



China's Security Presence in the Middle East

Redlines and Guidelines for the United States

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A Wing Loong II UAV
on display at the Dubai
Airshow in 2019.
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As the United States has increasingly emphasized the global nature of its competition with China, conventional wisdom in America has concluded that when it comes to the Middle East, China benefits greatly from the vast U.S. security architecture.^{*1} Yet while China most certainly benefits from the stability the U.S. architecture provides, its security posture in the region more and more suggests an unwillingness to rely exclusively on this architecture. Indeed, as scholars of China have noted, Chinese military leaders view their “dependence on U.S. military power to ensure their country’s maritime transport, energy supplies, and overseas market access as a profound strategic vulnerability.”^{*2}

^{*}This project owes a great deal to Carol Silber and her incredible research and feedback. Any errors or inaccuracies, however, are the author’s alone.

A year after the U.S. Department of Defense described long-term strategic competition with China as a “principal” priority for the U.S. military, China released its 2019 paper “National Defense in the New Era.”³ The document notes that “international strategic competition is on the rise,” and blames the United States for provoking “intensified competition among major countries.” Spotlighting the need for the Chinese military to protect its overseas interests, the paper describes efforts to build “far seas forces” and develop “overseas logistical facilities” as key to its strategic goals.⁴ Since the release of the paper, Chinese officials have repeatedly emphasized the need to defend the country’s interests abroad. In June 2022, Chinese president Xi Jinping approved a broad set of “trial outlines” that China claims provide the legal basis for an expanded overseas military presence. This expansion is meant, in part, to allow “Chinese troops [to] prevent spillover effects of regional instabilities from affecting China.”⁵

This increased overseas military presence is already apparent in the Middle East, long key to China’s economic interests abroad. Given China’s economic power and the depth of its overseas commercial interests, it was almost inevitable that its military would adopt a more robust presence in the region to secure these interests. A majority of China’s exports to the Middle East, Europe, and Africa flow through the region’s waterways, and the Middle East supplies significant energy resources to the Chinese mainland.⁶ To protect these interests, China has gradually expanded its security presence in the region through a combination of military deployments, investments in critical infrastructure, and arms sales.

China’s first military deployment beyond its near seas was to the Middle East, when it dispatched a three-ship anti-piracy task force to the Gulf of Aden in 2008. The task force, which still operates today, figured in China’s calculation to establish its first overseas military base, in Djibouti in 2017. China’s network of critical infrastructure investments across the region—ports in particular—boosts Chinese commercial shipping while also reportedly providing, in one case, cover for a Chinese security

presence.⁷ While China’s arms sales to the region remain modest in comparison to U.S. and Russian sales, it is increasingly positioning itself as a viable alternative supplier. China has a long history as a regional arms supplier: arms sales by Beijing to both Iraq and Iran during the 1980–88 war reinforced China’s defense industry, elevating it from the seventh largest global arms exporter in 1978 to the fourth ten years later.⁸

This paper explores China’s efforts to overcome its self-perceived strategic vulnerability by augmenting its Middle East security presence. The analysis examines how this security presence equates to a military footprint, investments in critical infrastructure, and efforts to increase arms sales. Finally, the paper describes how this presence challenges U.S. interests in the region, and makes suggestions for how Washington can respond.

The United States, China, and the Middle East

Since U.S. Central Command was established in 1983, America’s relations with the Middle East—and specifically with the Gulf states—have operated under a straightforward unwritten arrangement: Washington would provide the security architecture necessary for stable markets, and the Middle East would keep oil flowing outward at reasonable prices. This arrangement worked for all parties. The United States secured a steady stream of a crucial resource, and the Gulf states could rely on the U.S. security umbrella. This security architecture was invoked when Iraq invaded oil-rich Kuwait in 1991, and again far more expansively following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. While Washington has historically articulated other priorities for the region, with counterterrorism and democratization among them, ensuring the free flow of oil and freedom of maritime navigation remained consistent priorities.

In recent years, this calculus has begun to change. The United States is no longer as reliant on Middle

East oil as it once was. In late 2013, domestic U.S. production of crude oil surpassed imports. By 2020, the United States had become a net exporter of petroleum.⁹ At the same time, two decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan complicated the American people's appetite for entanglements abroad. President Trump's administration pledged to end "endless wars" abroad, while one of the Biden administration's first policy directives called for "right-sizing" the U.S. presence in the Middle East.¹⁰ Israel, for whose sake America occasionally justified its large regional military investment, has never been stronger or as integrated in the region. The Abraham Accords—the 2020 deals signed by Israel with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco—and the absorption of Israel within the CENTCOM area of responsibility from U.S. European Command have opened new possibilities for Israel-Arab cooperation.

As the Middle East has diminished somewhat as a strategic priority for the United States, emerging threats are demanding more of Washington's attention. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has threatened Eastern European security in a way that will demand U.S. focus for the foreseeable future. China's rapid military modernization, aggressive activities in the South China Sea, and intermittently hostile foreign policy has energized successive American administrations to attempt to prioritize Asia. A new era of great power competition, enshrined first by the Trump administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, and then by the Biden administration's Interim National Security Strategy, has become the central organizing principle in the U.S. foreign policy community.

In the Middle East, the U.S.-China competition is already playing out. While perhaps not the primary theater of contest with the United States and the West, Chinese officials view the region as key to establishing a world order more favorable to Beijing. In 2016, one week before Chinese president Xi Jinping visited the Middle East for the first time since taking office, China issued its Arab Policy Paper, which noted that "Arab countries as a whole have become China's biggest supplier of crude oil and the 7th biggest trading partner," and described the Arab

world as "China's important partners in...establishing a new type of international relations with win-win cooperation at its core."¹¹ China's consumption of oil and gas exceeded its domestic production in 1993, and since then China has increasingly been forced to rely on overseas sources to meet demand.¹² China surpassed the United States in crude oil imports globally in 2017, and today is the world's largest importer of oil and gas.¹³ While not exclusively dependent on the region for energy, upwards of 40 percent of China's crude oil imports in 2019 came from the Middle East, more than any other single region.¹⁴

Over the last decade, China has deepened its trade and investment ties to the Middle East, demonstrating the strategic importance of the region to Beijing. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese lending to the Middle East has increased significantly, jumping from \$300 million in 2014 to \$8.8 billion in 2017.¹⁵ From 2014 to 2019, Chinese state-owned companies invested \$21.6 billion in the region. During that same period, construction contracts awarded to Chinese companies in the region totaled \$92.4 billion.¹⁶ Since 2005, Chinese construction contracts in the Middle East have surpassed \$180 billion in value.¹⁷ Today, China is the region's number-one trading partner and a top-three supplier of imports to each of its countries, except Lebanon, where it ranks fourth.¹⁸ Among other infrastructure projects, Chinese companies have invested in ports and industrial parks across the Middle East, including in Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Chinese multinational telecommunications company Huawei has officially partnered with firms in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar to provide 5G infrastructure.¹⁹

These commercial ties have led to enhanced cultural affiliations. Confucius Institutes, which help the Chinese government advance its public image around the world, have branches across the region, including in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan.²⁰ In China, Arabic is taught at more than forty universities, and as many as 50,000 Chinese and foreign students in the country study Arabic and Islamic culture, according to one professor at the Beijing Foreign Studies University.²¹ A 2018 Shanghai

International Studies University report found the rate of Chinese students studying in the Middle East had increased by 21 percent between 2004 and 2016.²² Another study by the university in 2016 found more than 14,000 students from the Middle East currently enrolled in Chinese universities.²³ In Egypt and Saudi Arabia, officials have announced plans to begin offering Chinese-language courses in preparatory schools.²⁴

China's interests in the Middle East and North Africa lie in preserving its economic access, maintaining the free flow of commerce, preventing violent extremism from affecting its equities, and advancing its image as a global power. Some of these goals are compatible with U.S. interests in the region. China values stability, often positioning itself as an independent arbiter helping all parties to advance economic interests in accordance with Beijing's model of "win-win cooperation."²⁵ Like the United States, China seeks stable and secure markets to ensure the free flow of commerce. For instance, China's anti-piracy naval task force, while not operating in conjunction with U.S. or Western naval forces, contributes to the overall security of maritime shipping in the Bab al-Mandab maritime chokepoint.

China's pursuit of other goals in the region often does not comport with longstanding U.S. interests. Most troublingly, China's blending of state-controlled commercial enterprises with military development, commonly referred to as "military-civil fusion," presents unique risks to countries engaging in significant economic transactions with the country. Military-civil fusion involves, broadly, synchronizing China's civilian research and commercial sectors with its military and defense industrial sectors so that "innovations simultaneously advance economic and military development."²⁶ Further, China requires that state-controlled enterprises in specific sectors be prepared to host and service Chinese military assets.²⁷ This effectively blurs the line between its commercial and military presence abroad, and puts countries with commercial agreements with China in the awkward position of potentially supporting the Chinese military. In the Middle East, this conundrum is most visible in Chinese investment in ports and

industrial parks, which—though designed to grow commerce—can also enhance Chinese naval assets and aid China in building out a future military presence. As one Biden administration official testified in August 2021, "The current assessment is that China has a global strategy of pursuing military installations all over, including the Middle East...we warn and discuss with our partners in the Middle East that ultimately Chinese engagement in certain categories will violate their sovereignty."²⁸

The growing Chinese security presence in the Middle East concerns U.S. policymakers for several reasons, the first involving the risk that China could collect information on U.S. troops and equipment in the region. This concern is most pronounced in Djibouti, where China's first overseas base is located mere miles from the U.S. naval base, Camp Lemonnier, and where China has already interfered with U.S. military activity.²⁹ As one Biden administration official put it: "What we discuss with our partners is the expectation that [while] there will be an economic or trade relationship with China, just like the United States has, but there are certain categories of activities or engagement that our partners may be considering with China that if they do will pose a risk to U.S. defense technology, other kinds of technology, and ultimately force protection."³⁰

Another concern for Washington is that through its investment tactics, Beijing may ultimately create enough leverage with U.S. partners in the region to sway them against American interests. This could lead to a decrease in U.S.-partner coordination, an increase in partner cooperation with China, or broader instability stemming from Chinese economic conditions. This is already occurring in parts of Africa, where China has used its investment tactics to gain leverage over host countries, get access to rare minerals, and expand its security influence.³¹ As one U.S. general described it: "I had an African leader tell me a drowning man will reach for any hand."³² This leads to an additional level of risk for the United States: that Chinese debt-trap lending—which has led to turbulence in countries like Sri Lanka—may destabilize weakened economies in the Middle East and trigger broader instability.³³

Overall, China's pursuit of its interests in the Middle East presents both a direct and an indirect challenge to U.S. interests. China's military presence and its arms sales represent a direct challenge. Chinese military deployments to the region have led to the establishment of the Djibouti overseas base and a broader willingness from Beijing to flow in forces abroad, and its arms sales have captured customers in niche markets, forcing direct competition with the United States and other sellers. Indirectly, China's deep economic ties to the region and subsequent investment in critical infrastructure have given it an opportunity to translate its commercial influence into military power projection, potentially threatening regional countries' overall relationship with the United States.

China's Security Presence in the Middle East

China's security presence in the region comprises a traditional military footprint of naval deployments and exercises, arms sales, and critical infrastructure agreements.

Traditional Military Footprint

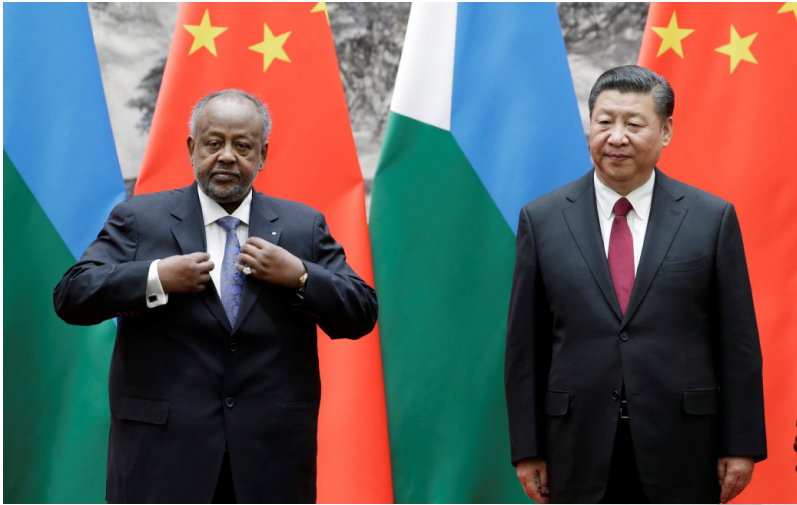
In December 2008, China sent two guided missile destroyers and a support ship to the Gulf of Aden as part of the first wave of its anti-piracy naval task force, marking the first time China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) had participated in operations outside its near seas.³⁴ The previous year, pirates staged more than a hundred attacks against commercial vessels transiting the Gulf. Chinese officials claimed at least seven of those attacks were against Chinese merchant ships.³⁵ In Beijing, repercussions of the global financial crisis, coupled with threats to China's overseas economic interests, led many to argue in favor of a more assertive military posture abroad.³⁶ In its initial deployments, the PLAN task force escorted only Chinese merchant vessels, according to one French naval official, and

did not participate in operations with any other navy in the region.³⁷

China has kept this deployment active, and it now represents China's longest continuous overseas deployment of naval forces.³⁸ Since its initial launch, the composition of PLAN's task force has rarely deviated from two combat ships, typically a destroyer and a frigate, along with one refueling vessel.³⁹ In June 2022, Chinese state media claimed that since the deployment began, PLAN had deployed more than 100 ships and 30,000 service members to escort over 7,000 "merchant ships of China and foreign countries."⁴⁰ At times, the task force has also supported additional missions in the region. Over less than two weeks in 2011, Chinese forces in the region coordinated with civilian entities to evacuate more than 35,000 of its citizens from Libya in a massive air, land, and sea operation that coordinated military assets with civilian aircraft.⁴¹ In 2013, China sent a PLAN ship to support the removal of chemical weapons from Syria, and in 2015 China evacuated more than 200 foreign nationals and 600 Chinese citizens from Yemen's Port of Aden amid heavy fighting.⁴²

Beijing views the task force as a resounding success, in large part due to an overall decrease in piracy throughout the Gulf. From 2012 to 2016, NATO claimed that as a result of its own anti-piracy task force, no successful piracy attacks had been conducted in the Gulf.⁴³ As piracy dropped in the region, so too did China's escort missions. In 2020, China's task force escorted just forty-nine ships, according to a Defense Department report.⁴⁴ The decreased piracy levels and the Chinese perception of task force success presented Beijing with an opportunity to use its continued deployment to project more traditional military power overseas, enhance the prestige of the Chinese military, and support its other economic interests in the Middle East and the African continent.

Given that China's surface fleets in the task force rely on oil tankers for refueling, replenishment became a priority for sustaining the task force's continued deployment. In 2014, China and Djibouti signed



Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh and China's President Xi Jinping take part in a signing ceremony in Beijing, November 23, 2017. REUTERS/Jason Lee



an agreement to allow the Chinese navy to use the Djibouti port for replenishment. A year later, the two countries began negotiating an arrangement to allow China to expand the nearby Doraleh port to include the construction of an adjacent Chinese naval facility.⁴⁵ This is China's first overseas base, as discussed earlier, and China has taken full advantage of it. Since its construction, China has expanded the naval facility's capabilities to potentially dock an aircraft carrier or nuclear submarine, according to U.S. military officials.⁴⁶

China's base in Djibouti and its naval task force are the most prominent features of its military presence in the Middle East and Africa, but China has augmented these features with other military operations, including joint exercises and port calls. In 2014, two PLAN warships made a port call to Iran's Bandar Abbas and conducted joint exercises with the Iranian navy.⁴⁷ In 2016, Chinese special forces hosted their Saudi counterparts for two weeks of exercises, and in 2019 China and Saudi Arabia conducted a three-week joint counter-piracy exercise.⁴⁸ Later that year, a Chinese guided missile destroyer participated in a joint counter-piracy exercise with the Egyptian navy.⁴⁹ In 2020, Chinese forces participated in a Russian military exercise that included Iran and Pakistan, and in 2019 and 2022 the Chinese navy

took part in joint exercises with Iran and Russia in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean.⁵⁰ Since 2010, Chinese ships have made port calls to every Gulf Cooperation Council country as well as to Iran, Egypt, and Israel.⁵¹

The effects of piracy and the massive evacuation from Libya demonstrated both the vulnerability of China's overseas economic interests and the inadequacy of the Chinese military to protect these interests. China's subsequent investment in military operations in the region, along with its establishment of a base, demonstrates its commitment to sustain operations over the long term. China's success in ensuring the security of its commercial shipping in the region has likely reinforced Beijing's willingness to project further power abroad. While modest in comparison to the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East, China has used its military presence to support its primary objectives in the region: advancing its economic interests, boosting its reputation, and increasing its prestige as a military power. Moreover, China's military presence has provided a foundation for increased security cooperation with regional countries—a dynamic that will likely continue as China expands its engagement in the Middle East.

Critical Infrastructure Agreements

In 2018, Israel awarded the Shanghai International Port Group a twenty-five-year contract to operate the Haifa Bayport. Under the agreement, the terminal operations company, majority-controlled by the Chinese government, is allowed to manage the Bayport terminal through an Israeli company.⁵² The agreement set off alarms in Washington: here was the closest U.S. partner in the region signing a major infrastructure agreement with a key U.S. global adversary, at a location frequented by the U.S. Navy. In 2020, Israel rejected a U.S. offer to conduct a security review of the port.⁵³ During a visit to Israel in 2021, Central Intelligence Agency director William Burns reportedly raised U.S. concerns about major Chinese investment in Israel, such as the Haifa port.⁵⁴ Later that year, Israeli defense sources sounded a more conciliatory tone, noting the Israeli navy would take action to keep its platforms in the Haifa port protected against “suspected foreign eyes and ears.”⁵⁵

The concern over what appeared, on paper at least, to be an innocuous agreement between a company and a country reflects deeper distrust of China’s overseas investment strategy. China’s blending of private companies with government control, as discussed earlier, allows it to use overseas projects as a potential bridge to hard power. Chinese regulations—in particular, the 2010 National Defense Mobilization Law and the 2016 National Defense Transportation Law—require Chinese companies abroad be prepared to provide support to Chinese forces globally.⁵⁶ These regulations stipulate that “the military, if necessary, can station military representatives in relative transportation enterprises,” essentially meaning that China can choose to embed military personnel in civilian firms overseas in order to coordinate military operations.⁵⁷

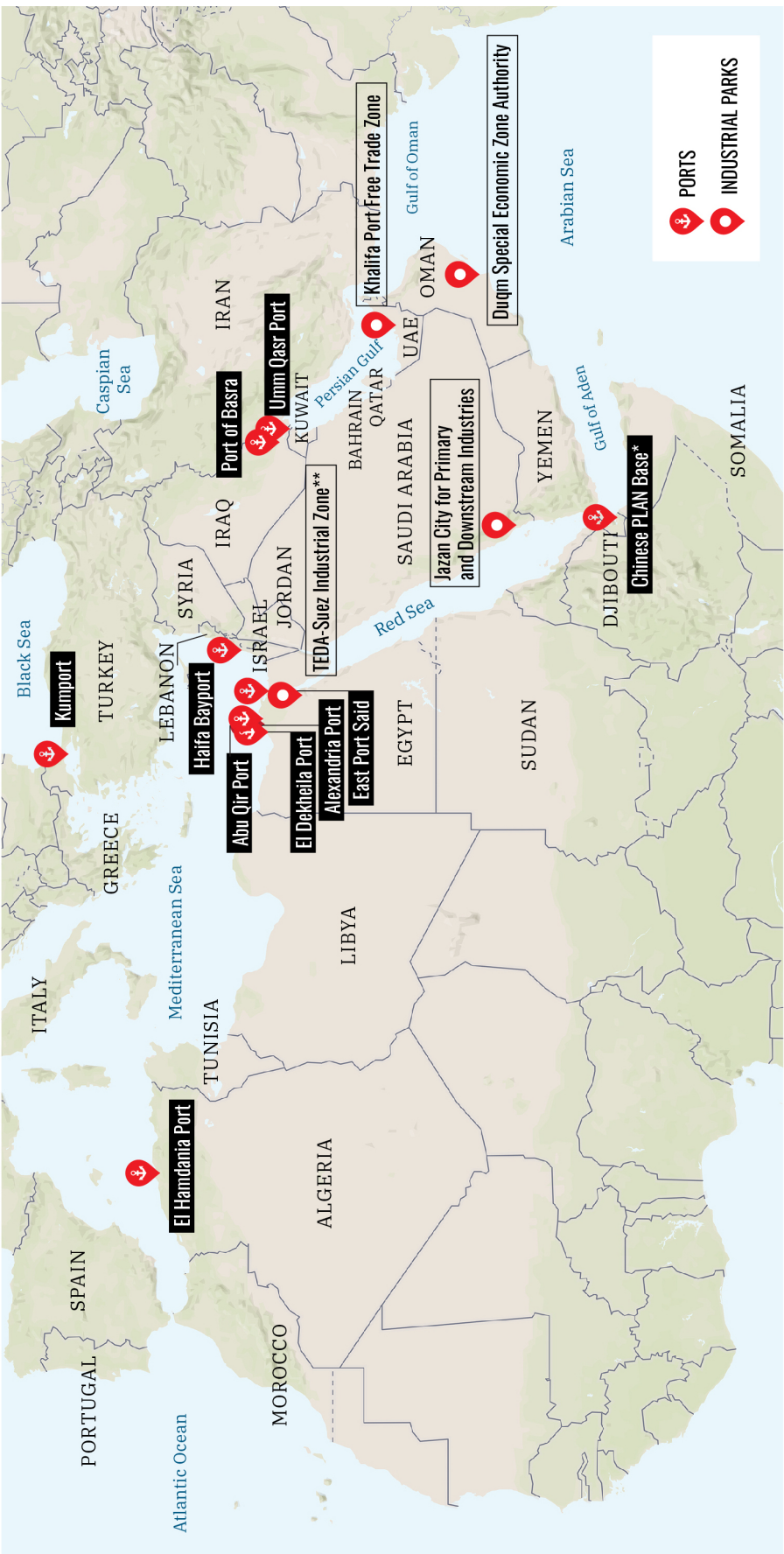
Chinese military strategists see overseas civilian investment in ports as a cost-effective way to support military operations without building large bases and risking geopolitical backlash (see figure 1).⁵⁸ China can claim that because it has not built a network of

global bases, it lacks the same global military aspirations as the United States, even though by increasing its network of modernized ports, it effectively achieves the same outcome. Some Chinese officials have been candid about their goals, describing overseas investments as “opportunities for firms to participate in or service military operations.”⁵⁹ For instance, initial drafts of China’s negotiations with Sri Lanka over operating the Hambantota port left open the possibility of China placing military assets at the port. Only after Indian officials intervened did Sri Lanka insert a clause barring China from using the port for military purposes without permission from Sri Lankan authorities.⁶⁰

A review of Chinese sources reveals that Beijing has depicted several overseas ports as potential “strategic strongpoints” it might use to provide future support to military forces abroad.⁶¹ China’s 2013 “Science of Military Strategy” document called for building “strategic strongpoints that rely on mainland, radiate out into the periphery, and go into the two oceans, providing support for military operations of serving as a forward base for the deployment of military forces overseas, as well as exerting political and military influence in relevant regions.”⁶² A Biden administration official has said that China’s investments in ports “are made cautiously and with an eye toward their future potential for military access,” and “top Chinese officials have privately told foreign delegations that these port projects are built as dual-use because China expects it will use them in the future for military purposes.”⁶³ In 2022, the *Economist* noted that Chinese firms either “partly or wholly” own more than ninety ports worldwide.⁶⁴

In the Middle East, Chinese government-backed entities have invested in several critical ports along the “Maritime Silk Road” connecting China to Europe. Chinese firms have also financed industrial parks in Egypt along the Suez Canal and in Oman at the Port of Duqm.⁶⁵ In 2020, Egypt signed a memorandum of understanding with the Hong Kong-based firm Hutchison Ports—which already operates Egyptian ports in Alexandria and El Dekheila—to operate a container terminal at the Abu

Figure 1. Notable Chinese Investments in Middle East and North Africa Ports and Industrial Parks



*PLAN refers to People's Liberation Army Navy

**TEDA refers to Tianjin Economic-Technological Development Area, an industrial zone in China with a branch in Egypt

Qir Naval Base along Egypt's Mediterranean coast.⁶⁶ More than 1,500 Chinese companies are currently active in Egypt, and China is the largest user of the Suez Canal.⁶⁷ In the UAE, a transit hub for almost two-thirds of Chinese exports to Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, the China Ocean Shipping Company was awarded a thirty-five-year concession in 2018 to operate and develop a new container terminal at the al-Khalifa port.⁶⁸ In 2021, Hutchison Ports secured a deal with Saudi Arabia to operate the Jazan port along the Red Sea.⁶⁹ In Turkey, a consortium of Chinese firms purchased a controlling stake in 2015 in the Kumport Terminal within the Ambarli port outside Istanbul.⁷⁰ In Algeria, Chinese firms have financed the construction of the port of El Hamdania in exchange for twenty-five years of operating rights.⁷¹

In spring of 2021, amid talks to sell the most advanced U.S. military aircraft—the F-35—to the UAE, American officials reportedly learned that China was using its presence at the Emirates' al-Khalifa port industrial park to construct a suspected military facility.⁷² The U.S. Defense Department had consistently warned that China was eyeing the UAE as a potential location for its next overseas base, given ties between the countries and the strategic importance al-Khalifa served to advance China's economic interests in the region and beyond.⁷³ The discovery disrupted negotiations

over the F-35 sale. Despite the UAE's halting of Chinese construction later that year, talks nevertheless collapsed shortly afterward. Soon after, the UAE announced it would purchase Chinese L-15 light attack advanced jet trainers.⁷⁴ The secret facility manifested Washington's darkest suspicions about Chinese port investments abroad, which by their very nature can be used as quasi-bases for the Chinese military.

Ports represent the nearest-term realization of China's ability to blend civilian investment with military presence, but they are not the only critical infrastructure Chinese investment is shaping in the region. Over the past seventeen years, China has invested billions of dollars in infrastructure projects throughout the Middle East. Since 2005, Chinese firms have signed \$36.8 billion in construction contracts in Saudi Arabia, \$29.1 billion in the UAE, \$21.8 billion in Iran, \$18.8 billion in Egypt, \$18.1 billion in Iraq, \$4.5 billion in Jordan, and \$2.75 billion in Israel.⁷⁵ While these projects are not always directly linked to China's so-called military-civilian fusion, they further entrench the country's interests in hard infrastructure in the region. Further, they could potentially allow cover for a future security presence, as China may invoke the need to protect these investments through private security companies or even a traditional military deployment.



UAE minister of state Sultan Ahmed al-Jaber meets with Chinese official Huang Lixin to sign a cooperation deal in Abu Dhabi, UAE, July 31, 2017. REUTERS/Stringer

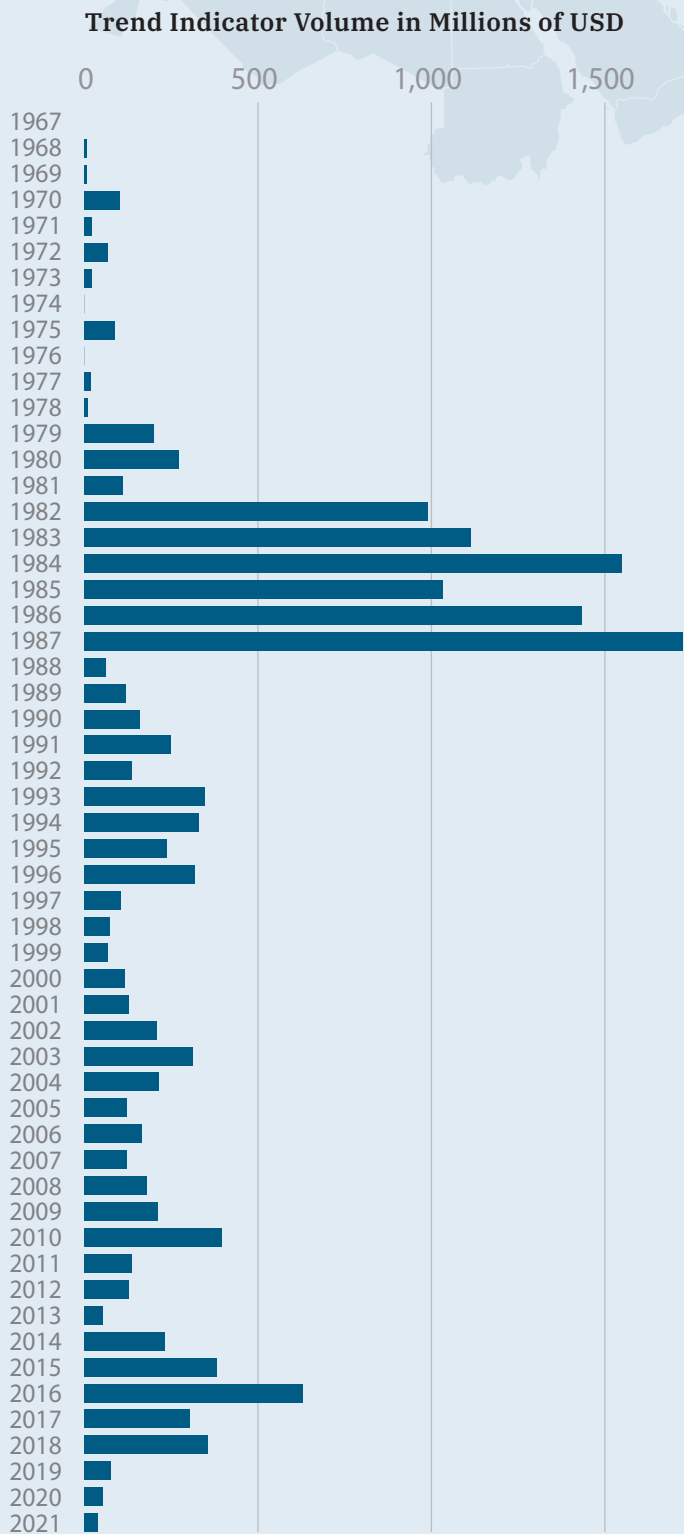
Arms Sales

Like the United States and other arms exporters, China advances both its commercial and security interests through weapons sales. In the Middle East, arms sales support China's efforts to protect its overseas interests in several ways. They advance China's own defense industrial base, boost the prestige of Chinese materiel, serve as an inroad for potential military cooperation, and provide an alternative supply of arms to longstanding U.S. partners. For countries that have grown weary of long waiting times, U.S. restrictions, and oversight, Chinese military equipment and arms systems are increasingly attractive.

Historically, the Middle East has proven a lucrative market for Chinese arms (see figure 2). During the Iran-Iraq War, China sold both countries the same fighter jets, the F-6 and F-7, as well as tanks, armored personnel carriers, and a range of missile systems.⁷⁶ China also found a willing customer in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s, selling the kingdom fifty Dong Feng-3 intermediate-range ballistic missiles.⁷⁷ By the end of the Cold War, China was the fourth largest global exporter of arms, with a sizable portion headed to the Middle East.⁷⁸ However, the collapse of the Soviet Union coupled with the swift defeat of the heavily Soviet-equipped Iraqi military in the 1991 Gulf War diminished the availability and appeal of Soviet materiel in the global arms market, and China's arms exports—which also relied on Soviet supply—decreased as well. (See figures 3 and 4 for China's arms sales compared with other powers, and for the breakdown of China's clients.)

Figure 2.

China's Arms Exports to the Middle East and North Africa, 1967–2021



Source: Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute, accessed August 2022

Figure 3.

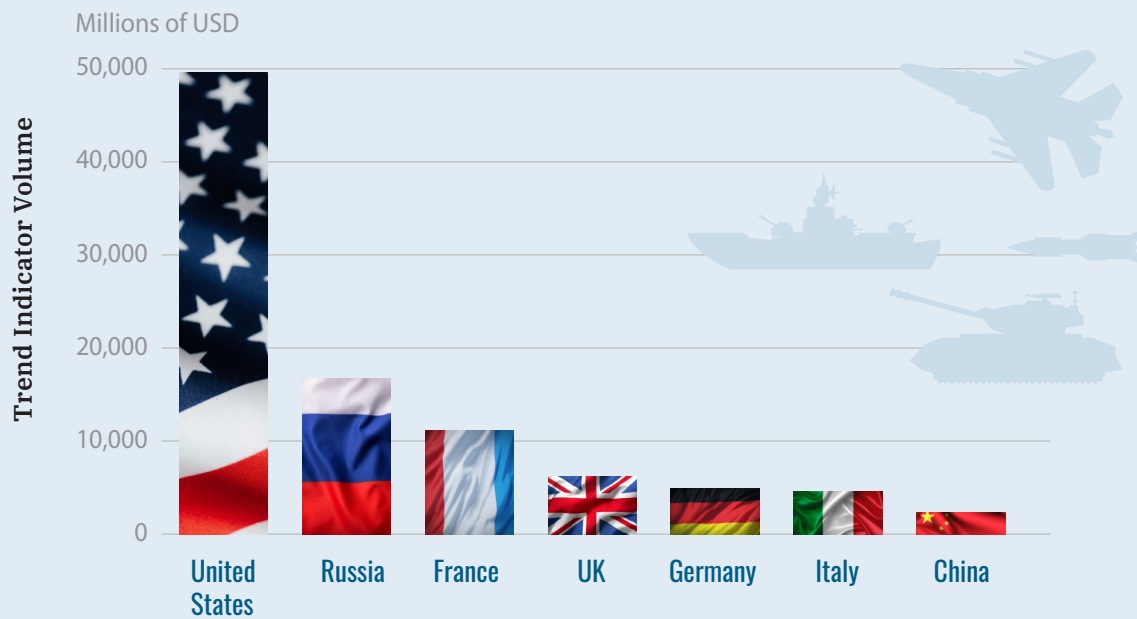
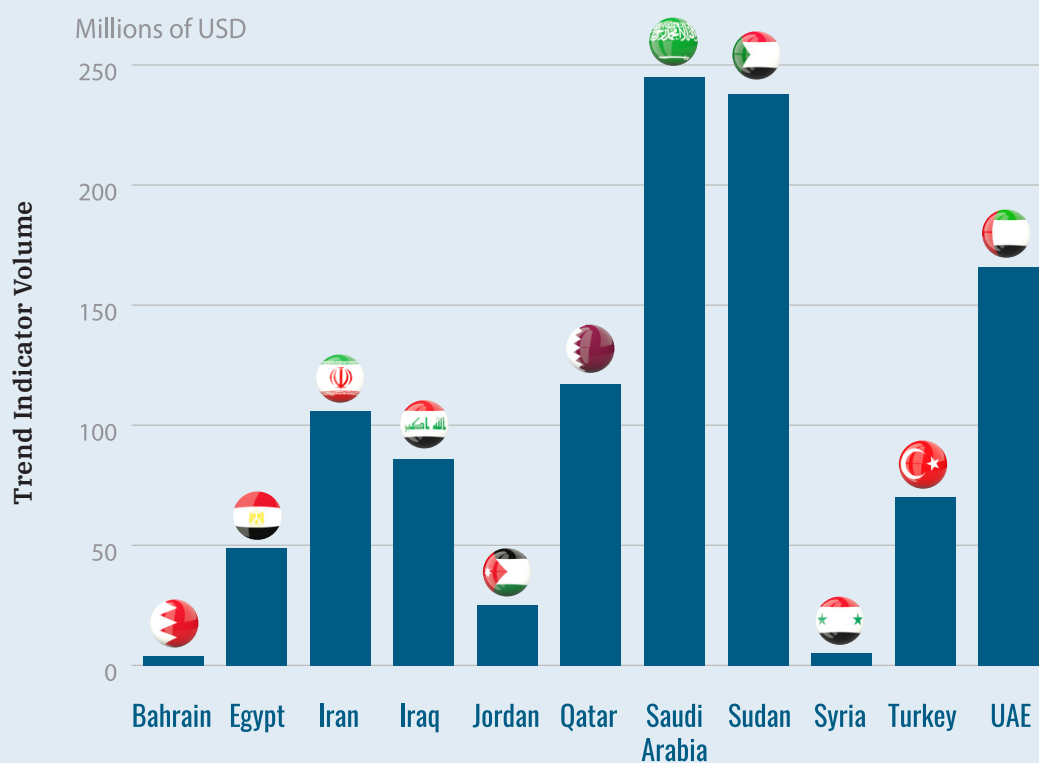
Top Arms Exporters to the Middle East and North Africa, 2011–21

Figure 4.

Purchases of Chinese Arms, 2011–21

Source: Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute, accessed August 2022

As China's own defense industry has developed and as its global aspirations have grown, Beijing has made a concerted effort to further vary its arms exports. The U.S. Defense Department noted in 2019 that China had become "the world's fastest-growing arms supplier during the past 15 years."⁷⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, China typically exported missiles and land-based systems.⁸⁰ In recent years, however, China has increasingly exported aircraft, ships, and advanced missile systems. In the Middle East, China has targeted a small niche market: armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The United States has traditionally been reticent to supply armed UAVs to customers in the region, and Russia does not have a popular armed UAV it markets successfully to the region. China has met the demand among Middle East customers for such systems, supplying them to U.S. adversaries and partners alike.

Among the first Chinese armed UAVs to appear in the region was the Cai Hong-4, a medium-altitude, long-endurance UAV that comes in two primary models, one focused on reconnaissance (CH-4A) and one capable of conducting airstrikes (CH-4B).⁸¹ China's exports of the CH-4 were prolific at first. Between 2014 and 2016, Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia purchased the CH-4B; in 2017, Algeria purchased the CH-4A.⁸² The UAV demonstrated mixed performance, however. According to the U.S. Defense Department, Iraq had to sideline its fleet of twenty CH-4Bs in the middle of its anti-Islamic State campaign after eight crashed and China was tardy in providing parts for the twelve others.⁸³ Algeria's CH-4 fleet was likewise prone to crashing.⁸⁴ Jordan, which purchased the CH-4 after the Obama administration denied the kingdom's requests to buy the U.S. Predator UAV, almost immediately put its squadron of CH-4s up for sale.⁸⁵ A 2020 report indicated that they may have sold to the Libyan National Army faction under Khalifa Haftar.⁸⁶

China has also had success selling the more advanced Wing Loong series of UAVs to the region. Like the CH-4, the Wing Loong I and II series are medium-altitude, long-endurance platforms that can be armed to support long-range precision strike

missions.⁸⁷ In the region to date, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have purchased the Wing Loong.⁸⁸ This drone's long-range precision strike capability has made it particularly useful to countries engaged in expeditionary warfare. The UAE has purchased the Wing Loong I and II and has reportedly fielded them in Yemen, Libya, and Eritrea.⁸⁹ Egypt, which has bought dozens of the Wing Loong I, has reportedly deployed the UAV along its border with Libya.⁹⁰ Nearly all these UAV sales have come with associated sales of Chinese precision missiles. Egypt's purchase of the Wing Loongs came with hundreds of Blue Arrow-7 antitank missiles and TL-2 antiship missiles.⁹¹ The UAE's purchase of the Wing Loong II was accompanied by an order for approximately five hundred Blue Arrow-7 missiles. Iraq's purchase of the Ch-4B was joined by an order for approximately one hundred FT-9 precision-guided munitions.⁹²

China has used the success of UAV sales to expand its defense relationships with countries around the world. Serbia, which purchased nearly \$20 million worth of Chinese UAVs in 2020, recently received a battery of the Chinese HQ-22 medium-to-long-range air defense system.⁹³ Serbia's purchase of Chinese UAVs represented China's first export of military aircraft to Europe.⁹⁴ Saudi Arabia, which has purchased both the CH-4 and Wing Loong, recently showcased the Chinese HQ-17 air defense system in its arsenal, and the two countries have announced plans to jointly manufacture UAVs.⁹⁵ Additionally, reports emerged in 2021 that Saudi Arabia was domestically producing ballistic missiles with China's technological support.⁹⁶ The UAE, likewise, announced in early 2022 that it would be complementing its Chinese UAVs by purchasing the aforementioned Chinese L-15 trainer jet.⁹⁷ Emirati and Chinese firms have also set up a joint UAV research and development project in Abu Dhabi.⁹⁸ And as drones have proliferated on Middle East battlefields, China has also marketed its own mobile, counter-UAV system, the Silent Hunter, which it exhibited at the Dubai air show in 2021.⁹⁹ Here, too, the United States is at a disadvantage, as it lacks a comparable platform to export to the region, despite the demand.



A Wing Loong model presented at the Egypt Defence Expo, Cairo, November 30, 2021. REUTERS/Mohamed Abd El Ghany

The United States continues to hold the advantage in post-sale maintenance and sustainment of its military platforms. As demonstrated by the moribund fleet of CH-4s sold by China to Iraq, many recipients of Chinese arms regularly complain about not only their quality but also about the bloated costs and complications involved in maintaining them. Thailand's 2017 purchase of a Chinese Yuan-class submarine has repeatedly stalled due to China's inability to source German engines for the boat.¹⁰⁰ Bangladesh took delivery of two Chinese frigates in 2019 with defective navigation and weapon systems, which China reportedly offered to fix—for a price.¹⁰¹ Analysts have noted that China's arms sales tactics rely in part on marketing at a lower initial price with hidden post-sale costs.¹⁰²

Despite these complications, the market for Chinese arms and technology in the Middle East is likely to grow in the coming years. China is increasingly willing to provide critical military support to key partners in the region. Russia's invasion of Ukraine,

and the subsequent sanctions on the Russian defense industry, will likely diminish Moscow's ability to continue to export arms globally. This will create an opportunity for China's arms exports around the world, but in particular in the Middle East, which trails only Asia in arms purchases.¹⁰³ China can offer potential customers a less expensive product that arrives faster and with minimal political interference, a feature of China's supposed "win-win cooperation." Traditional U.S. partners will likely turn to China for the same reasons they turned to Russia for arms in the past: faster deliveries, fewer obligations regarding their use, and cheaper prices. Additionally, some are likely to use the prospect of Chinese arms deals as leverage with Washington. China sees arms as a straightforward way to enhance security cooperation with countries around the world; the 2015 white paper on Chinese strategy calls on the military to conduct dialogues with foreign militaries on "services and arms building" while strengthening "material assistance" and cooperation in "equipment and technology" with the goal of deepening these ties.¹⁰⁴

Redlines for the United States

Not all of China's relationships in the region will look the same. To craft a response that both meets the China challenge and preserves strong ties with partners in the region, the United States must accurately assess the type of Chinese security presence and its associated risks to U.S. security interests. China's security presence in the Middle East generally covers five levels of risk to U.S. security interests, each associated with China's varying levels of engagement with particular countries, both in its security presence as well as in its future relationship with the countries and the region (see figure 5 for a graphic representation).

The first level of risk—the standard level associated with any country in which both the United States and China have some type of presence—is characterized by modest Chinese investment in the country's economy and minor arms sales. At this level, embodied, for example, by Jordan, the relationship with China tends to be innocuous. China has invested in Jordanian infrastructure projects such as the Attarat Power Plant, and has even sold the kingdom UAVs. But Jordan almost immediately put those UAVs up for sale, and Jordanian officials regularly complain about the terms of the Attarat deal. Even today, some officials note that the king has an informal ban on major Chinese investment in the country. Jordan, then, has largely calibrated its commercial relationship with China to serve its economic interests without jeopardizing its national security and, by extension, its defense relationship with Washington. The United States can therefore continue to deepen its defense relationship with Jordan without serious concern about Chinese interference. While Jordan may be an outlier, the United States can assume that most countries in the Middle East will have at least this level of relationship with China.

More enhanced cooperation with China leads to the

second level of risk the United States must navigate in competing with its rival: one focused on information protection, or the worry that China's economic relationship with the host country will allow it to collect information on U.S. military platforms and personnel. Nowhere is this concern more tangible than in Huawei's role in supplying regional cell phone networks. In 2019, the United States banned American companies from using federal subsidies to purchase components from Huawei, and in 2021 the U.S. Department of Commerce opened a probe into Huawei assets near U.S. bases stateside.¹⁰⁵ Fears center on the prospect that these Huawei assets may be used to collect information on the United States, which in turn might be handed over to the Chinese government, as dictated by Chinese law. The United States likewise pressured Britain to divest from Huawei in its 5G networks, in part to protect U.S. personnel and proprietary defense information in future F-35 deployments to British bases.¹⁰⁶ Several countries in the Middle East with a Huawei presence also host U.S. forces, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This level of risk drove the July 2022 agreement with Saudi Arabia to collaborate with U.S. firms on 5G and 6G research, a potential avenue to box out Huawei in Saudi Arabia's 5G (and later 6G) networks.¹⁰⁷ While this level of risk is broadly assumed whenever the United States stages forces around the world, it is heightened in places where China has an increased technological presence owing to the dual-use nature of its commercial entities.

A third level of risk involves the likelihood that a country's economic relationship with China might lead to an enhanced security relationship, and that China might leverage this relationship at the expense of the country's defense relationship with the United States. This could manifest itself in several ways, including a potential decrease in security cooperation with America. Such a level of risk applies to the U.S.-UAE defense relationship. The F-35 negotiations collapsed over two issues: the presence of Huawei in the UAE's cell phone networks and the reported construction of the secret Chinese military installation at al-Khalifa port. In this instance, China's long-standing economic ties to the UAE led to a deepened

Figure 5.

Levels of Risk to U.S. Security Interests from China's Presence in the Middle East and North Africa

Risk Level	Characteristics	Examples
First	Moderate Chinese economic investment and potentially some security coordination/arms sales	Jordan
Second	Chinese economic presence and security coordination/arms sales, creating risk to proprietary U.S. defense information	Saudi Arabia
Third	Chinese economic and military relationship with a country deepens, potentially precluding closer security coordination with U.S.	UAE
Fourth	China's economic and military relationship becomes country's top priority, pushing U.S. out of country's security orbit	—
Fifth	China becomes the security partner of choice for multiple countries in the region	—

security relationship, and this relationship ultimately torpedoed the F-35 sale. Shortly after these negotiations failed, as discussed before, the UAE announced that it would purchase the Chinese L-15 trainer jet, a platform specifically designed to acquaint pilots with Chinese avionics for future fighter jet purchases. Here was a nascent Chinese military installation nested within an economic relationship that was directly contributing to a crisis in a country's defense relationship with the United States.

In a fourth level of risk, a country's deepening economic and security ties with China causes it to gradually drift out of the U.S. security orbit. This could emerge in several different ways, likely starting with a robust economic relationship with China that evolves into purchasing Chinese arms and potentially hosting Chinese security forces. The purchases may follow the emerging Chinese model of starting with sales of UAVs and missiles before evolving into air defense systems and aircraft. China may be granted access to military installations in the country or be able to flow in its own assets to local ports. The country, in turn, may look to China first for

its procurements, joint exercises, and military cooperation. At this stage in a country's security relationship with China, the United States could reasonably conclude that it is no longer the "preferred partner of choice."

Finally, in a fifth level of risk, should China sway traditional partners from the U.S. security orbit, the People's Republic may be able to marshal the countries of the Middle East against American interests. This level is the most remote possibility in the region, but it is still worth considering. A scenario in which the United States disengages diplomatically from the region, coupled with any potential drawdown of U.S. forces and an overall weakening of U.S. reliance on Middle East oil—as well as with growing Chinese relationships with both U.S. partners and adversaries alike—creates a hypothetical future in which China's voice in the region could match or even exceed that of the United States. Such a scenario, while unlikely in the near term, poses great risk with regard to U.S. global competition with China.

Guidelines for the United States

Ultimately, many countries will view this era of great power competition as an opportunity to play the United States and China against each other to maximize their own gains. They will view relationships with both the United States and China as a “hedge” should either power emerge stronger. Defense relationships in the Middle East and North Africa—home to some of the world’s largest arms importers—will become complicated as some countries decide to procure weapons from both parties. Yet weapons sales demonstrate a degree of bilateral cooperation and trust that reverberates in the diplomatic realm; a country’s defense purchases are often the first signs of a potential change in its geopolitical orientation. In order to compete diplomatically with China in the region, the United States must also compete in the field of security cooperation. To do so, U.S. officials should consider the following:

Expediently identify and convey the risks a relationship with China may have on security cooperation with the United States. Without doubt, some countries in the region will seek to balance between security cooperation with the United States—in the form of security commitments, procurement, joint exercises, and intelligence sharing—and a closer relationship with China. As the UAE example shows, however, there are limits to this balancing act. Countries that partner with Huawei in their 5G networks, purchase advanced Chinese platforms, and allow secret Chinese military installations likely present too much risk to acquire the most advanced U.S. weaponry. Washington should make that point repeatedly to partners in the region looking to deepen their ties to China.

Reverse the decision to downgrade general officer/flag officer defense-attaché billets. The 2017 U.S. National Defense Authorization Act

mandated the Defense Department to reduce its corps of generals and admirals from 963 to 852 starting in 2023.¹⁰⁸ Reports over the 2022 summer indicated the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was recommending fulfilling this requirement by downgrading senior defense official/defense attaché (SDO/DATT) positions around the world, many of whom are one- or two-star generals.¹⁰⁹ This is an inexplicable decision in an era of great power competition, where the global U.S. network of security relationships is a clear, but not guaranteed, advantage. SDO/DATTs are the frontline in maintaining this network of global military partnerships. Replacing a brigadier general with a colonel in a country where China might have a brigadier general, for example, risks sending an unintentional message of U.S. withdrawal, especially in a Middle East environment already skeptical of American commitment. Instead, the Defense Department should look to the services or combatant commands to reduce the requisite number of billets.

Identify and dual-track platforms to export to the region. In the region today, most U.S. partners seek advanced air defense platforms to address the threat of UAVs and missile strikes. U.S. partners also complain that American arms transfers take too long, burdened by a byzantine export process. The United States has an effective counter-UAV platform in the region, the counter-rocket, artillery, and mortar system (C-RAM), but does not export it widely. Instead, the United States has provided Patriot batteries to select countries. But given that a single Patriot interceptor runs into the millions of dollars, the cost of shooting down UAVs can quickly become disproportionate.¹¹⁰ The United States lacks a mobile, cost-effective counter-UAV platform ready for export—the closest is perhaps a prototype currently being developed by the U.S. Army.¹¹¹ China and Russia, however, do have counter-UAV platforms that, though of dubious quality, are aggressively marketed to the Middle East.¹¹² To better compete in this space, the United States needs to identify critical platforms designed for partners around the world—specifically defensive platforms—and dual-track their development for potential export.

Increase senior-level visits to the Middle East.

One way to counter the narrative of U.S. withdrawal from the region is by increasing senior-level visits, making them more comparable with officials' stays in other regions. Visits demonstrate principal-level commitment and attention and create opportunities for deepened cooperation. As of July 2022, President Biden has visited Europe four times and the Middle East only once. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has visited Europe almost twenty times, but the Middle East six, while Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has visited Europe seven times and the Middle East three. Undoubtedly, the war in Ukraine is at least partially to blame for this imbalance. Yet high-level visits are an important barometer of Washington's investment in a relationship. If the administration wants to convince its partners in the region that its presence involves more than boots on the ground, it needs to show up in other ways.

Explore possibilities of coproduction with select partners.

Many countries around the world seek to develop their own defense industrial base in order to diminish their reliance on foreign suppliers. But this process requires technological sharing and cooperation from an arms exporting supplier. The United States has long been reticent to share its technology in the region out of concern for losing proprietary information. Yet it has at times partnered with countries in the region to manufacture arms: Israel has produced airframe and wing components and conformal fuel tanks for F-16, F-15, and F-35 aircraft, and the United States and Egypt previously coproduced the M1A1 Abrams tank. Other U.S. partners in the region seek these types of arrangements. Saudi Arabia and China have agreed to jointly manufacture UAVs, and the UAE and Russia have agreed in the

past to jointly develop advanced fighters.¹¹³ The uneven U.S. willingness to coproduce platforms is a sore spot for regional U.S. partners looking to advance their own economies. The United States and its defense industry have ample means to counter China in this space, but will require strict conditions and protections in order to prevent any information leaking. U.S. officials should explore the possibilities of potential arrangements while also advising potential recipients of the specific agreements necessary in order to proceed.

Conclusion

China's presence in the region has mirrored its rise as a global power. What began as a strategy to advance its economic interests has gradually evolved to include an increasingly expansive array of military-security interactions with Middle East and North Africa countries. Today, China has put in place the infrastructure for deeper security ties in the region. As competition between the United States and China ramps up, the region will again be a key arena. As Gen. Michael E. Kurilla of U.S. Central Command remarked in July 2022: "This region is at the center of America's strategic competition with Russia and China."¹¹⁴ To avoid turbulence with longstanding U.S. partners in the region, the United States must establish and communicate to them what it sees as the acceptable parameters of their security relationships with China. In doing so, Washington can avoid unnecessary escalation with China, maintain its regional network of defense partnerships, and find a way toward a sustainable long-term presence in the Middle East and North Africa. ❖

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