The Marathon Initiative

Sino-American Competition, Global Strategy, and the Place of the Middle East

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The United States also has a significant, if at present strained, informal alliance structure in the region and considerable assets — soft and hard — that should not be abandoned. What is needed is a sense of proportion, balance, and conceptual coherence for the partnerships among the United States and like-minded Middle Eastern states to guide the re-prioritization inherent in the idea of a rational pivot.

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I. Introduction

Great power competition over the Middle East is as old as history. At the mouth of the Dog River in Lebanon, where the gap between the mountains and the Mediterranean Sea narrows to the width of a road, nineteen different armies marked their passage with a plaque. Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II started the practice in the early 13th century BC, followed by Esarhaddon of Assyria, Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon and Roman Emperor Caracalla. The troops of Napoleon III in 1860; the British, French and their Hashemite allies during World War I; the French again in 1920; and Australians, New Zealanders and Indians during World War II installed their memorials.

Others, such as Alexander the Great and Saladin, marched through but skipped the plaque laying. American marines could have left plaques during their deployments in Lebanon in 1958 and 1982-4, if the thought had occurred to anyone, but it likely would have been dismissed as "off message." However, it would not have been out-of-step as yet another memorial to the way great powers become entangled in the Middle East, whether as a place of transit, a landscape to protect allies and battle rivals, or an object of desire for its own assets and resources.

Political Middle East, The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/maps/world-regional.

II. America and the Middle East

By the end of World War II, the United States, as a new global power, took increasing interest in the region. Although initially inclined to defer to the British, who retained imperial sway there after 1945, American cold warriors came to see Britain's deficiencies. Not only was London unable to finance the projection of power needed to counter the Soviet Union in Turkey and Iran, it became obvious to Washington officials that British attempts to retain

power and military bases in the region were fueling Arab antagonism and nationalism to the potential benefit of Moscow. The United States took a more direct hand, and American-Soviet competition came to overlay an age-old one among Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, and the Persians, soon to be joined by Riyadh, a newcomer with oil wealth. In the aftermath of the 1973 Israeli-Arab war, Henry Kissinger masterfully sidelined the Soviets by demonstrating that through his step-by-step diplomacy, Washington alone could deliver the ceasefires, territorial returns, and paths toward peace sought by both Israel and the Arab states. American influence over the Arab world was reaching a high-water mark as the century closed, but was never total. Syria remained a Russian ally, while Libya's Muammar al-Gaddafi and Iraq's Saddam Hussein were intolerable mavericks. But overall, America had eclipsed the Soviet presence long before the obsolescence of the Soviet Union itself. While the emergence of a hostile, revolutionary Islamic regime in Iran was a major setback, for better or worse, it reinforced weak, autocratic Arab regimes' dependency on the United States as a provider of security.

American paramountcy in the Middle East carried the seeds of its own limitations. First, once peace between Israel and its Arab nation-state neighbors became irreversible, those states came to rely less on nimble American diplomacy and more on a steady supply of American economic and military assistance to deal with non-state threats. These mainly arose from Iranian-backed Hamas and Hezbollah (for Israel) as well as homegrown discontent with the consequences of decades of misrule (for Arab states). Second, with paramountcy came American association with the unpopular status quo in the Arab world, where inadequacies in governance and human development fed discontent and terrorism, to spectacular effect as the 21st century opened.

The United States has a significant, if at present strained, informal alliance structure in the region and considerable assets — soft and hard — that should not be abandoned. What is needed is a sense of proportion, balance, and conceptual coherence for the partnerships between America and like-minded Middle Eastern states to guide the re-prioritization inherent in the idea of a rational pivot to East Asia. The very word "pivot" is problematic as it implies a binary "either/or" choice, rather than a re-prioritization. It should not be interpreted, portrayed, or executed as a declaration of Middle Eastern irrelevance to U.S. interests, which remain vital and in jeopardy.

While the now-emerging Sino-American competition in the Middle East may not have been inevitable, it is hardly surprising. However, what *is* surprising — at least for those who still have some faith in the probity of American policy-makers — is what little has been done to lay the groundwork to protect U.S. interests in the Middle East after the pivot to Asia, a maneuver much discussed over the past decades but of only recent and somewhat sticky execution. A pivot that creates a vacuum in the Middle East to be readily exploited by China or Iran is hardly a step forward in America's global competition with Beijing. America and its partners are dealing with a great power environment in the Middle East that is more competitive and varied than complacent

American officials have experienced in decades, yet they have not developed a conceptual framework to shape and explain a credible response. The Middle East has for so long dominated the American vision of its threats that it has come to distort the latter's picture of the globe; a correction of these distortions is overdue.

III. China and the Middle East, and America's Reaction

A *New York Times* headline on March 11, 2023, declared a "Chinese-Brokered Deal Upends Mideast Diplomacy and Challenges the U.S.," in reference to normalization between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It had all the American-centric, short-term focus that American readers can expect from much of their media. The author wrings his hands over Americans being sidelined after three-quarters of a century of playing a central role in the Middle East and observes that China is now "the new power player." Substituting "a" for "the" new power player in hindsight might have captured reality, if not more clicks. The real point here is the unstated, unobserved, ironic contradiction: American leaders loudly proclaim a pivot out of a deprioritized Middle East, yet then feel insulted and outraged when they are no longer the indispensable partner for everyone and at center stage for everything. In any case, seven short months after *The New York Times* relegated the United States to a secondary role in the Middle East power equation, Hamas' attack on Israel on Oct. 7 turned all eyes to Washington — not Beijing — to develop solutions to a grave situation for Israel, the Palestinians, and the whole region, whether or not such solutions exist.

In reality, until recently, meaningful Sino-Arab connectivity was limited to energy interests. Of course, there are some who try to invent a continuum of millennial, civilizational engagement across the seas and the Silk Road from little of tangible worth. While the presence and mingling in the Middle East of Arab, European, South Asian, American, African, Persian, Muslim, and Christian cultural influences is transparent, only propagandists can conjure significant Chinese cultural or political influence, past or present.

One thing that is new is China's — and specifically Foreign Minister Wang Yi's — nimble opportunism and assertion of presence and influence. An initial reaction in some American quarters to China's more assertive diplomatic activity in the Middle East was almost one of relief. Fingering scar tissue from many a goring by Middle East realities, there are American policy-makers and diplomats who welcome China to the fool's errand of making peace between Arabs and Persians or launching one more "last chance" grand plan for a Palestinian state. This attitude is built on an expectation that China will fail just as gloriously as did America in its Middle East delusions. A less cynical, if more naïve, twist on this thesis is to believe that it is just fine if Chinese diplomacy can bring stability to the Middle East, as that is what the United States has sought all along. The superficial observation that China and the United States have

shared interests in the Middle East — favoring its stability as an energy provider and transportation hub, and opposing nuclear proliferation and terrorism there — masks the reality that Chinese and American leaders have very different ideas about what "stability" entails.

A basic fallacy at work here is the American tendency to project our logic and behavior onto foreign actors. There is no reason to expect Chinese actions in the region to mirror those of the United States, not just because Chinese statecraft has a different style, but because it has fundamentally different goals. That style and those goals may work well in some ways, but fail in others. The Chinese are unlikely to plunge into nation-building among Middle Eastern states, and Chinese officials are perfectly at ease working with authoritarians with deplorable human rights records. They are more likely to enliven long, tedious diplomatic dinners by swapping tips on repression than indulging in lectures on ethics. Nor does Chinese public opinion, to the extent there is such a thing directed at China's role in the Middle East, matter. China is unencumbered by the United States' perpetual anxiety over a perceived conflict between its values and its interests when it comes to the conduct of foreign policy in the Middle East. The Chinese will be untroubled by the conundrum that while long-term stability would seem to require better Arab governance and democratic practices, the evidence suggests that most external efforts to push in that direction only make matters worse. That does not mean they will be any more successful at advancing their own interests in a deeply troubled region, but because there is little expectation that Beijing will improve governance in the Middle East, few will feel hostile toward it for its association with despotism.

China's own governance structure means it can keep secrets and build leader-to-leader relationships over decades, not just during leaky, four-year cycles as in the case of the United States. The Middle East is thick with leaders who prefer to conduct national security in the shadows and who rule for life — or at least aspire to. Yet, one countervailing trend is the United States' "soft power" linkages. These patterns orient the current and future generations of Middle Eastern elites toward the United States; most speak American English, attended American schools, bonded with American military counterparts, and/or enjoy American entertainment and fast food. Try to substitute "Chinese" for any of those activities, and you will come up nearly empty-handed.

While the Chinese will seek to burnish their credentials as a power equal to or greater than the United States by asserting their diplomatic presence in the Middle East, they are unlikely to put their prestige on the line or choose sides. Providing real security to the states of the Middle East, durable diplomatic solutions to their problems, or humanitarian relief has so far been absent from Chinese initiatives. Beijing is likely to fall well short of Arab needs.

In fact, regional leaders have their own interests to pursue. The weak ones — which is to say all of the Arab states, none of which as yet has a nuclear deterrence capability — no longer feel secure under an American umbrella. That condition leads them to reduce their risks, as we have seen since 2021; the issue is less about Chinese encroachment in the Middle East and more about American detachment. For Saudi Arabia, de-risking has meant trying to establish a ceasefire and diplomatic exit from the war in Yemen and trying to reduce regional tensions with the Iranians. The Saudis were hardly going to turn to Washington to help recalibrate their ties with Iran, since Washington itself was struggling to define a coherent strategy as Tehran balked at returning to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) deal. In any case, the United States would most certainly have rejected the idea, accustomed to monopolizing unilateral surprise compromises as its own prerogative, not one for dependent powers to exercise. China was the natural alternative and had the added appeal of showing the Biden administration that the Saudi "pariah" had options.

But neither the Saudis nor the Iranians have embarked on a dramatic geostrategic upset of the region, despite the case of the vapors at *The New York Times*. Nor is the resumption of diplomatic relations so earth-shattering a development; even at times of acute bilateral tension, Tehran and Riyadh more often than not have kept their embassies open. The Persian-Saudi rivalry, which preceded the Iranian Revolution, will roll right along. The summer 2023 deployment of American marines to protect oil tankers was a small, initial sign of what little had really changed. The Iranian-backed assault by Hamas against Israel in October, which President Biden in part attributed to an Iranian attempt to stymie emerging Saudi-Israeli normalization, provided a reminder of the deeper fault lines in the Middle East that separate the interests of Iran and its Western-oriented targets.

China's relations with Iran differ from those with the Arabs, not for reasons of civilization, but power. As the United States sought to isolate revolutionary Iran, Tehran and Beijing developed meaningful relations in the fields of energy, nuclear cooperation, and military modernization. China at times cooperated with American plans related to Iran, but more often tried to thwart them. Without an American strategy that deals with the core threat posed by progress toward nuclear weapons capabilities and tackles the challenges posed by Iranian regional interference, our partners will draw their own conclusions on how to defend their interests. So far, outside Israel, that has entailed a softening of resistance to Iran that will likely not lead to longer-term stability, but rather longer-term Iranian influence.

With Iran already holding considerable sway in four Arab capitals — Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sanaa — it is well positioned to threaten our traditional partners, as illustrated by the multifaceted October campaign against Israel and the United States, choreographed by Iran. The reassertion of America's military presence to safeguard the flow of tankers in the Persian Gulf this summer, and the massive deployment of

American assets to reinforce Israel's deterrence in October and attempt to suppress regional escalation, were necessary moves and options the United States should always retain.

However, they were divorced from any apparent or meaningful, comprehensive strategy to constrain the Iranian threat. Moreover, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's comment that American retaliatory strikes against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) logistics and munitions hubs in Syria on Oct. 27 were unrelated to events in Gaza showed a desire to disaggregate the region despite an inherent connectivity that Iran is fully exploiting. Washington is correct not to tumble into a war with Iran at this juncture; but it is inaccurate and dangerous to fail to recognize that the Middle East is a single campaign theater. Until America and its partners re-establish deterrence, Tehran will continue to identify where and how much pain will be applied and the extent of imperilment of American interests throughout the region.

A return to the Trump era's maximum pressure strategy on Iran would reflect realism, instill regained confidence in American policy among our partners, and give Washington added leverage to demand hard work among them to build collective, homegrown defenses. Otherwise, American confusion and withdrawal will continue to create opportunities for Chinese, Russian, and Iranian diplomatic and strategic opportunism. The danger to America arises not just because of China or Russia, but because of how Iran can gain strength and leverage in such an environment.

IV. Ranking the Place of the Middle East in the Sino-American Contest

Ultimately, American global strength rests upon its economic, military, and ideological power. No global strategy to deal with China can succeed unless those pillars are sturdy; the United States can weather challenges, missteps, and even a parade of mediocre presidents so long as we continue to have a robust economy, a well-resourced and advanced military, and a healthy, functioning democracy at home that can inspire others around the globe. How should American policy-makers view the Middle East from this perspective about our core strengths? The elemental — and missing — thing would be to integrate our strategies for the Middle East with our strategies to counter China. After all, the Middle Eastern states on the Persian Gulf and Red Sea are, in fact, part of the Indo-Pacific. They will have a role as we deal with the problem of China.

Economically, the Middle East will continue to be of vital interest so long as the United States seeks a stable global market economy. However green everyone may want to be, fossil fuels will remain an essential source of energy and the Middle East its primary producer and market arbiter for the foreseeable future. Ostensibly, America and China share this interest, although unlike the United States, China relies on direct imports of

energy from the region. China's dependence on Middle Eastern energy supplies is one of its greatest vulnerabilities.

It may also be more motivated to dominate the global economy than to allow it to flourish, just as the Xi era inside China saw a shift whereby Chinese economic goals were subordinated to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) political and security ones. Therefore, it is likely that differences in the American and Chinese conceptions of "stability" in the energy market will emerge. China's preoccupation will be with preserving its own access and, if needed, withholding it from its foes, even at the price of higher fuel costs. The United States is likely to seek stable prices and a steady flow of oil and gas to markets globally, although it also has shown a readiness to use oil as a tailored foreign policy tool, such as with Iranian oil sanctions. By extension, maintaining the means to deprive China of regular oil supplies from the Gulf could be a helpful tool for America in deterring or managing Chinese aggression in the Pacific in the event of a military crisis or clash between the two countries. In any case, the Sinification of the Persian Gulf's energy supply chain would be a prescription for Chinese bullying and sabotage of the rest of the global economy.

Militarily, the region has been a major arena for U.S. investment and presence for interconnected reasons related to the defense of Israel, protection of the flow of energy, and countering Islamic extremism and terrorism, whether state-sponsored or arising from non-state actors such as Usama bin Laden and the Islamic State. The record is mixed. While the secure existence of the Jewish state is not now in doubt, the price of complacency and the frustrating nature of asymmetrical warfare was made evident with Hamas' massacre of Oct. 7. Iran and its Arab proxies remain potent threats. In addition, the threat of Middle East-generated terrorism striking in America is much diminished. Preserving that status will require constant vigilance, intelligence and security partnerships across the globe, including in the Middle East, and our military's modest but persistent physical presence to contain this threat to the stateless areas of the Islamic world, where it still thrives. The expensive experiment of state-building to address the sources of terrorism — sources never rigorously identified nor understood in any case — was a failure. Our military engagement in the region has slowly shifted accordingly, but not settled into a doctrine aligned with the new reality of global competition with China but capable of mitigating or handling localized challenges to American interests.

The American brand remains strong in the Middle East and elsewhere, even if American policy is reviled. Apart from the attraction of American educational, cultural, and consumer products, the brand in essence is a form of governance and way of life that, despite imperfections, inspires hundreds of millions. While American policy-makers for now have abandoned clumsy efforts to replicate American democracy, the example of our values — adherence to the rule of law, the will of the people and the peaceful transfer of power — resonates abroad. China cannot compete in that league.

Disinformation, social media subterfuge and absurd doublespeak about "win-wins," "democracy," and "peace" are Chinese tools to obscure reality. What Chinese officials really mean is "we win," and the CCP defines "democracy," and "peace" as what happens when you submit. However, societies with access to real information — which, despite authoritarian rulers, most Arab societies enjoy to varying degrees — will not be fooled. Precious few around the globe or in the Middle East would embrace the Chinese system of governance and social organization as an improvement.

V. Economic Colossus?

The ambitions of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and, to a lesser degree, Emirati President Muhammad bin Zayed are to quickly catapult Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to the status of major global powers. While likely to make big strides, they will ultimately be frustrated. However potent their economies become, their limited demographic potential will constrain their ability not only to project power beyond the Arabian Peninsula, but even to defend themselves unless they start to act collectively. Some of what is happening is a reaction to having been treated by White House incumbents in recent years as a gas station where the price of oil should reflect their immediate electoral needs and as ATMs for cash to underwrite their latest foreign policy errand. What these Gulf leaders are seeking are options, leverage, respect and wider markets for two-way trade and investment, as seen most recently in their move to join the BRICS grouping.

In theory, China might seek a partnership that adds Saudi and Emirati economic heft to shared security strategies. However, that approach is unlikely to fulfill the ambitions in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi for greater independence. The new generation of leaders there is unlikely to submit to China's version of dominance. The volume of two-way commerce and investment between them and China is impressive, but that alone does not generate Chinese strategic dominance. Nor are rich Saudi Arabia and the UAE at risk of falling into the "debt trap" China has laid for the developing world. The issue for the United States should remain not the volume of trade and investment between China and places like the Arab Gulf states, but their nature. Continuous, high-level and technical dialogue on the risks related to sensitive technology transfers as well as Chinese intelligence and military exploitation of communications and transportation infrastructure should figure prominently in any post-pivot strategy.

VI. A Balanced Response

American interests in the Middle East are persistent and need tending, and China's rising activity in the region is by no means benign. However, we should not exaggerate

the problem or continue to engage in failed or counterproductive strategies of the past. Nation-building and large-scale military occupations only made matters worse for the United States and the people of the Middle East, however well-intended. Pursuing the Holy Grail of a two-state solution that majorities of neither the Israeli nor the Palestinian public have believed in for years will not yield the desired result of peace. Leaders of those societies must come to terms with the consequences of their own failures, rather than ask us to repeat ours. Hamas' actions on October 7 have put off the fulfillment of peaceful Palestinian aspirations — the last thing Hamas seeks — for a generation. However, an American regional strategy that ignores unfinished political and humanitarian problems, such as the dilemmas facing Israel and the Palestinians, ensures that Iran and its proxies can continue to exploit them.

Some of China's diplomatic and economic strategies have succeeded and need to be contained, countered, or tolerated, depending on the threat posed. However, some of its strategies have failed as its potential clients or partners awaken to the reality that China's menu has hidden prices; the distinction between being China's partner and being its victim is largely a matter of semantics. It is not just a question of debt traps and the use of commercial products to collect intelligence that has prompted resistance.

Overbearing Chinese diplomacy alienated leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), one of the world's most mild-mannered multilateral bodies, and provoked a critical public statement. China's "16-plus-One" initiative for economic cooperation with Eastern and Central Europe collapsed as China's promises of infrastructure investment and technical cooperation proved to be so much hot air. Misgivings over China's strategic alignment with Russia during the invasion of Ukraine further accelerated that trend. Like immunizations, the best antidote to Chinese attempts to penetrate and influence states is for leaders and citizens in those target countries to get a taste of Chinese behavior. The Middle East will be no exception.

Ending the pursuit of impossible goals in the Middle East and reorienting our resources to deal more effectively with China still require a degree of presence and engagement there. The Asia pivot makes sense so long as it does not produce a vacuum in the Middle East to be exploited by China, Russia and Iran. Instead, we should work to build on our informal but formidable network of partners — Israel, Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Morocco — to enable them to better deter and defend their nations, together when possible. Israeli-Saudi normalization will be welcome when it occurs, but there is no need to wait for it. There is no question that American military force and diplomatic bandwidth is shifting from the Middle East to Asia. At the State Department, Secretary Mike Pompeo moved hundreds of positions out of Afghanistan and Iraq and redistributed them to the Indo-Pacific and globally to enhance our ability to counter China. The military has done the same. The quiet advance of joint exercises, joint planning and intelligence sharing among these partners, with U.S. facilitation, is underway. Integrated air defense would be a logical next step.

Preserving Israel's "qualitative military edge" will be an unshakeable American commitment, but the logic of the Abraham Accords requires less rigidity over military technology transfers to Gulf partners.

Above all, if we want the trust and cooperation of our Middle East partners, they need to see a coherent, sustainable American game plan for the source of instability that drives them together — Iran. It is difficult to identify the existence of such a game plan at present, but it is past time to declare the demise of the Biden administration's pre-Oct. 7 approach. Recognizing after two fruitless years that resumed talks over the JCPOA nuclear deal were a dead end, the Biden team sought to accommodate Tehran in order to buy calm until the Nov. 2024 American presidential elections.

Accommodation included the money for hostages deal and the de facto non-enforcement of oil sanctions. It should come as no surprise that Tehran would conclude that accommodation signaled weakness ripe for further exploitation. Observation of Israeli Defense Force reservists evading duty this summer to protest civilian judicial reform likely reinforced in Iran a sense of opportunism. Ending serial Iranian exploitation of regional conflicts and vulnerabilities will require a comprehensive, multilayered response at three levels: restored deterrence combined with active strategies to address localized problems and discontent with partners committed to shared values; a comprehensive regional strategy to maximize pressure on the Iranian regime using all-of-government tools; and, a global perspective and game plan that minimizes, rather than invites, Chinese regional involvement.

VII. Statecraft, Engagement and Flexibility

Even our closest North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies at times have had deep differences, with us and among themselves. When de Gaulle parted ways with the NATO military command, when Erdogan played every side of the alliance against itself, or when Macron declared NATO brain dead, the wise American response was unflappable steadiness. Events and interests — reality — eventually brought them around. Sanctions or harsh rhetoric would be counterproductive. Alliances are organic, especially when informal, and must prove their value and adjust to new realities over time.

Diplomacy is one of the methods by which American statecraft leverages the power of its economy, military and values to achieve outcomes. Real diplomacy, rightly understood and correctly led, is an essential tool. It is about persuasion, and persuasion requires developing relationships of trust and maintaining persistent communication through physical presence. It requires not just understanding our own interests, but those of foreign counterparts, and where and how they can be made to overlap. Tradeoffs, opportunities, and consequences are among the normal elements of diplomatic dialogue. American diplomacy's success is based not primarily on the quality of its

diplomats; it should be a given that the American people have the best. It derives from America's core sources of power.

Our long-term interest is in the success of the Saudi and Emirati vision of asserting a more independent and prominent place on the world stage, in keeping with their economic power and privileged place in the Arab world. Muhammad bin Salman, in particular, has embarked on a transformation of the rules and methods that have prevailed in Saudi Arabia for over a hundred years. If he succeeds, the outcome will create a better environment for the Saudi people and a more cohesive society.

However, it will still look very different from what makes the United States or Germany or, for that matter, China tick. This process may succeed or fail and will be determined largely but not solely by internal matters. The outcomes are more likely to contribute to our interest in a thriving global economy and stable Persian Gulf if we work with rather than against them. To its credit, the Biden administration has shifted from a stance of self-defeating lectures to the Saudis, aimed not to alter Saudi behavior but to appease domestic Democratic party constituencies. A more realistic approach in the spirit of partnership and quiet diplomacy is welcome, but there is lost time and deep mistrust still to overcome.

America’s contest with China in the Middle East is about a global balance of power, whether or not Washington is prepared for or seeks it. We should look to our own policy shortcomings, not Chinese strengths, to understand the hedging strategies in the region that Beijing is seeking to exploit. Talking about China’s false promises will take us only so far; helping our partners deal with their own problems, on the basis of true partnership and understanding, will remove some of the roads China uses to promote itself in the Middle East. Doing so does not require a return to large-scale military activity or detract from the pivot; it does demand statecraft, engagement and flexibility.

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