

# The US Pivot in the Context of Great Power Competition: A New Multipolar Global Order?

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While the United States maintains important investments in the Middle East, the general tenor of its transactions has been perceived as faltering, and indeed as disengaging from certain parts of the region. An early manifestation of what the foreign policy community saw as a “pivot away” from the Middle East was former President Barack Obama’s failure in 2013 to react to the Syrian regime’s chemical attack on its own citizens that killed 1,400 people, a stunning about-face from his avowed “red line” that, if crossed, would trigger US military intervention.<sup>1</sup> The administration’s motivations at the time were avoiding the collapse of nascent nuclear talks with Iran and the hope of creating an equilibrium that would enable states in the region to police their own matters, a goal that, perhaps inadvertently, involved the tacit recognition of Iran’s investments and influence and the provision of greater maneuverability to newer regional actors like Russia.

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1 Patrice Taddonio, “‘The President Blinked’: Why Obama Changed Course on the ‘Red Line’ in Syria,” *PBS*, May 25, 2015, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-president-blinked-why-obama-changed-course-on-the-red-line-in-syria/>.

Since then, the narrative about a declining US role in the region has focused mainly on the United States' abdication of its security commitments and its abandonment of its partners in the context of greater energy independence and a "rebalance" to Asia that has increased the relative significance of other regions.<sup>2</sup> This view was reaffirmed by the underwhelming US reaction in the wake of drone attacks on Saudi Aramco facilities in 2019 that were alleged to have been sponsored by Iran.<sup>3</sup> If any event can explain why Riyadh has lost its faith in the United States, it is this one; and the Saudis have since taken matters into their own hands by recalibrating alliances. The recent Saudi-Iran rapprochement is a case in point, and can be traced to Riyadh's realization that if it cannot get more from the United States, it will look elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Repeated missile attacks against Abu Dhabi—and especially a January 2022 attack on its national oil company—similarly brought into question the United States' resolve and reliability as a strategic partner.<sup>5</sup> But US allies in Asia—who are almost completely dependent on Middle Eastern oil—worry that this approach is futile and that a US abandonment of the Middle East will have the opposite effect of making China even stronger in Asia.

Meanwhile, the power vacuum occasioned by the United States' halting disengagement has enabled both Russia's entrenchment and China's extended reach and influence in the region, as well as regional competition for influence between an assertive Iran, a more confident Turkey, an increasingly eager Israel, and reactive Arab actors. The region is "there for the taking," with these trends intensifying in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, during which media efforts promoting anti-US and anti-western perspectives that are detrimental to universal norms and values have dealt America's image a serious blow. And although China, within this great power

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- 2 Tania Branigan et al., "Obama's First Term: Pivot to Asia and Tweaks to Latin America," *The Guardian*, October 21, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/21/obama-foreign-policy-pivots-asia>.
  - 3 Ben Hubbard et al., "Two Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strike, and U.S. Blames Iran," *New York Times*, September 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html>.
  - 4 "The Impact of the Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement on Middle East Conflicts," International Crisis Group, April 19, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran-saudi-arabia/impact-saudi-iranian>.
  - 5 Jon Gambrell, "Satellite Photos Show Aftermath of Abu Dhabi Oil Site Attack," *Reuters*, January 18, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/business-dubai-united-arab-emirates-only-on-ap-abu-dhabi-4a72597046dab910fbcb1634bfa05b1>.

competition, has chiefly sought to stabilize the region to protect its access to oil, Russia threatens to spoil its attempt to do so as it seeks to restore its own status in the region while undercutting US leadership. While the US approach to China needs to focus on neutralizing the latter's quiet dominance, it will also need to contain Russia so that its opportunistic interventions and predilections for superpower projections do not disrupt stability. The next decade is one that will surely be shaped by how these rivalries play out.

Questions about the United States' dedication to the region are often explained within US policy circles by referencing the need for a more pragmatic approach to Middle East entanglements, one that factors in the changing geopolitical environment (including Russia and China's forays), US interests, and the costly price tag—both in human lives and in dollars—of pursuing a more hard-hitting foreign policy. Primacy is also placed on newer and possibly grimmer threats, such as those posed by China's rise to power and its challenge to US global hegemony. Statements coming from US administration officials about reoriented priorities have emphasized, over and over, China's new centrality in foreign policy, above and beyond that of Russia. In the most recent US National Security Strategy, China is referred to as America's "most consequential geopolitical challenge," especially given what the Biden administration sees as the increasingly threatening China-Russia axis.<sup>6</sup> But there is also an understanding within these same circles that efforts to restrain China also need to include the Middle East.

Accordingly, despite frustration with lasting violence and instability in the region, US leadership is engaged in a strategic rethinking of the nation's foreign policy, taking into account the changed reality on the ground and the failures of prior interventions. This effort needs to make better use of the full range of diplomatic, economic/financial, and military tools. Therefore, any talk of a downgraded US involvement in the region has to be measured. The flurry of US administration trips to Saudi Arabia—the most recent by Secretary of State Antony Blinken in early June 2023—are seeking, if anything, to detract from talk of a pivot away from the Middle East and to reassure partners that the US remains committed to offsetting the overarching distrust of Washington that has taken hold in the region.<sup>7</sup>

6 "National Security Strategy," The White House, October 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

7 Humeyra Pamuk, "Blinken Heads to Saudi Arabia amid Strained Ties, Israel Normalization in Mind," *Reuters*, June 6, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/blinken-heads-saudi-arabia-amid-strained-ties-israel-normalization-mind-2023-06-06/>.

## Push and Pull Factors of Russian and Chinese Power

Within the Middle Eastern theater of great power competition, Russia has sought to remain relevant by tenaciously shoring up allies like Syria's Bashar al-Assad, while simultaneously frustrating US ambitions. In the 1990s, Russia was a defeated adversary trying to find itself again on the world stage after the end of the Cold War. But since intervening to prevent both US-approved regime change in Syria and a transition to democracy in Libya, Moscow has been searching for conduits through which to amplify its sway. In part through deployments in Syria and Libya—failed states where it has made progress by taking advantage of the chaos—Russia has formed a complex partnership with Iran (on which it depends for artillery and drones in its Ukraine war) and has also expanded its interests and involvement in the Gulf to avoid destabilizing moves, especially given western sanctions that have wracked its energy industry.<sup>8</sup> And it has succeeded: Bashar al-Assad is still in power and Russia has gained military air and naval bases in Syria, in Humaymim and Tartus, and in the north at al-Jarrah.<sup>9</sup> In the process it is cozying up to Turkey, which itself is seeking to diversify its allies and move away from the United States to secure its own spheres of influence, namely in the Caucasus region and the Eastern Mediterranean—also areas of Russian involvement. And Turkey's competing involvement in Syria and Libya will eventually factor into the competition between the US and Russia. These Russian forays, mostly opportunistic and disruptive, have enabled Russian President Vladimir Putin to enhance both his country's global standing and his popularity at home by demonstrating the value of an assertive, hard-line foreign policy. By positioning itself as a powerful and effective player that is actively thwarting US interests, Russia is signaling that it can confront anyone who wishes to prevail in the region. As such, Moscow has also gained the esteem of countries—Egypt, for example—that, disillusioned by the United States' support for the anti-regime popular revolts that swept the

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8 "Iran's Deepening Strategic Relationship with Russia," United States Institute of Peace, April 25, 2023, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/feb/24/iran%E2%80%99s-deepening-strategic-alliance-russia>.; Darya Korsunskaya and Jake Cordell, "Western Sanctions Push Russia's Energy Revenues to Lowest since 2020," *Reuters*, February 3, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/western-sanctions-push-russias-energy-revenues-lowest-level-since-2020-2023-02-03/>.

9 Guy Faulconbridge and Caleb Davis, "Syria's Assad Would Like More Russian Bases and Troops," *Reuters*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-assad-says-would-welcome-more-russian-troops-2023-03-16/>.

region in 2011, are looking to be pulled into the Russian orbit, and that have deepened, as a result, their military and diplomatic ties with Moscow.

In the meantime, the Middle East is quickly becoming the cornerstone of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a colossal international infrastructure project that consists of a mix of development and investment initiatives seeking to link East Asia to the rest of the world.<sup>10</sup> At base, this is an economic development strategy aiming to improve regional connectivity and cooperation through free trade zones and to accelerate trade and investment by creating new export markets for China, all in the name of more sustainable growth. The BRI now includes well over 100 countries, and has thus come to signify a more dramatic expression of Chinese economic, cultural, and political influence.<sup>11</sup>

China's fast economic growth has been accompanied by a rising demand for oil, and China is expected to make up 60 percent of all oil demand growth in 2023.<sup>12</sup> As almost half of China's oil imports now come from the Middle East, oil remains at the core of its interests in the region, which have broadened to encompass investment and trade. And indeed, China reached \$330 billion in trade with GCC countries in 2021, and US-Gulf trade is on the decline.<sup>13</sup> Chinese-Saudi bilateral trade, for example, stood at \$3 billion in 2000, and reached \$41.6 billion in 2010 before totaling \$87.3 billion in 2021.<sup>14</sup> There are thus huge stakes in this and other regional partnerships, and they are growing exponentially.

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- 10 James McBride et al., "Backgrounder: China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, February 2, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.
  - 11 David Sacks, "Countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative: Who's In And Who's Out," Council on Foreign Relations, March 24, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/countries-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-whos-and-whos-out>.
  - 12 Will Horner, "China's Demand for Oil Hits Record as IEA Raises Global Forecasts," *Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-demand-for-oil-hits-record-as-iea-raises-global-forecasts-67daad8e>.
  - 13 Nurettin Akcay, "Beyond Oil, A New Phase in China-Middle East Engagement," *The Diplomat*, January 25, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/beyond-oil-a-new-phase-in-china-middle-east-engagement/>.
  - 14 Jon B. Alterman, "Chinese and Russian Influence in the Middle East: Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism," U.S. Congress, May 9, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/109455/witnesses/HHRG-116-FA13-Wstate-AltermanJ-20190509.pdf>; Ruxandra Iordache, "Saudi Arabia Takes Step to Join China-Led Security Bloc, as Ties with Beijing Strengthen," *CNBC*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.cnb.com/2023/03/29/saudi-arabia-takes-step-to-join-china-led-security-bloc-as-ties-with-beijing-strengthen.html>.

Amid changing regional dynamics, China is also establishing economic and strategic partnerships with an increasing number of countries in the region, thus creating a web of allies. Strategic cooperation agreements in a range of critical areas, including telecommunications, infrastructure, technology, and energy have been signed with Iran and with its rivals, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt, and others. Many of these investments come with no human rights strings attached (as is, by contrast, sometimes the case with US agreements), making them especially enticing for leaders in the region who do not want to be held accountable for the repression that has become part and parcel of their mode of governance. Indeed, much of China's engagement has been guided by the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, making sure not to unsettle prevalent autocratic and patriarchal political systems.

China's economic moves may, however, signal a more audacious form of diplomacy under President Xi Jinping in the form of deliberate peace-making, most significantly epitomized by the recent China-brokered Iran-Saudi deal that could dramatically alter the geopolitical balance in the region. China's own approach in East Asia has consisted of patient and methodical moves, such as its militarization in the South China Sea, over which it has long claimed sovereignty. The PRC has accordingly been increasingly less timid about military engagement in the Middle East. It has, for example, steadily extended its naval footprint since launching its first regional base in Djibouti in 2017, which quickly expanded from a logistics facility to a "military support facility."<sup>15</sup> And it is also quietly searching for new bases in the Arabian/Persian Gulf. This search has included Khalifa Port in the UAE (a close partner of the United States), where Beijing is believed to be building a more permanent military presence as part of efforts to create a global network of military bases and logistical support sites by 2030, an initiative referred to by Chinese officials as Project 141.<sup>16</sup> Budding security ties between China and the UAE, with the concurrent establishment of a Chinese base in the country, will certainly complicate the United States' own ability to maneuver there.

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15 Erica Downs et al., "China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base," CNA, July 2017, [https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA\\_Files/pdf/dim-2017-u-015308-final2.pdf](https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/dim-2017-u-015308-final2.pdf).

16 John Hudson et al., "Buildup Resumed at Suspected Chinese Military Site in UAE," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/26/chinese-military-base-uae/>.

China has further upped its soft power engagement in the region through an international media network, cultural centers, and educational investments that have been cautiously undertaken yet steadily effective. Surveys show that views of China in the Arab world tend to be positive, and that there appears to be an openness toward China among Arabs. By contrast, 81 percent of Arabs see the United States as a foreign threat, while only 32 percent perceive China as such.<sup>17</sup> The reality is that China has had little negative press in the region. Having stayed out of both conflicts and domestic affairs, it is increasingly perceived as a stabilizing force. But China is bound to become more conspicuous as it identifies opportunities to expand its influence in the region—and here the question becomes not if it will replace the US but how it is becoming a welcome player in a region looking to diversify its patrons.

### **Saudi Arabia's Realignment**

At the regional level, Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Iran and its alliance with Russia on oil cooperation—expanded significantly since the formation of OPEC+—have prompted questions as to the kingdom's motivations.<sup>18</sup> Riyadh's single most important concern has been that of protection provided by external actors. Despite having a large arsenal (provided by the US), Saudi Arabia's defense management and its ability to use and sustain these weapons remains weak, while the Saudi Ministry of Defense has "little ability to effectively identify, train, deploy, and retain a technically capable force."<sup>19</sup> The efficacy of a recent Saudi defense establishment overhaul—undertaken under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud's leadership—is yet to be ascertained. This means that Saudi Arabia is essentially incapable of defending itself against external threats, at least in the short term.

Today, Riyadh is absorbed by the implementation of its Vision 2030 project, a "whole economy" strategic framework and development program

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17 "The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, November 16, 2020, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-2019-2020-arab-opinion-index-main-results-in-brief/#section6>.

18 Sean Hill and Owen Comstock, "What Is OPEC+ and How Is It Different from OPEC?," U.S. Energy Information Administration, May 9, 2023, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=56420>.

19 Bilal Y. Saab, "After Oil-for-Security: A Blueprint for Resetting US-Saudi Security Relations," Middle East Institute, February 17, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/after-oil-security-blueprint-resetting-us-saudi-security-relations>.

that seeks to diversify the kingdom's economy away from resource-dependence and to transform it into a regional business hub.<sup>20</sup> Around \$3 trillion in investment opportunities for foreign companies have already been identified, and while plans are underway to enhance the country's internal business infrastructure, the broader regional investment climate will be the principal factor for attracting diverse and steady investments. Accordingly, although keen on becoming a bigger player in the region, Saudi Arabia is even more interested in keeping the region stable.

From the Saudi perspective, US policy failed to rein in Iran, which today is steps away from obtaining weapons-grade nuclear material.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Tehran has neither reduced its support to its proxy militias nor ceased its malign foreign interference outside its borders, thereby rendering the region more volatile. In the absence of security guarantees and a defense pact with the United States, the Chinese approach to stabilizing the region is almost irresistible.<sup>22</sup> Riyadh is thus recalibrating its approach and taking matters into its own hands to improve its regional standing, reduce its involvement in military confrontations, and alter the regional balance of power in its favor. The Middle East, in this instance, needs to be seen less as a region that has been conquered by China or Russia and more as one that is fundamentally displeased with the terms of its current arrangement with the United States, which is perceived to have not only taken the region for granted but effectively abandoned it.

## The End of US Hegemony

The Middle East has changed in the last decade in ways that affect US national security interests. Existing troop levels in the region—which stand between 40,000 and 60,000—are at their lowest since the September 11 attacks, and the US is not involved in any active conflicts.<sup>23</sup> At the same

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20 "Vision 2030," Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, undated, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>.

21 Phil McCausland and Dan De Luce, "Iran Enriching Uranium to Near Weapons-Grade Levels, Nuclear Watchdog Warns," *NBC News*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iran-enriching-uranium-weapons-grade-nuclear-iaea-rcna72753>.

22 Michael Crowley et al., "Saudi Arabia Offers Its Price to Normalize Relations With Israel," *New York Times*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/09/us/politics/saudi-arabia-israel-united-states.html>.

23 J.P. Lawrence, "US Troop Level Reduction in Middle East Likely as Focus Shifts Elsewhere," *Stars and Stripes*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle-east/2022-01-14/centcom-central-command-drawdown-iraq-afghanistan-kuwait-saudi-arabia-4289137.html>.



time, civil wars continue to rage in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and have also given rise to instability. The region's outlook for stable democratic governance and consistent economic growth has regressed, with citizens having less and less of a say in their governments and being forced to live under corrupt, parasitic, or simply unresponsive political systems. Youth unemployment continues to stand at around double the world average as overly centralized public-sector-dominated economies have failed to create jobs for an ever-growing number of young people entering the workforce across the region.<sup>24</sup> Unaddressed youth resentment creates fertile ground for radicalization, giving illiberal actors leverage over liberal voices. Moreover, the threat of nuclear proliferation is rising, primarily from Iran, but also from powers like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which are likely to follow in Iran's footsteps in developing their nuclear programs.

At the same time, the region houses nearly half of the world's oil reserves and accounts for 31 percent of global oil production.<sup>25</sup> Although the ongoing transition to renewable energy will certainly reduce the global significance of the Middle East eventually, this is not likely to happen anytime soon. And while the United States may no longer rely on Middle East oil as much as it has in the past, its allies still do, and the region is still crucial for the stability of global energy markets. Furthermore, the United States is hardly protected against disruptions in world energy supplies.

Today, US supremacy in the Middle East is finished. Though still an important actor, the US role is currently diminished, as it is no longer the only superpower in a region that is increasingly marked by a contest between those who are in the process of demarcating their roles and priorities. By projecting its might, Russia is seeking to reclaim its superpower status in order to offset its relatively weak domestic economic and political situation. China is playing the long game by trying to ensure a cheap inflow of oil and a steady outflow of goods to new markets in the region while also hoping, as the Middle East's main source of foreign investment, that economic influence will eventually translate into greater political and military significance. And here, Russia and China are actively positioning

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24 "Young People Address Challenges and Explore Opportunities of Transition from Learning to Employment in the Middle East and North Africa/Arab States Region," UNICEF, May 23, 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/young-people-address-challenges-and-explore-opportunities-transition-learning>.

25 "Middle East's Energy Market in 2020," Statistical Review of World Energy 2021, undated, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2021-middle-east-insights.pdf>.

themselves against the US, competing for economic, diplomatic, and military clout, so far without forming a united front. China is taking the lead in the ideological confrontation over democracy and human rights by presenting an autocratic alternative in a region where autocracy and paternalistic governance is rampant. This opposition to liberal and democratic values is resonating with local leaders who, themselves preempting and suppressing domestic calls for liberalization, are increasingly competing for China's attention.

### **The Developing Multipolar Order and the Rise of China**

There now exists a burgeoning multipolar order in the Middle East, one in which a confident China could use the goodwill it has cultivated, alongside various economic and political tools, to more forcefully exert its influence with the region's autocratic elites. China has given precedence to promoting stability and shared economic interests, but any new hostilities or tensions could push it toward an enhanced military posture to protect its now extensive regional interests. It has already stepped up its military cooperation with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran in reaction to US sanctions against a China-based network of companies accused of supplying aerospace parts, including for drones, to Iran.<sup>26</sup> Russia, meanwhile, has actively used conflicts in the region to deepen its influence and establish an order that runs against US interests.

The firming up in the region of these great powers, who are brandishing quintessentially autocratic playbooks as their *modus operandi* against fast-waning liberal values while regional partners more forcefully pursue their self-interest, bodes ill for the region's trajectory and for US interests. China in particular, which is quietly exploiting openings and US detachment to expand its hegemony, is likely to become the most daunting of America's adversaries. The recent China-brokered peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran is one such opening, and it is upending traditional alliances.

This challenge needs to be factored into a reexamination of what is and is not working in current US policy, new approaches to proactively managing opportunities and threats, and a recognition of the need to deploy tools that are more effective in addressing the new brand of security threats

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26 Daphne Psaledakis and Michelle Nichols, "US Sanctions China-Based Network Accused of Supplying Iran Drone-Maker," *Reuters*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-targets-china-based-network-supporting-irans-drone-procurement-efforts-2023-03-09/>.

emerging from the region. The US will need to pay more deliberate attention to helping address and contain socioeconomic challenges within the region, and must not succumb to the temptation of subcontracting out responsibility for the region's stability to the emerging authoritarian nexus and its clients. The less influence the US has, the more its illiberal and undemocratic competitors will fill the void. And while regional autocratic actors vie to expand their influence in a contested space, the region risks sliding into multipolar autocracy.

Even if the US wanted to withdraw from the Middle East, so long as China has stakes in the region, the US will have a role there. The United States' reading of the next few decades has to be less about great power competition more broadly than about a more specific US-China competition. Just this year, President Xi upped the ante by brazenly accusing the US—following restrictions on access to Chinese technology—of leading a campaign of “containment, encirclement and suppression” against China and challenging its economic development.<sup>27</sup> He then warned of the possibility of confrontation. While US policymakers certainly realize that divesting from the region is not a viable option, they have failed to present a steady, sober alternative for a realistic and responsible engagement that serves US interests. A fundamental component of the US strategy to contain China must be renewed attention to the Middle East, if only because the region is so important to China for oil, trade, and investment. The US also needs to counter China's new hegemony in the Middle East—and contain Russia's subversive rogue actions there—not just to bolster US strength in the region, but in other parts of the world as well.

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27 Chun Han Wong et al., “China's Xi Jinping Takes Rare Direct Aim at U.S. in Speech,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-xi-jinping-takes-rare-direct-aim-at-u-s-in-speech-5d8fde1a/>.