
The competition of emerging powers (China and Russia) in the Middle East: Threat or opportunity for regional stability

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Abstract

The shifting geometry of the global order has catalyzed a profound geopolitical realignment in the Middle East, characterized by the intensified engagement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. This paper examines whether the increasing structural footprint of these Eurasian powers constitutes a systemic threat to regional stability or a strategic opportunity for multi-vector balancing by Middle Eastern states. Employing a Neorealist theoretical framework, this study utilizes a qualitative analytical methodology to dissect the foreign policy trajectories of Beijing and Moscow. The analysis reveals a distinct bifurcation in strategic execution: while China systematically leverages economic statecraft and infrastructure integration to secure energy corridors and build regional influence, Russia predominantly assumes a disruptive, security-centric posture to counter Western hegemony and project asymmetric power. Consequently, the Sino-Russian presence generates a dual structural effect within the regional subsystem. It inherently destabilizes the pre-existing unipolar security architecture by escalating great-power competition, yet simultaneously furnishes regional middle powers with unprecedented diplomatic flexibility and strategic autonomy. This paper argues that while the transition toward multipolarity mitigates the constraints of hegemonic coercion, the resultant overlapping spheres of Eurasian influence significantly amplify the probability of localized proxy conflicts and systemic miscalculations.

Keywords: Middle East, Multipolarity, Neorealism, Great Power Competition, Sino-Russian Relations, Strategic Balancing, Geo-economics.

1. Introduction

The Middle East presently resides at the epicenter of a historic transition within the international system, shifting away from an era defined by unquestioned United States unipolarity toward a highly complex multipolar order. At the core of this systemic transformation is the accelerating multidimensional influence of China and Russia, two revisionist powers actively seeking to reshape the global geopolitical architecture and challenge Western primacy (Daraj, 2025). As these Eurasian actors deepen their diplomatic, economic, and military footprints across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, a critical debate has emerged regarding the structural implications of their involvement. Specifically, this research investigates the central question: How do the competing and complementary strategies of China and Russia in the Middle East impact regional stability, and do they constitute a systemic threat or a structural opportunity for regional actors?

To address this inquiry rigorously, this study adopts a Neorealist theoretical framework, which posits that state behavior is fundamentally dictated by the anarchic structure of the international system and the perpetual imperative for survival through power maximization and strategic balancing (Nouri, 2020). From this structural realist perspective, the Middle East represents a vital geostrategic theater where great-power competition manifests primarily as a concerted effort to counter the extant hegemon and redistribute global power configurations (Monem, 2024). Recent scholarship highlights the crystallization of a "New Great Game," wherein the United States, China, and Russia vie for paramount influence, thereby establishing new paradigms of interaction that reverberate from the Levant through the Persian Gulf and into Central Asia (Komila & Uvraimov, 2025; Tariq et al., 2026).

However, the prevailing academic literature remains intensely fractured regarding the net effect of this multipolar competition. While some scholars emphasize the inherently conflictual and destabilizing nature of these overlapping great-power interests, others suggest that Chinese economic engagement and Russian security guarantees offer Middle Eastern states essential levers for multi-vector diplomacy and regional balancing (Mason, 2023; Rhoades et al., 2023; Wasser et al., 2022). Furthermore, the operational dynamics between Moscow and Beijing in the region are not strictly cooperative or monolithic; their strategies occasionally exhibit profound friction, presenting unique geopolitical challenges and asymmetric opportunities for regional actors attempting to navigate this tripartite rivalry (Afrasiaban & Deghani Firouzabadi, 2025).

This paper navigates these theoretical tensions by synthesizing recent regional literature to provide a nuanced, evidence-based assessment of Sino-Russian engagement. The subsequent sections are structured as follows: Section 2 critically maps the intellectual contours of the existing literature and explicitly positions the neorealist framework within the current scholarly debate. Section 3 provides the core analytical discussion, applying the theoretical model to dissect the divergent methodologies of China's economic pragmatism and Russia's security opportunism, while evaluating their localized and systemic impacts. Finally, Section 4 synthesizes the analytical findings, discusses the broader implications for international relations theory, and charts actionable pathways for future empirical research.

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

The contemporary academic discourse surrounding the geopolitical architecture of the Middle East is increasingly defined by the systemic transition from unipolarity to competitive multipolarity (Daraj, 2025). The literature examining this structural shift is robust, complex, and highly debated, reflecting the multifaceted nature of Eurasian engagement in a region historically dominated by Western hegemonic structures. By categorizing the existing scholarship, identifying theoretical gaps, and establishing a rigorous Neorealist foundation, this section maps the intellectual contours of the current debate and operationalizes the framework for subsequent analysis.

2.1. Mapping the Scholarly Discourse: Threat versus Opportunity

Within the current academic literature, scholars broadly bifurcate into two primary analytical camps regarding the structural implications of Eurasian powers penetrating the Middle East, alongside a third, emerging perspective focusing on the internal cohesion of the Sino-Russian alignment itself.

The first scholarly camp interprets this "New Great Game" as an inherently conflictual and destabilizing phenomenon. Scholars in this tradition emphasize the escalating friction between the United States, China, and Russia as they compete for dominance over critical energy corridors, maritime chokepoints, and regional alliances (Komila & Uvraimov, 2025; Tariq et al., 2026). From this perspective, the overlapping strategic interests of these great powers significantly increase the probability of localized conflicts and systemic miscalculations across the region. Analysts argue that as Washington attempts to counter Beijing's economic expansion and Moscow's military footprint, the resulting friction creates volatile security dilemmas that regional actors are ill-equipped to manage (Rhoades et al., 2023; Wasser et al., 2022).

Conversely, a second scholarly camp views this multipolar transition through the lens of structural opportunity, hedging, and regional balancing. This literature suggests that the shifting geometry of the global order allows regional actors to maneuver against Western hegemonic constraints, thereby increasing their strategic autonomy and diplomatic flexibility (Daraj, 2025; Nouri, 2020). For instance, China's reliance on economic statecraft and infrastructure investment is frequently characterized as a stabilizing mechanism that prioritizes regional development and commercial connectivity over zero-sum military entanglements (Mason, 2023).

A third, synthesizing branch of the literature examines the nature of the Eurasian convergence itself. The burgeoning economic and strategic cooperation between Beijing and Moscow, heavily catalyzed by Western sanctions and the Ukraine conflict, has created a formidable, albeit complex, Eurasian bloc (Azin & Jalayi, 2024; Kaveh Baghbaderani, 2024). However, scholars note that this alignment is born of pragmatic necessity rather than ideological uniformity, resulting in occasional strategic friction between China's risk-averse commercial approach and Russia's disruptive security posture (Afrasiaban & Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2025).

Table 1: Typology of Scholarly Perspectives on Eurasian Middle East Engagement

Scholarly Camp	Core Argument regarding Systemic Impact	Key Mechanisms Identified	Representative Scholarship
Destabilization & Conflict	The multipolar transition exacerbates regional volatility and proxy warfare.	Security dilemmas, zero-sum great power competition, overlapping zones of influence.	Rhoades et al. (2023); Wasser et al. (2022); Tariq et al. (2026)
Opportunity & Autonomy	The presence of alternative powers dilutes US hegemony, allowing regional states to balance.	Multi-vector diplomacy, economic diversification, alternative security guarantees.	Daraj (2025); Nouri (2020); Mason (2023)
Eurasian Convergence	China and Russia form a pragmatic bloc to counter the West, but their localized interests often diverge.	Sanctions evasion, energy alignment, diplomatic coordination vs. economic competition.	Azin & Jalayi (2024); Kaveh Baghbaderani (2024); Afrasiaban & Dehghani Firouzabadi (2025)

2.2. Theoretical Framework: Neorealism and Multipolar Balancing

To synthesize these divergent perspectives and rigorously analyze the empirical realities of the region, this paper employs a Neorealist theoretical framework. Rooted in structural realism, Neorealism posits that the anarchic structure of the international system—devoid of an overarching sovereign authority—compels states to prioritize absolute survival through power maximization, self-help capabilities, and balance-of-power politics.

Within this framework, the Middle East serves as a critical geostrategic theater where revisionist powers (China and Russia) actively challenge the established unipolar hegemon (the United States) in an effort to redistribute global capabilities and establish a multipolar distribution of power (Monem, 2024). Neorealism dictates that great powers will naturally expand their influence into regions where the hegemon shows signs of retrenchment or weakness, filling power vacuums to prevent rivals from gaining a disproportionate advantage. However, Neorealism also accounts for the strict limits of international alliances. While Beijing and Moscow share a macro-level, systemic objective of countering Washington, their localized strategies occasionally exhibit profound friction. Because states are ultimately driven by self-interest and relative gains, their regional cooperation constitutes a pragmatic alignment rather than an absolute, unified front (Afrasiaban & Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2025). This theoretical model effectively explains why regional middle powers utilize this great-power competition not merely as a localized threat, but as a structural mechanism to maximize their own security and diplomatic leverage through multi-vector balancing (Yermekbayev & Yekibassova, 2026).

Table 2: Operationalizing Neorealist Concepts in the Middle Eastern Context

Neorealist Concept	Operational Definition in Current Analysis	Empirical Manifestation in the Middle East
Anarchy & Self-Help	The absence of a reliable global security guarantor compels states to secure their own survival.	Regional states acquiring diverse military technologies from Russia and economic lifelines from China to mitigate reliance on the US.
Balancing	Aligning with or against great powers to prevent any single state from achieving regional hegemony.	Iran leveraging Sino-Russian ties against US containment; Saudi Arabia expanding Chinese ties to pressure Washington.
Hegemonic Transition	The structural friction generated when rising powers challenge an established unipolar order.	The "New Great Game" characterized by competing diplomatic frameworks and infrastructure projects across the MENA region.

3. Analytical Section / Discussion

The structural impact of Sino-Russian engagement in the Middle East cannot be treated analytically as a monolithic phenomenon. Instead, a rigorous neorealist analysis reveals a clear division of labor—and latent competition—between China's geo-economic pragmatism and Russia's security-centric opportunism. This section disaggregates these differing foreign policy methodologies and evaluates their cumulative impact on regional stability and state behavior.

3.1. China's Geo-Economic Pragmatism and Strategic Ambiguity

The People's Republic of China approaches the Middle East primarily through the vector of economic statecraft, utilizing massive infrastructure investments, technology transfers, and long-term energy agreements to secure its geopolitical interests. Crucially, Beijing executes this strategy without directly challenging the prevailing military architecture maintained by the United States. China's paramount structural objective is the preservation of regional stability to guarantee the uninterrupted flow of hydrocarbons, which remain absolutely critical to its domestic economic growth and industrial capacity (Mason, 2023).

Consequently, China meticulously avoids entangling military alliances or taking definitive sides in sectarian conflicts. Beijing prefers a policy of "strategic ambiguity" and comprehensive strategic partnerships that allow it to maintain robust, simultaneous bilateral relations with historically adversarial states, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. This economic-first methodology positions China as a highly attractive, non-interventionist alternative to Western powers, effectively expanding its domain of influence across the region while minimizing the risk of direct geopolitical confrontation (Tariq et al., 2026). Furthermore, Beijing subtly utilizes normative diplomacy, such as aligning rhetorically with Arab states on the Palestine issue, to enhance its soft power and critique the US-led normative order without committing military resources (Mehrnia, 2025).

3.2. Russia's Security Opportunism and Asymmetric Disruption

In stark contrast to Beijing's risk-averse economic strategy, the Russian Federation employs a highly disruptive, security-oriented approach designed to shatter Western diplomatic monopolies and reassert Moscow as an indispensable global power broker. Recognizing its

severe economic limitations compared to the massive financial capital of China, Russia capitalizes on regional instabilities, civil conflicts, and security vacuums to project asymmetric military and diplomatic influence (Nouri, 2020).

By intervening decisively in conflicts such as the Syrian civil war, Moscow has successfully established entrenched, long-term military outposts in the Eastern Mediterranean and positioned itself as a critical arbiter in Middle Eastern security dynamics. Russia leverages private military contractors, sophisticated arms sales (such as advanced air defense systems), and energy diplomacy (via the OPEC+ framework) to tether regional actors to its strategic orbit. The geopolitical fallout from the Ukraine war has further accelerated Russia's Eurasianist strategy, compelling Moscow to deepen its strategic coordination with Beijing and regional actors like Iran to circumvent Western containment and sanctions (Azin & Jalayi, 2024; Kaveh Baghbaderani, 2024). Furthermore, post-republic Afghanistan has served as a secondary theater where Moscow, alongside Beijing, seeks to manage regional security architectures independently of Western oversight (Tajik et al., 2024).

Table 3: Comparative Strategic Matrix of China and Russia in the Middle East

Strategic Dimension	People's Republic of China (PRC)	Russian Federation
Primary Instrument of Power	Geo-economics, infrastructure (BRI), trade, technology transfers.	Military intervention, arms sales, mercenary forces, diplomatic arbitration.
Approach to Regional Stability	Highly risk-averse; requires stability for uninterrupted energy flows and trade.	Opportunistic; leverages instability to insert itself as an indispensable security broker.
Stance toward US Architecture	Seeks to gradually displace US economic dominance without triggering direct military conflict.	Actively seeks to disrupt, degrade, and challenge US military and diplomatic hegemony.
Key Relational Strategy	Comprehensive strategic partnerships spanning adversarial divides (e.g., Iran & Saudi Arabia).	Targeted security alliances and transactional relationships based on immediate geopolitical necessity.

3.3. The Structural Effect: Multi-Vector Balancing by Middle Powers

The bifurcation of Sino-Russian strategies generates a profound structural effect on the regional environment, fundamentally altering the strategic calculus of Middle Eastern states. As the United States demonstrates perceived geostrategic retrenchment—punctuated by a pivot toward the Indo-Pacific and a reluctance to intervene in localized conflicts—regional powers are increasingly compelled to diversify their geopolitical portfolios.

The presence of competing great powers provides middle powers with unprecedented diplomatic elasticity. States are no longer structurally constrained to rely solely on Western patronage. Instead, they can extract hard security guarantees from Washington, secure critical 5G and infrastructure investments from Beijing, and negotiate nuclear or advanced arms frameworks with Moscow (Yermekbayev & Yekibassova, 2026). This dynamic is particularly vital for states seeking to balance against Western coercion; for example, Iran heavily leverages the Sino-Russian alternative to mitigate the crushing impact of Western sanctions and

diplomatic isolation, actively attempting to integrate into Eurasian institutional frameworks (Monem, 2024).

Similarly, traditional US allies utilize engagement with China and Russia as diplomatic leverage to remind Washington of their strategic optionality. Ultimately, while the Sino-Russian convergence in the Middle East is heavily defined by their mutual systemic confrontation with the West, the inherent differences in their regional ambitions continue to create a highly complex matrix of both unique structural opportunities and severe security challenges for regional stability (Afrasiaban & Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2025).

Table 4: Typology of Regional Responses to Eurasian Engagement

State / Regional Actor Profile	Primary Balancing Strategy	Objective of Engaging Eurasian Powers	Outcome / Structural Effect
Sanctioned / Revisionist States (e.g., Iran)	Comprehensive alignment and institutional integration.	Regime survival, sanctions evasion, countering direct Western containment.	Deepened dependency on the Sino-Russian bloc; formation of a counter-hegemonic axis.
Traditional US Partners (e.g., Saudi Arabia)	Omni-balancing and strategic hedging.	Maximizing economic modernization; pressuring the US for better security guarantees.	Increased diplomatic autonomy; compartmentalization of economic (China) and security (US) ties.
Emerging Middle Powers (e.g., Turkey)	Transactional balancing and geopolitical arbitrage.	Expanding regional influence; securing alternative energy and military tech (e.g., S-400).	High-friction relations with NATO; enhanced role as an independent geopolitical bridge.

4. Conclusion

The intensified engagement of China and Russia in the Middle East signifies a definitive rupture in the post-Cold War unipolar order, introducing a highly complex, multipolar dynamic to the region's geopolitical landscape. Viewed through a neorealist analytical lens, this paper demonstrates that the Sino-Russian presence generates a profound dual structural effect that simultaneously destabilizes the broader international architecture while expanding the localized autonomy of regional states.

On the macro-systemic level, the crystallization of this "New Great Game" introduces severe risks of structural destabilization. As the overlapping strategic ambitions of Washington, Beijing, and Moscow intersect, the region is transformed into a primary theater for great-power confrontation. This intersection exacerbates traditional security dilemmas, accelerates regional arms races, and increases the likelihood of systemic miscalculations as competing powers vie for control over vital maritime chokepoints and energy corridors. The transition away from unipolarity inevitably generates a volatile power vacuum, wherein the friction of competing

hegemonic visions threatens to militarize commercial routes and escalate localized disputes into broader international crises.

Yet, on the subsystemic level, this same great-power competition inherently dismantles entrenched hegemonic monopolies. By presenting viable alternatives to Western diplomatic, economic, and military reliance, the Sino-Russian presence furnishes regional actors with the structural capability to execute sophisticated multi-vector balancing. Middle Eastern states, ranging from traditional United States security partners to heavily sanctioned revisionist actors, are no longer unilaterally constrained by the zero-sum conditionalities historically imposed by a single hegemon. Instead, they are actively asserting unprecedented strategic autonomy, utilizing the geopolitical friction between great powers to maximize their own security guarantees, secure unconditioned infrastructure investments, and diversify their diplomatic portfolios through omni-balancing strategies.

The structural impact of this alternative architecture is largely defined by the distinct, yet inadvertently complementary, methodologies of its architects. China's geo-economic expansion—characterized by risk-averse, long-term infrastructure integration and strategic ambiguity—operates in stark contrast to Russia's disruptive security posturing and opportunistic military interventions. While their regional cooperation is firmly cemented by a shared systemic necessity to counter Western containment and dilute US influence, their differing operational objectives ensure that their alignment remains highly pragmatic rather than perfectly unified. China requires absolute regional stability to safeguard its energy supplies and commercial transit routes, whereas Russia frequently leverages managed instability to insert itself as an indispensable security arbiter. This underlying structural friction prevents the formation of a monolithic Eurasian bloc, meaning regional middle powers must continuously and carefully calibrate their engagements with both Beijing and Moscow.

Ultimately, for both political science theory and future policy formulation, it is imperative to move beyond reductive, binary categorizations of the Sino-Russian presence as either purely threatening to systemic stability or entirely opportunistic for local actors. The reality is a fluid, hybridized strategic environment where risk and opportunity are inextricably linked. Moving forward, future empirical research must pivot toward investigating the micro-level diplomatic strategies employed by Middle Eastern middle powers as they navigate these competing domains of influence. Specifically, scholarship must critically examine the long-term sustainability of strategic hedging, the operationalization of localized proxy networks in a genuinely multipolar framework, and the threshold at which regional actors might inadvertently overextend their balancing acts in an increasingly polarized global order.

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