

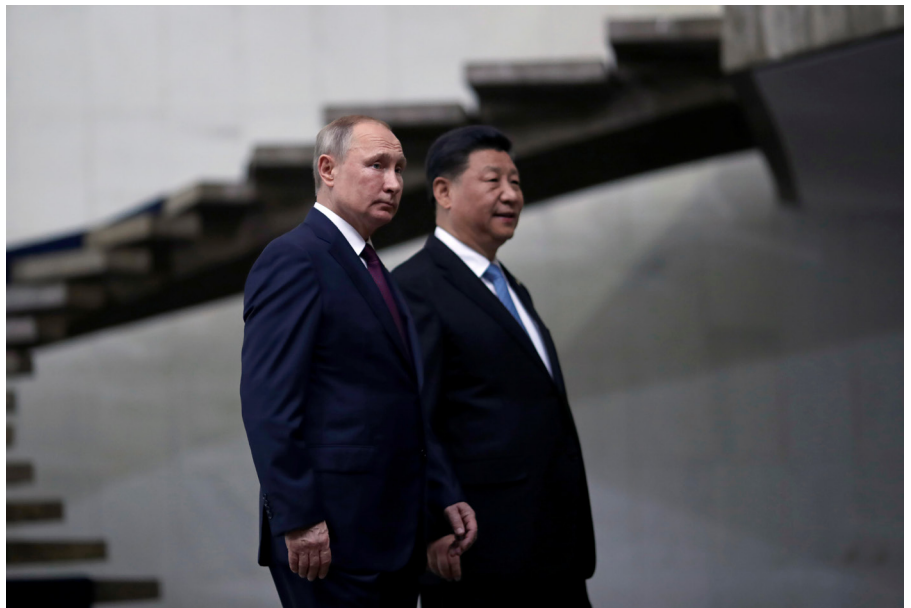
China and Russia Maneuver in the Middle East

As the US recalibrates its Middle Eastern engagements, Russia and China are building up their presence in the region. While not seeking to supplant the US, both powers will need to be increasingly taken into account by Europe as the latter seeks to advance its interests in the Middle East.

By Lisa Watanabe

As the US is adjusting the form of its engagement in the Middle East, other external actors are in the process of stepping up theirs. For the last two decades, Russia has been reviving its relations with regional states and has benefitted from Washington's reluctance to engage in the region. Yet, Russia is not the only major power to increase its presence in the Middle East. China too has been augmenting its involvement in the region over the past twenty years, especially within the context of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its increased engagement tends to be seen through the lens of geo-economics, but its role has become more multifaceted, with a growing security dimension.

The rise of these two powers in a region where the US has been traditionally dominant, but has been recalibrating its commitments as a result of public opposition to deploying troops to far-away Middle Eastern conflicts and near total energy independence as a result of the domestic exploitation of shale gas, raises questions about their respective roles in the Middle East. Much will depend on the actual extent of US military drawdown in the region, which has been so far less significant than talk of US retrenchment would suggest, as well as the style and nature of Washington's en-



While the US is readjusting its focus in the Middle East, China and Russia are becoming ever more visible actors. *Ueslei Marcelino / Reuters*

gagement, which could change under a Biden administration. Both of these factors will be critical in determining Beijing and Moscow's room for maneuver, as well as regional states' calculations.

However, what is certain is that Russia and China's role in the region cannot be ig-

nored. While Russia has an increasingly visible role in the Middle East, predominantly in the Eastern Mediterranean as a result of its intervention in the Syrian conflict, it is China that could become a more serious competitor to the US over the longer term. Beijing is currently dependent on the US security guarantee to ensure safe

passage for shipping and access to energy in the Middle East. Should Washington's commitment to that guarantee significantly waver or US-Chinese rivalry become increasingly transposed to the region, Beijing could be forced to further build up its regional military presence and to try to deepen security ties with many of Washington's allies.

The multipolarization of the Middle East will have implications for Europe. The preference of both Russia and China for state stability and territorial integrity makes them attractive partners for many governments in the region, which could make it harder for Europe to promote a normative agenda. At the same time, Beijing and Moscow will likely become unavoidable partners on certain issues. Reconstruction of Syria is a case in point. European countries will thus need to consider carefully how they can optimize their leverage and advance their interests in a more complex regional environment.

Russia's Revived Presence

Since 2000, Russia has been reviving its presence in the Middle East. However, Moscow does not have an ideologically-driven vision for the region. It does not seek to transform regional states. Indeed, Russia has sought to promote itself as an indispensable power in the Middle East and one that is significantly different from the US in that it favors state stability over transformative agendas that have only led to increased regional instability in Moscow's eyes. Russia has also been quite successful in engaging all regional states, regardless of where they are situated in terms of major regional divides, such as that between Iran and its allies, on the one hand, and the Saudi-led anti-Iranian alignment, on the other. For countries in the region, wary of the agendas and interventions of external powers, Russia's engagement is often welcome. Moscow is, moreover, adept at making the most of opportunities that allow it to increase its profile and influence in the Middle East.

Economic interests have prompted Moscow to deepen its engagement in the region. Fueling economic recovery after the collapse of the Soviet Union was a key driver of renewed regional engagement. To a lesser extent, security concerns also played a role, particularly those related to Islamist extremism. Yet, Russia's engagement increasingly needs to be understood in terms of Russia's ambition to be a major pole within a multipolar international system in

which state sovereignty, rather than liberal democracy, is paramount. In this sense, the search for great power status and resistance to Western efforts to promote regime change have also been significant factors guiding Russia's behavior in the region. Syria was a redline for Moscow in this regard, particularly after the NATO-led 2011 intervention in Libya.

Russian engagement takes a number of forms. Arms sales have proved useful in engaging regional states and generating path dependencies linked to maintenance and training requirements. Russian weapons and equipment are often attractive, because they remain affordable and, in some instances, are familiar to senior military staff. Soviet-era debt has on several occasions been forgiven in return for arms acquisitions and other benefits. Russia cancelled Syria's Soviet-era debt in return for arms purchases and permission to renovate the naval base at Tartus, for example. Arms sales have also proved an effective means of engaging states at odds with the US, not least Iran, as well as those whose relations with Washington have deteriorated, including Turkey, a NATO member that has recently purchased Russia S-400 air and

Russia is likely to content itself with filling gaps left by others.

missile defense systems. Egypt too has acquired Russian military hardware, particularly since the 2013 partial suspension of US military aid in response to the removal from office of the popularly elected former president, Mohamed Morsi.

Moscow has also sought cooperation in the energy sphere. The construction and maintenance of nuclear power plants and research reactors has helped deepen relations with some regional states eager to benefit from Russian expertise in the nuclear field, such as Syria and Iran. For Russia, such energy cooperation is extremely lucrative and establishes long-term reliance on nuclear fuel rods of Russian origin. Crude oil has likewise proved useful in engaging the non-oil producing states in the region, such as Israel and Turkey, which are currently the largest regional importers of Russian oil. In addition, Russian companies are active in oil and gas exploration in some other regional states, notably Iraq.

In line with the growing importance of Russia's pursuit of great power status, Moscow has also been increasingly using con-

certed diplomatic means, military assistance and mercenaries to promote Russia as a major powerbroker in the region. Taking on a military role has marked a significant departure from its earlier engagement. The Assad regime's vulnerability in 2015/16 and uneven US engagement, as well as the recent withdrawal of US troops from northeast Syria, opened up possibilities for Moscow to fill vacuums and to act in favor of state stability.

Russia's Ambitions

However, Russia's more overt political and security role should not be understood as a bid to supplant the US in the region. The Middle East is not important enough to Moscow to warrant this level of ambition. In any case, Russia does not have the economic means or technological lead to replace the US as the main security partner of the more powerful states in the region such as Saudi Arabia and Israel that have long-established relations with Washington.

Russia is likely to content itself with filling gaps left by others. Moscow has an advantage in situations where it can leverage regime vulnerability and take advantage of uneven US engagement. Even though this

type of opportunism is indicative of Russia's relative weakness, Moscow is able to capitalize on it, as well as increasing doubts about Washington's reli-

ability. States in the region are eager to diversify their partners as a means of hedging against a more significant US withdrawal, even if they recognize that Russia is not a viable replacement for the US. Russia's role in Syria is generating some overlapping interests between Russia and a number of Syria's neighbors, including Israel, Lebanon, and Turkey.

Largely as a result of its involvement in the Syrian conflict, Russia is carving out a more visible role for itself in the Middle East, particularly in the Levant. It will have a long-term military presence in Syria and its regional influence will continue to be boosted by its close relations with the Assad regime, both now and in a post-conflict scenario. However, as long as the US stays committed to fairly broad-based, institutionalized cooperation with its major regional allies, and makes efforts to reassure them of its commitments over the long term, Moscow will find it hard to deepen relations with them, circumscribing its role in the region. Although Washington is eager to leave Iraq and Syria, it has been placing pressure on its key regional

partners to limit the extent of their military cooperation with Moscow. Equating the recalibration of US engagement in the Middle East with total withdrawal from the region would thus be a premature.

China's Growing Role

China is a different story. It can allocate significant resources to the region, and the Middle East is important to Beijing. It im-

China's long-term role in the region could be far more significant than that of Russia.

ports some 50 per cent of its crude oil from the region, principally from Saudi Arabia. It is thus heavily dependent on the Gulf in particular for its energy needs. The region is also a gateway to Europe and Africa and, as such, commercially important.

Although China has not articulated a regional strategy, it has indicated its intention to increase cooperation with the region, particularly through the BRI, as outlined in 2016 Arab Policy Paper. The latter indicated that stepped up regional engagement would follow a "1+2+3 cooperation pattern", with energy cooperation at its core, trade and investment as secondary dimensions, and new technologies in the nuclear, satellite, and renewable energy fields as tertiary elements. Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity are stated guiding principles of China's engagement, which, like Russia's approach, resonates well with regional governments.

Trade with the region is on the rise. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are now China's top two trading partners in the Middle East. The bulk of that trade comprises Chinese imports of crude oil. Over the longer term, China would also like to increase crude oil imports from Iran as a means of reducing energy dependence on Saudi Arabia. Both Beijing and Teheran were hoping that an end to sanctions linked to the Iranian nuclear deal would increase investment in Iran and Chinese imports of Iranian crude oil. However, Washington's withdrawal from the agreement and the re-imposition of US sanctions has hindered the development of Sino-Iranian relations. Some observers speculate that the recently disclosed Comprehensive Strategic Partnership deal between Beijing and Teheran could lead to a deepening of Sino-Iranian relations, though continued US sanctions and China's need to take into account Riyadh's sen-

sivities would likely place limits on the extent of cooperation.

China is also investing in critical infrastructure. Not surprisingly, it is facilitating the development of energy infrastructure, as well as infrastructure linked to shipping. Chinese companies are investing in Saudi petrochemical facilities, the development of ports in the UAE and the redevelopment of the Suez Canal and the harbour of Port Said in Egypt, for instance. Chinese investments in telecommunications networks have also been growing. The Chinese company

Huawei has been included in some Middle Eastern states' 5G networks. Such investments have in many cases been linked to regional states longer term economic goals.

China is also cooperating with regional states in the development of alternative energy sources, such as nuclear power. China will build and maintain a research reactor in Saudi Arabia, for example, as part of Saudi Arabia's efforts to diversify its domestic energy mix in order to export more oil. Jordan too has signed a similar deal with China.

Although geo-economics within the framework of the BRI account for a large part of China's activities in the region, Beijing has also been increasing its regional security profile. China's military presence is on the rise through its contribution to regional peacekeeping missions, UN-mandated anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, as well as the 2017 establishment of a military base in Djibouti. Bilateral defense cooperation is also growing. Joint naval exercises have been carried out over the last few years with Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is also providing low-level military training to the Saudi military and is soon set to do the same in the UAE.

China's Ambitions

Despite its growing and more multifaceted engagement in the region, China, like Russia, is not seeking to replace the US as the dominant external actor in the region. Although China is moving away from Deng Xiaoping's "hide-and-bide" approach to a more assertive stance encapsulated by Hu Jintao's emphasis on proactively seeking achievements, Beijing is still reluctant to get too entangled in security provision in the region. Whilst it may be willing to con-

tribute to maritime security in the Gulf through its longstanding anti-piracy operations, it has shown reluctance to get involved in the Syrian conflict beyond providing diplomatic cover for the Assad regime.

From Beijing's perspective, the US is providing an important public good, namely energy and navigation security in the Gulf. A drastic scaling down of US commitments in the region would not be in China's interest. Even if China had the political will to get more involved in security provision in the region, it does not have the military capacity or technological lead to replace the US in this field. Although Beijing and Washington do not agree on every regional security issue, notably the Syrian and Iranian files, Beijing does seem happy to freeride on the US umbrella for as long as possible.

Moreover, states in the region understand that China is not willing to get too involved in the region's security affairs. As such, they do not yet see China as a viable alternative to the US. They are willing to use cooperation with the first to meet their economic and development objectives and to supplement relations with the latter, though. However, should the US significantly pull back from its institutionalized security presence and radically revise its commitment to the Gulf and Israel, this would change not just regional states' calculations, but also those of Beijing. Over the long term, Beijing's energy dependence

An emergent multipolarity in the region would have implications for the US and for Europe.

on the Gulf and its burgeoning economic interests in the region, could oblige it to play a greater security role in the Middle East.

The Outlook

Increased presence of Russia and China in the Middle East should not, therefore, be seen as attempts by either power to take on a leading role in the region, comparable to that of the US. Russia and China have, nevertheless, successfully built up their influence in the region. Involvement in the Syria civil war has given Russia a long-term presence in the region, which has increased its clout not just with the Assad regime in Syria, but also with Syria's neighbors. The type of broad-based and institutionalized security relations that

Washington has with key allies in the region appear to be beyond the scope of Russian interest, however, and Washington still keenly guards the close security relations it has with these states, even if its willingness to militarily and diplomatically intervene in regional conflicts has waned.

China's long-term role in the region could be far more significant than that of Russia, though. Beijing's interests and focal points in the Middle East are more similar to those of the US. As long as it is energy dependent on the Gulf and needs to ship its goods through the region's many maritime chokepoints, it will need to take on security tasks, and regional states will expect it to do so. This will be all the more so, if Washington's interests at some point shift away from ensuring access to the region's

energy supplies for global markets and navigation security, or if US-Chinese rivalry intensifies. Under such circumstances, Beijing would seek security relations with Middle Eastern states that would be broader and deeper. It would also need to establish a greater military presence in the region.

Chinese and Russian roles and sub-regional areas of focus could thus be complementary, guided by a meeting of minds regarding state stability in the region. An emergent multipolarity of this kind would have implications not only for the US, but also for Europe. The latter will have to position itself carefully in order to manage its relations with great powers, as well as promote its interests, without compromising on its values.

Further Reading

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Erzsébet N. Rózsa, "Deciphering China in the Middle East," *EUISS Brief* 14, June 2020.

Jonathan Fulton, "China's Changing Role in the Middle East," Atlantic Council, June 2019.

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