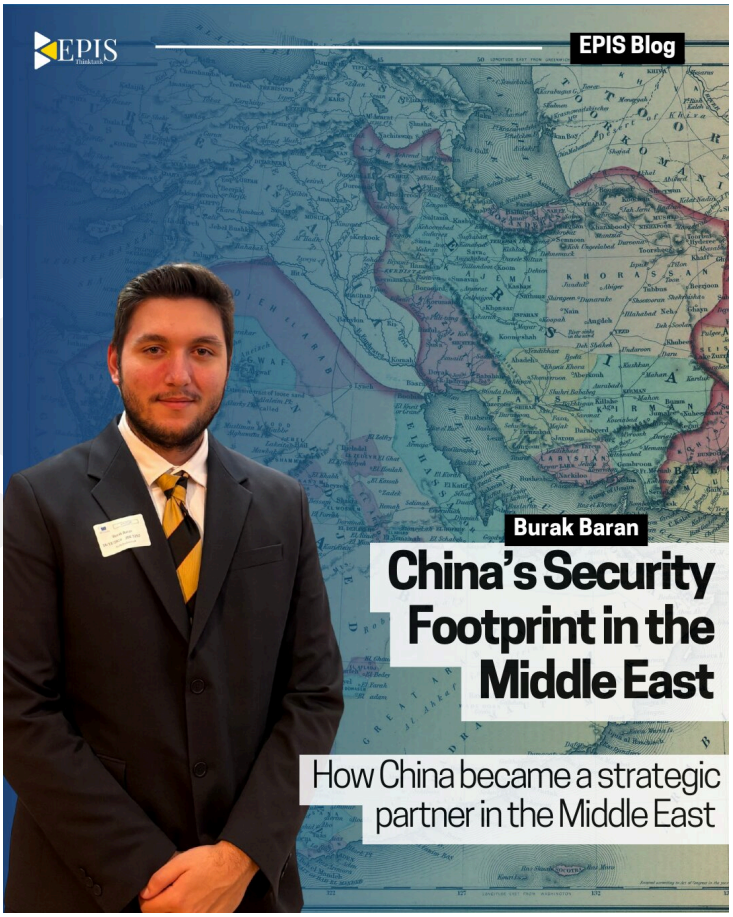
China's Security Footprint in the Middle East

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China in the Middle East

Throughout modern political history, the security foundations of the Middle East have been dominated by the United States. The US' military presence in the region combined with partners in the region like Türkiye shaped the region's political landscape. The security guarantees given by DC especially to Israel, Gulf States, and Saudi Arabia also made the US' influence in the region extremely solid and left little room for alternative power shifts.

However, in more recent years, China has stood out more visibly in the Middle Eastern region. A relationship that was once defined by energy trade and economic investment (particularly through BRI) has expanded into the fields of security and diplomacy over time. China has taken a shift from being a passive economic partner to an active strategy partner as shown by its role in Saudi-Iran rapprochement in 2023, increasing arms sales and expanded naval presence in the region. The shift in China's presence in the region raises questions about the power dynamics in the Middle East. This change not only challenges the US-dominance in the region, but also forces other actors like the EU to adapt into a multipolar world order.

China as a diplomatic mediator

China successfully managed to capitalise on its image as a neutral power without colonial legacies or direct military involvements in the Middle East. Unlike the US and many European countries, Beijing emphasises the principles of sovereignty and non-interference. This approach compared to the West's approach made China an attractive option as a partner for governments that look out for external mediation without conditions attached. For example, in 2023, China facilitated the Saudi-Iran rapprochement. By hosting and mediating between both delegations in Beijing, China has shown its capacity to connect rival powers. The agreement between Saudis and Iran underscored China's credibility as a diplomatic negotiator, as well as their interest in stabilising a region that has a vital importance in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects.

China's mediation in the Middle Eastern region goes beyond just bilateral disputes. China has supported dialogues in Syria, Yemen and occupied Palestinian territories. By doing so, China represents itself as a counterweight to what it portrays as Western double standards. Such diplomatic activities reduce risk to Chinese investments and trade routes while projecting China's influence and power in the region. However, China's mediation also has its limitations and are often overlooked. China has a pragmatic and transactional approach when it comes to mediating, unlike the Western powers. For instance, the US has a strong military presence in the region supported by many bases, while China lacks the military alliances or security commitments to enforce peace settlements.

Military and security ties

What originally started by China as an economic enlargement slowly transformed and evolved into a security partnership that complements China's outreach. Arm sales represent a central pillar of the shift. Drones, missiles and other defence products made by China were added to military inventories of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Iran. Such sales appeal to countries in the region as they often come with few political restrictions and terms compared to the Western alternatives. By supplying the Middle Eastern

countries with advanced and affordable defence technologies, China has managed to strengthen its security ties while expanding its influence in the region.

China's military involvement goes beyond arm sales. They have conducted joint exercises with Iran, Russia, and Gulf States focusing on factors such as naval security, counterterrorism and maritime security. People's Liberation Army's support base establishment in Djibouti in 2017 also shows China's ambitions in having a military presence close to the region. China's economic, military and security ties in the Middle Eastern region reveals an act of balance that has been established carefully. China has projected strength and reliability without actively engaging in the conflicts. This marks China as an important but cautious actor in the region.

Energy securities and strategic geography

The Middle East supplies 40% of China's crude oil import, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran being the top providers. Chinese dependence on the Middle East for crude oil has made the political stability in the region a priority for China, as any instability could cause a delay in the trade process. The US has slowly decreased its reliance on Middle Eastern oil due to domestic production, however China still relies heavily on crude oil trade.

To reduce such vulnerabilities, China invested in energy infrastructure across the region. State-owned companies funded and built pipelines, refineries and facilities as a part of BRI to minimise dependence. Beijing is also prepared to engage with sanctioned states such as Iran to demonstrate its realistic approach to securing energy sources. Acquisitions and investments under BRI extended the strategic outreach of China by controlling or influencing facilities.

China chasing energy security through infrastructure, partnership and maritime access shows how military presence and pragmatism is vital in maintaining sustainable economic ties and increasing its strategic capacity.

Present multipolar Middle Eastern politics

China's role in the Middle East exponentially increases day by day. Its role reflects a strategic transformation from being an economic partner to an emerging security actor. By mediating between countries, China has demonstrated that it can influence the region. Growing arms sales and military practices with countries in the region also suggest that China is becoming more militarily engaged day by day to project power. China's dependence on crude oil and other raw materials in the region also creates an incentive for Beijing to create a politically stable environment.

The US who has long dominated the region now faces a fierce and strong rivalry whose influence is expanding without any formal alliances or treaties. Europe meanwhile should navigate this shift more carefully, being tied to China economically and the US on security. This results in the Mid-

dle East being shaped by a multipolar competition, unlike the post-cold war era that was dominated by the United States with no visible competition.