The China-Middle East relations have grown multi-dimensional to the extent that Washington’s persistent efforts to unplug them have fell on deaf ears in Abu Dhabi and beyond. At the same time, Washington’s own troubles with other Middle East states, such as Saudi Arabia, have directly allowed China to expand its ties beyond economic cooperation, trade and investment. As I wrote in my previous articles for NEO, a key reason for why the UAE has scrapped its F-35 fighter jet deal with the US is its resistance to the US pressure to reject China’s 5G technology. But China’s growing economic and technological footprint in the Middle East is only one dimension of Beijing’s ties with the region. The Beijing-Middle East are characteristically inter-dependent – something that the Middle East’s relations with the US have always lacked. In this context, China’s growing reliance on the Middle East for its oil and gas needs means that the US ambition to force China out of the region is counter-acted by the Middle Eastern states’ own need to sell oil and gas to the world’s biggest consumer.

Ever since China surpassed the US in 2017 as the world’s biggest importer/consumer of oil and gas, its relations with the world’s largest producer of oil and gas have fundamentally changed, which means the US pressure tactics on states like the UAE cannot work in ways Washington would have ideally wanted to shock Beijing.

Besides the high volume of non-oil trade between Beijing and the UAE, the later is also amongst the 10 suppliers of oil to Beijing. In 2021, the UAE met more than 5.5 per cent of China’s annual oil needs. China’s import bill from the
UAE stood at almost US$10 billion. But Saudi Arabia emerged as the largest supplier of oil to China in 2021. With the
Saudi Kingdom – which has been estranged with Washington ever since the arrival of Joe Biden in the White House -
supplying almost 16 per cent of China’s oil (worth US$28.1 billion), it is not surprising to see Beijing’s growing ties
with Saudia Arabia – ties that even include Beijing’s assistance in helping Kingdom develop its very own ballistic
missile system.

As Saudi officials recently confirmed, the Kingdom has sought help from Beijing to build its ballistic missile capacity.
According to recent a report of The Wall Street Journal, the Saudi quest comes against the backdrop of a persistent
US refusal to sell ballistic missiles because of its fear of “proliferation” via the Kingdom. The coming cooperation
comes against the backdrop of increasing military cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia, which includes a
uranium enrichment plant that China built in Saudi Arabia near a small city called Al Ula.

Besides military cooperation, China’s investment through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also pumping enough
money into the Middle East to meet its increasing demands for economic modernisation. As some recent data shows,
China invested more than US$123 billion into the Middle East between 2013 and 2019. China’s direct involvement in
the Middle East is not only furthering its own economy, but the very projects it is building, or is keen to build,
compliments its Silk Roads project. For instance, China has been building ports across the Middle East that would
not only facilitate its trade via the Sea Lines of Communication, but also allow these oil rich states’ urge to diversify
their economy beyond sole reliance on the export of oil and gas.

Most recently, the UAE’s AD Ports Group signed an agreement with China’s Shandong Port Group to build the
region’s first tyre storage and distribution centre. According to the managing director of the AD Ports Group, "The
UAE is emerging as a principal facilitator of global trade and a fast-developing industrial destination that
complements China’s Belt and Road Initiative. We are pleased to see greater level of Chinese industrial interest and
investment in Abu Dhabi."

There is, thus, a direct synergy between the Middle East and Beijing, which exists at a level where the US military
presence in the region cannot neutralise it. Besides it, the fact that the US is actually in the middle of withdrawing
its military forces and assets from the Middle East to focus more on Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific to ‘fight
China closer to its border’, it has become easier for the Middle Eastern states to choose, if it comes to that, China
over Washington. The UAE’s cancellation of the F-35 fighter jet deal – which came after the Emirati leaders did
extensive “cost benefit analysis” – predicts the trend.

This cost-benefit also involves what the US can offer to states like the UAE and Saudia, which are increasingly
focused on reorienting themselves as ‘modern’ countries at part with, as Saudia’s Mohammad bin Salman said tow
years ago, Europe. In this behalf, while the US has so far been relying on pressure to dissuade these states from
going too deep with Beijing, this strategy has not worked precisely because the US has not been able to offer an
alternative plan backed by “cash on the table”, as some western analysts have also pointed out.

At the same time, the US’ anti-China narrative, which stresses security risks associated with acquiring China’s 5g
technology, has lost its relevance and credibility in light of recent revelations about how the US-based technology
companies like Facebook as well as national security agencies like the NSA use technology to spy on people across
the globe. The US, in other words, cannot project itself as more credible and reliable than China – a weakness that
comes on top of the US inability to offer an alternative and cheaper use of technology and 5G than being offered by
Beijing.

Therefore, in the absence of a US-alternative, the writing, predicting China’s deep roots in the Middle East in the
next century, is very much on the wall. These roots will continue to expand as the those of the US shrink in both
military and economic terms. This is as much logical as inevitable, considering the fact that the Middle East now has
more options today than it had in the previous century when China was yet not a global player.

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