategic autonomy.

Introduction

The architectural foundations of the Middle Eastern regional order are not merely shifting; they are being fundamentally reconstructed. This transition transcends a simple redistribution of power among global actors, advancing instead into a structural condition best conceptualized as a mediated anarchy. In this fragmented environment, the deterioration of American hegemonic authority, a process elucidated by Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) has unleashed the region's long-suppressed, inherent security dynamics. The result is a structural vacuum contested not by a single successor hegemon, but by resurgent global powers, primarily China, and a cohort of ambitious regional states Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel which have now emerged as the primary architects of their own security.

This review contends that the prevailing narrative of a straightforward transition to multipolarity is analytically insufficient. Such a model obscures the essential character of the emerging order, which is defined by the volatile interaction between global power diffusion and entrenched regional rivalries. To illuminate this complexity, the analysis synthesizes Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). This integrated framework posits that the decline of the US-led hegemonic order has removed a critical layer of suppression from the Middle East's regional security complex, thereby intensifying its internal competitive logic. Consequently, external powers increasingly find themselves responding to regional initiatives rather than dictating them, while local states adeptly leverage global competition to advance their strategic autonomy.

The empirical exploration of energy security, proxy warfare, discursive power, and digital sovereignty will demonstrate how this interaction produces a system distinguished by its heightened volatility and resistance to external control. Adopting

a geopolitical lens, this review prioritizes the analysis of power structures and strategic calculus. While acknowledging their significance, socio-humanitarian factors are examined only insofar as they inform the decisions of state actors. The central objective is to furnish a theoretically robust explanation for the current transformation, tracing the causal relationship between hegemonic decline and the consequent rise of regional agency, and to assess the profound implications of this mediated anarchy for the future of Middle Eastern and international politics.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis is grounded in a synthesis of two principal theoretical approaches: Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). The former provides a macro-level understanding of global power transitions, while the latter offers a lens for examining regional security dynamics. The central premise of this integrated framework is that the contemporary transformation of the Middle Eastern order is driven by the interaction between hegemonic decline and the reactivation of the region's endemic security competition.

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), originating in the work of Charles P. Kindleberger and later developed by Robert O. Keohane posits that the stability of the international system often relies on a dominant power to provide public goods, such as security and a framework for economic exchange. A key corollary of this theory is that the decline of a hegemon creates a structural vacuum, leading to greater systemic uncertainty and instability. In the context of the Middle East, the retrenchment of American power has resulted in less reliable security guarantees, creating opportunities for other global actors and compelling regional states to pursue more independent and assertive foreign policies.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), as formulated by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, provides a critical corrective to state-centric or globalist perspectives by arguing that security is primarily organized at a regional level. It defines a Regional Security Complex (RSC) as a group of states whose primary security concerns are so interconnected that their national security cannot be analyzed in isolation. The Middle East is a quintessential RSC, whose dynamics are shaped not merely by

global politics but by an internal structure of persistent rivalries and alignments such as the Saudi-Iranian competition or the Arab-Israeli conflict. As scholars like Raymond Hinnebusch emphasize, these patterns are rooted in enduring issues of regime security, sectarian identity, and ideological contention, which ensure the RSC's continuity even as the global distribution of power shifts.

Independently, each theory presents limitations. An analysis relying solely on HST can lead to an oversimplified, top-down view that neglects the agency and complex motivations of regional actors. Conversely, an approach using only RSCT may lack the explanatory power to account for the systemic pressures that enable or constrain regional dynamics. The transformation of the Middle Eastern order cannot be fully understood by examining global and regional levels separately; it is their interaction that is decisive.

Therefore, this paper proposes that the waning of American hegemony (HST) has not been replaced by a new, stable order. Instead, it has removed a critical layer of external restraint from the Middle East's inherent security dynamics (RSCT). The United States historically acted as an external regulator, mitigating though not resolving regional conflicts. The partial withdrawal of this hegemonic presence, a process noted by F. Gregory Gause III, has effectively "taken the lid off," intensifying and decentralizing security competition. The result is a region that is no longer a passive object of great power politics but an active agent. Regional powers are now leveraging global rivalries to pursue their own strategic ends, while external powers find themselves increasingly drawn into conflicts whose origins and logic remain fundamentally regional.

In conclusion, this synthesized framework demonstrates that the contemporary Middle East is defined by the tense interplay between a receding global hierarchy and an increasingly assertive and fragmented regional complex.

The Receding Hegemon: U.S. Retrenchment and the Void It Leaves

The gradual retrenchment of American hegemony represents a foundational shift in the Middle Eastern security architecture. This is not a momentary policy fluctuation but a structural trend, driven by the cumulative drain of prolonged military

engagements and the ascendancy of strategic competitors. Scholars such as G. John Ikenberry have documented the corrosion of the post-Cold War liberal order, while regional specialists like F. Gregory Gause III analyzes its specific manifestations in the Gulf: a recalibration of U.S. security guarantees and a diminished willingness to act as the ultimate regional security manager. This retrenchment has created a structural vacuum, inviting alternative models of external engagement and forcing regional states to recalibrate their strategic calculus.

Into this void, China has projected a state-centric model of influence that deliberately contrasts with American liberal internationalism. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing pursues a form of "asymmetric interdependence," leveraging infrastructure finance and trade partnerships such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to re-engineer economic corridors without demanding political conditionalities. As underscored by analysts like Jon Alterman, this approach prioritizes access, stability, and resource security. However, this alternative model possesses inherent limitations. China's reliance on selective market liberalization and technological self-reliance, while attractive to regimes wary of political reform, does not constitute a replacement for the public goods of hard security. Its strategy is one of economic penetration, not hegemonic provision, creating dependencies but not a security order.

This fundamental distinction was exposed during the 2025 Israel-Iran crisis, a scenario that tested the contours of the new multipolarity. China's carefully cultivated posture of strategic ambiguity maintaining deep energy ties with Iran while expanding commercial relations with Israel reached its breaking point. Beijing's response, a rhetorical alignment with the Global South coupled with criticism of Israeli sovereignty violations, revealed its primary imperative: risk aversion. In contrast to the United States' immediate reaffirmation of its security commitment to Israel, China's hesitation and its corporations' fears of secondary sanctions illuminated the non-equivalence of American and Chinese power. Beijing's influence, while substantial, remains compartmentalized within the economic sphere and is held hostage to the very regional conflicts it seeks to transcend.

The episode serves as a powerful empirical validation of this review's theoretical synthesis. The hegemonic retreat of the United States (HST) did not simply create space for a new hegemon, but rather unleashed the latent forces of the Regional Security Complex (RSCT). China, lacking the will or capacity to supplant America's security role, functions as an influential penetrator, not a hegemonic successor. Consequently, the region is not experiencing a clean transition to a new bipolarity or a benign multipolarity, but a more volatile and decentralized system. Gulf monarchies and other regional actors, recognizing this, are not merely "balancing" but are actively engaging in omnidirectional hedging, leveraging economic partnerships with Beijing while seeking to retain security ties with Washington, all while pursuing their own assertive regional agendas in the absence of a definitive external security guarantor.

Shaping the Strategic Environment: Think Tanks as Agents of Securitization

In the fragmented landscape of contemporary international relations, think tanks have evolved from scholarly institutions into potent policy entrepreneurs who actively construct the narratives that define security and direct state resources. Their influence is particularly pivotal in the Middle East, a region deeply penetrated by external powers, where their analytical frameworks shape Western, and by extension, global responses to regional crises. These organizations do not merely analyze policy; they engage in a process of "securitization," as conceptualized by the Copenhagen School, moving issues from the realm of ordinary politics into the realm of existential threat, thereby legitimizing extraordinary measures. Their competing ideological lenses fundamentally narrow the spectrum of politically viable policy options, directly impacting the region's strategic calculus.

The American context provides the most stark illustration of this dynamic. Ideologically opposed institutions like the Heritage Foundation and the Center for American Progress function as parallel foreign policy bureaucracies for their respective political tribes. The Heritage Foundation's "Mandate for Leadership" project and CAP's detailed blueprints are not passive reports; they are actionable agendas that, upon a party's ascension to power, often supplant nonpartisan expertise. The consequence for the Middle East is a pattern of disruptive volatility, where

strategic priorities toward Iran, Gulf security cooperation, or the Arab-Israeli conflict swing dramatically between administrations. This forces regional actors, from Riyadh to Tel Aviv, to navigate an unpredictable Washington, incentivizing them to hedge their bets and pursue more autonomous security policies.

This trend of narrative weaponization is a transatlantic phenomenon. In the United Kingdom, the debate over cyber insurance governance reveals how think tanks embed fundamentally different philosophies of the state into emerging policy domains. Chatham House, with its liberal institutionalist roots, frames cybersecurity through an economic lens, advocating for market-based solutions, contractual innovation, and global standards to manage risk as a financial liability. In direct contrast, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), steeped in a realist strategic culture, securitizes the same domain. It advocates for state-centric solutions, including sovereign guarantee funds and mandatory protective standards, framing cyber threats as fundamental challenges to national security. This divergence is not academic; it represents a critical battle over whether the digital realm will be governed by logics of commerce or logics of national security, with profound implications for liberty, sovereignty, and resilience.

The power of these constructed narratives extends decisively into traditional geopolitics. The portrayal of Iran as either an irreconcilable "axis of evil" to be contained or a rational strategic actor to be engaged is not an objective fact but a contested narrative heavily influenced by the outputs of these partisan ecosystems. These frames, once institutionalized, create path dependencies that can lock governments into confrontational or conciliatory postures long after the strategic landscape has shifted. While the theoretical potential exists for a synthesis of market and security approaches to create robust regulatory ecosystems, such synergy is often thwarted by institutional imperatives. The need for distinct branding, donor alignment, and political relevance typically reinforces intellectual silos, producing fragmented and often contradictory policy advice.

Ultimately, in an era where threats are hybrid and the lines between economic, digital, and military security are blurred, the power to define the nature of a challenge is the power to pre-determine the response. By securitizing issues like

energy dependence, cyber vulnerability, and geopolitical rivalry, think tanks do not just interpret the world for policymakers; they actively construct the strategic environment in which those policymakers operate. Understanding this dynamic is not a sidebar to Middle Eastern analysis; it is central to deciphering the erratic nature of external intervention and the broader, often incoherent, architecture of global security governance in a post-hegemonic age.

Proxy Warfare and Coercive Diplomacy: The Failure of Maximum Pressure

Iran's reliance on proxy forces constitutes a rational asymmetric strategy for a state facing conventional military disadvantages. This approach, documented in research on Tehran's regional policy, utilizes non-state actors across Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as force multipliers. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has developed this network to extend Iran's strategic reach while maintaining deniability. This represents a fundamental component of Iran's foreign policy architecture rather than a temporary tactic, enabling power projection despite economic and military constraints.

Washington's response has alternated between containment and maximum pressure campaigns employing severe economic sanctions. This coercive diplomacy, frequently advocated by conservative policy institutes, operates on the premise that economic hardship would force behavioral change or political transformation in Tehran. However, substantial academic analysis indicates these measures have produced opposite effects. Instead of conceding, Iran has adapted through strengthened alliances with sanctions-insulated powers, intensified hardline influence in domestic politics, and accelerated nuclear development as leverage.

The conflict dynamics intensified following the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel. Subsequent military operations tested the resilience of Iran's proxy network. A significant escalation occurred in April 2024 with an Israeli strike on Iranian diplomatic premises in Damascus, provoking Tehran's unprecedented direct missile attack against Israeli territory. This exchange represented a dangerous departure from established patterns of indirect engagement through militant allies.

These developments occur within the structural context of diminishing American security commitments. Regional powers increasingly calculate they can pursue unilateral security actions with reduced fear of superpower intervention. This perception has created conditions for greater volatility, particularly evident in the collapse of nuclear diplomacy. The JCPOA's failure and subsequent European attempts to revive negotiations through United Nations sanctions snapback mechanisms proved futile. While devastating Iran's economy, these measures only reinforced Tehran's refusal to negotiate under pressure.

The convergence of targeted military operations against Iranian nuclear and military facilities with complete diplomatic breakdown characterizes the current dangerous impasse. The region now faces a precarious situation where Iran's proxy network shows strain, its nuclear program advances unchecked, and economic distress deepens. Coercive strategies have clearly failed to achieve strategic objectives while contributing to regional fragmentation. As hegemonic influence recedes, the resulting power vacuum has unleashed unstructured competition that lacks established rules or reliable mechanisms for conflict management.

Energy and Strategic Hedging: Gulf Approaches in a Transitional Order

Energy remains a central pillar of geopolitical influence in the Middle East. However, the traditional security framework that once underpinned Gulf politics has undergone significant transformation. Defense arrangements previously centered on the United States and the United Kingdom no longer dominate regional strategy. In their place, Gulf monarchies now operate within a complex international environment shaped by multiple centers of power. These states maintain crucial security ties with Washington but have simultaneously deepened their economic and diplomatic relations with rising Asian actors such as China and India, both of whom are critical energy partners and strategic stakeholders.

This evolving pattern reflects a deliberate strategic hedging posture. Rather than aligning exclusively with a single great power, Gulf states are diversifying their external relationships in an effort to manage uncertainty and maximize strategic autonomy. Strategic hedging enables them to extract economic and security benefits

from multiple actors without committing fully to any one bloc. They preserve defense cooperation with Western powers while expanding economic partnerships with China, India, and other emerging players.

National variations are evident in how this strategy is implemented. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 illustrates a state-led development model that seeks to transform the Kingdom's hydrocarbon wealth into a diversified, innovation-driven economy. The United Arab Emirates has pursued a more mature post-oil trajectory, leveraging Dubai's commercial infrastructure, Abu Dhabi's investment capital, and a globally oriented tourism sector to position itself as a regional economic hub. Despite different institutional approaches, both states increasingly view national security as inseparable from economic resilience and technological advancement.

This strategic logic extends into the digital domain. As energy infrastructure becomes more automated and interconnected, cyber vulnerabilities have emerged as a critical security concern. Gulf governments have responded with significant investment in cybersecurity architecture, recognizing that protection of digital assets is now integral to the stability of their energy sectors and broader national interests.

These developments mark a transition from dependence on a single security guarantor to a flexible, multi-aligned foreign policy framework. By balancing security ties with the United States, pursuing technology partnerships with China, and attracting investment from a range of actors, Gulf monarchies have embraced a pragmatic approach that seeks to safeguard regime durability and national influence in an era of international competition and declining unipolarity.

Digital Sovereignty: The New Frontier of the Mediated Anarchy

As American hegemonic influence recedes, as described by Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), and regional rivalries deepen within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), security competition in the Middle East has expanded into cyberspace. In this context, digital sovereignty, defined as state control over data, infrastructure, and cyber capabilities, has emerged as a critical strategy for governments attempting to navigate an increasingly fragmented international order.

Rather than a purely technical policy concern, digital sovereignty now serves as a key expression of national autonomy and a tool of strategic influence.

Two major turning points accelerated this development. The 2011 Arab uprisings revealed the vulnerability of governments to digital mobilization from below. The Stuxnet cyberattack on Iran, by contrast, illustrated the destructive power of state-sponsored cyber operations. These events highlighted both the fragility of digital systems and their capacity to shape geopolitical outcomes.

Regional states have since responded by institutionalizing cybersecurity as a central pillar of national security. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have created national cybersecurity authorities and integrated defense strategies, often developed in partnership with American and British security firms. Iran, facing different constraints, has prioritized the development of indigenous cyber capabilities focused on both resilience and offensive potential. Across the region, capacities vary widely. Tunisia has implemented relatively advanced legal protections, while politically unstable states struggle to build even basic cyber governance frameworks. This disparity has created a new layer of strategic differentiation and vulnerability within the regional system.

The involvement of external powers has further transformed the digital landscape. China, through its Digital Silk Road initiative, offers Middle Eastern governments access to infrastructure such as telecommunications networks, smart city technologies, and next-generation mobile systems. These tools align with the priorities of states seeking greater control over domestic information flows. However, adoption of Chinese technology introduces new dependencies. Governments benefit from modernization but risk ceding strategic autonomy through reliance on Chinese systems, standards, and data architecture. This dynamic compels regional actors to carefully navigate between leveraging Chinese tools and preserving independence in the context of the growing technological competition between Washington and Beijing.

Digital sovereignty is also shaped by developments in international financial governance. The rise of cyber insurance markets, largely shaped by Western

institutions, brings foreign frameworks for measuring, pricing, and managing digital risk into the region. This process embeds regional cyber infrastructure within global financial systems, introducing new forms of interdependence that extend beyond technology into economics and regulation.

In summary, digital sovereignty in the Middle East illustrates the core dynamics of the current geopolitical transformation. The decline of American dominance has allowed cyberspace to become a principal arena of competition, consistent with the predictions of Hegemonic Stability Theory. The specific contours of this competition, including the divergent strategies of GCC states and Iran, reflect the entrenched rivalries described by Regional Security Complex Theory. In this new strategic environment, control over digital infrastructure has become a defining element of geopolitical power. The states that succeed in securing their digital domains while projecting influence through them will shape the future balance of power in the region.

Conclusion

The contemporary Middle East is defined not by the consolidation of a new order, but by the protracted and violent dissolution of the old. The region's strategic environment is now a testament to the decay of American primacy and the absence of any single power capable of imposing hegemonic stability. In this condition of mediated anarchy, regional states have decisively become the principal architects of their own security, no longer mere pawns but active grandmasters in a complex game of multi-vector hedging.

This analysis, through the synthesized lens of Hegemonic Stability and Regional Security Complex Theories, has demonstrated that this power shift is not merely a redistribution of influence but a fundamental re-characterization of agency. China has emerged as an indispensable economic partner, its Belt and Road Initiative providing the capital and infrastructure for Gulf monarchies to diversify their dependencies and gain crucial leverage. Yet, as the 2025 crisis illustrated, Beijing's compartmentalized power, economic penetration without security provision, underscores its role as a penetrator, not a hegemonic successor. Concurrently, the very instruments of power have transformed. Think tanks now wield discursive power to securitize policy

options, cyber capabilities have become essential tools of statecraft, and the demonstrated failure of maximum pressure campaigns against Iran reveals the obsolescence of traditional coercive diplomacy in a fragmented landscape.

Concurrently, non-state actors have gained unprecedented influence in shaping regional dynamics. Western think tanks function as policy entrepreneurs, framing threats and opportunities in ways that constrain official decision-making. In the digital realm, cyber capabilities have emerged as essential instruments of statecraft, with control over digital infrastructure becoming synonymous with sovereignty. The failure of maximum pressure campaigns against Iran underscores the diminishing returns of coercive diplomacy, revealing how traditional tools of statecraft have lost potency in this fragmented landscape.

Looking forward, the region's trajectory will be determined less by dramatic military confrontations and more by the gradual, structural shifts in economic interdependence, technological capability, and institutional resilience. The era of binary alliances has yielded to a complex reality where regional powers, not external patrons, set the terms of engagement. For the United States, China, and other external actors, this demands a painful but necessary strategic recalibration. Sustainable influence will require moving beyond obsolete zero-sum frameworks toward a posture of competitive coexistence, one that acknowledges the irreducible agency of Middle Eastern states and the multidimensional nature of contemporary power.

The central implication of this mediated anarchy is that influence is no longer a structural privilege of hegemony; it is a perishable commodity that must be continually earned and demonstrated through diplomatic agility, reliable partnership, and a recognition that in the emerging Middle Eastern order, the locals are firmly in charge.

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