China vs US: Who’s Going to Get an Upper Hand in the Middle East?

The defining feature of today’s geopolitical reality is the reorganization of global order with new alignments, new divisions and new forces replacing former norms.

At the turn of the century, the situation on the international stage became shaky and unstable, with massive shifts occurring in the structure of interstate relations. As China began gaining more and more strength, transforming itself into a major player on the world stage, the existing bilateral ties between China and the United States began deteriorating, reaching the point when an ever increasing number of disputes led to a confrontation in both bilateral trade and a struggle for a sustainable presence and influence in various regions of the world.

At the same time, as US power began waning, more and more analysts began claiming China was bound to become yet another superpower on the international stage, with them arguing that this meant that it would become a threat to the United States or would go as far as to replace it.

After the end of World War II, the United States didn’t just create NATO, it also established a wide network of ties across Eurasia, in particular with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, thus providing the latter with security guarantees and establishing a layout of military connections. Until recently, China hasn't been creating similar alliances, yet it has managed to form a global network of strategic partnerships. However, this network remained extremely fragmented as there were no binding obligations or agreements to tie them together. These days, China seeks to strengthen international coordination and cooperation by promoting such entities such as BRICS, the New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the One Belt, Road global initiative.

Against this backdrop, it’s noteworthy that the Middle Eastern region remains among the most strategically important regions of the world not just for Washington, but for Beijing as well. For the latter it’s not just a resource base, but an important link in the One Belt, One Road initiative. After the end of the Cold War, the Middle East was ruled by the United States, which tried to strengthen its unipolar hegemony through waging wars in the Persian Gulf, in Afghanistan and Iraq, but instead of improving its standing it faced unprecedented challenges. Among them, is the activities of the terrorist group known as ISIS. In parallel, Russia made a decision to get involved in the fight against ISIS in the Middle East, while China carried on increasing its influence across the region.

Washington’s approach towards the Middle East can be divided into several stages. The initial years of 1945-1971, saw the United States oust Britain from the region and replace it. The establishment years of 1971-1979—was when the creation of the so-called “pillars” of US foreign policy in the region were erected - Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran. And then, the conflict stage that began back in 1979 and hasn’t ended yet, during which the United States decided to resort to the tactics of direct military engagements across the region.

Back in 2002, Washington developed the concept of the Greater Middle East which implied that the entire regional layout was to be redrawn under the pretext of promoting democratization. At the same time, Washington assumed the right to undermine, suppress and overthrow any government whose policy, in its opinion, was a “threat to US national security.” American military analysts have gone as far as to draw a map of the pro-American Middle East, where former regional strongholds were cut in pieces.

Using a wave of so-called “Color Revolutions” and proxy wars, the US tried to achieve its goals in the region without a full-scale commitment of military force which would have come at a damning price. Washington’s next step was the
However, such an approach found no approval in a great many of the Middle Eastern capitals. In addition, the recent events in Syria, where Washington demonstrated its undisguised aggressive intentions towards the future of the Middle East, coupled with repeated US violations of its foreign policy promises (from Vietnam to Iraqi and then those made to Syrian Kurds) have sent a clear message to all of its allies around the world that the United States is an unreliable partner.

The Arabs of the Persian Gulf didn’t just lose their confidence in the United States due to Trump’s decision to withdraw from Syria, but due to the effect of a string of pre-Trump decisions of the White House taken in the region. It’s noteworthy that a well-known American publicist Patrick Joseph Buchanan has recently published an article titled: “How the War Party Lost the Middle East,” in which he analyzed in much detail the militaristic approach of the US towards this turbulent region of the world.

In fact, a period of political instability that the Middle East is currently facing is the direct result of US interventions through the use of political pressure, economic sanctions, deceiving regime change strategies and direct military force. All of these actions have led to the exacerbation of previously dormant regional contradictions and threats and for a search started by regional countries for an “alternative defender”. As noted by the British Financial Times, the time of uncontested American influence in the Middle East has probably come to an end, as both Arab and Israeli partners are gradually realizing that the United States is a reliable ally no more, with intricate intrigues and vicious rivalries being omnipresent across the Middle East.

And in this regard, in a natural way, the region started sympathizing with the policies pursued by Russia and China.

So far, China’s cooperation with most countries of the Middle East was limited to pursuing purely economic endeavors. But things are about to change. Over the past decade, as fears about the security of sea lanes intensified, the Red Sea, the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandeb Channel have become the focus of China’s attention. The pursuit of influence in these geographic “bottlenecks” of world trade and attempts to ensure the unimpeded supply of oil and gas through them became a key component in China’s foreign policy in Western Eurasia.

Recent events indicate that China has started strengthening its ties with the countries of the region in such fields as defense cooperation and cultural interchange. Beijing has signed partnership agreements with 15 countries across the Middle East so far. For example, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia gradually becomes China’s leading trading partner in West Asia, and Beijing, in turn, is transforming into Riyadh’s largest customer.

These days, a total of five Middle Eastern countries with direct access to the Indian Ocean (Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Oman) are playing a key role in Beijing’s industrial vision of the future. The growing influence of Beijing in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea implies the emergence of many geo-economic prospects for the Middle Kingdom in the Middle East. Today, Beijing already has established military bases in Tajikistan and Djibouti. It has also tried to exercise its military force in Syria. In addition, China supplies Iran with technology in the field of peaceful nuclear applications.

As for the alignment of forces across the Middle East, there is a visible decline in US influence and an increase in the influence of China and Russia, which will jointly oppose US hegemony, which could lead to bipolar competition in the very near future, with the United States being on one side and China and Russia on the other, as the positions on Middle Eastern issues of the latter are becoming increasingly more aligned.

This will inevitably lead to greater instability in relations between Washington and Beijing. Senior US officials have already warned of China’s efforts to gain influence in the Middle East region, which could undermine existing ties between the US and its traditional Arab allies in the field of defense.

Thus, the Middle East is turning into another arena of competition between the United States and China.

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