

China's Investments in Security Cooperation in the Middle East

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Key Points

- Beijing aims to become the dominant power in ten leading technologies by 2023, to be the innovation leader in all advanced technologies and complete the modernization of national defense and military by 2035, and to be unambiguously the number one country in the world by 2049.
- China's role in the Middle East in recent years has been multifaceted, encompassing trade and investment, the energy sector, security cooperation, and diplomatic activities.
- China is willing to use the security cooperation tool to achieve its economic, political, and military goals.
- Difficulties and the restrictive arms sales policies of major exporters like the US, mostly pertaining to items such as armed drones, have pushed countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE to look for other available alternatives with fewer strings attached.
- To anticipate possible areas of cooperation and competition, it is necessary to understand China's approach to protecting its interests.
- The preferred position of the US as a military and security partner in the Middle East is still secure. The US should look for ways to prevent efforts by AOR countries to reduce their reliance on US security by strengthening ties with other security providers, particularly Russia and China.

Introduction

Aiming to change the world order established by the USA, China has taken necessary steps to achieve this, especially since 2010. To understand China's goals, we only need to look at the Chinese long-term timeline also shared by President Xi Jinping. Accordingly, Beijing aims to become the dominant power in ten leading technologies by 2023, to be the innovation leader in all advanced technologies and complete the modernization of national defense and military by 2035,¹ and to be unambiguously the number one country in the world, pushing to build the country into a fully developed and prosperous nation by 2049.² Developments in favor of China may allow the targets to be reached before the determined deadlines.

Although the goal is to be active worldwide, it is necessary to concentrate on certain regions to achieve this gradually. Outside of Asia-Pacific, the Middle East is the most critical region of the world for China.

¹ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China "China's National Defense in the New Era", 2019, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

² Allison, Graham, "Is War between China and the US inevitable?", <http://www.ted.com>, 2019, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

Connecting China through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean and Europe, the Middle East is a unique geostrategic location for Beijing, a critical source of much-needed energy resources, and an area of expanding economic ties. In turn, Middle Eastern countries see Beijing as the most important world capital after Washington because of China's considerable economic power.³

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has recently deepened its economic and diplomatic interaction with the Middle East. China's role is multi-faceted, encompassing trade and investment, the energy sector, security cooperation, and diplomatic activities.

This document discusses whether Beijing is increasing its influence in the Middle East. It will also analyze China's plan of action in the Middle East and focuses on China's security cooperation investments, especially with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The Importance of the Middle East for China and the Chinese Middle East Strategy

China's footprint in the entire Middle East has been widening rapidly since the announcement of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. Since then, it has become the largest trading partner and foreign investor for several regional countries. While China's current focus is on clinching major BRI-connected economic investment deals, mainly infrastructure and connectivity projects, Beijing appears to have taken notice of the lucrative defense markets of the Middle East. The developing geopolitics in the region and uncertain policies on the part of the United States seems to have prompted China to reorient its strategies.⁴

In 2015 China officially became the biggest global importer of crude oil, with almost half of its supply coming from the Middle East. As a strategically important crossroads for trade routes and sea lines of communication linking Asia to Europe and Africa, the Middle East is important to the future of the BRI – which is designed to place China at the center of global trade networks. For the moment, China's relationship with the region focuses on the Gulf States due to their predominant role in energy markets.⁵ Protection of its mushrooming interests is forcing China to review fundamental principles that have long underwritten its foreign and defense policy and realign its policies and relationships in the region. The time has passed for China to simply reap economic benefits with limited risk to Middle Eastern markets and policies; Beijing is now pursuing greater goals.⁶

Although China measures its influence and presence in the Middle East mainly in terms of securing energy supply, trade ties, and commercial benefits, we can say that it also looks for opportunities for military and security gaps in accordance with their timeline. In other words, when we look at Beijing's relations with some Middle Eastern countries, we see that the relations are BRI-centered, but it is possible to see some other agreements and convergences.⁷ Indeed, one can see the signs of this with the fact that China has already significantly increased its port visits to the region.

³ Chaziza, Mordechai, Sussex Academic Press, "China's Middle East Diplomacy, Belt and Road Strategic Partnership", 2020, http://www.sussex-academic.com/sa/titles/middle_east_studies/chazizame.htm, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

⁴ Ningthoujam, Alvite, The Diplomat, "The Middle East: An Emerging Market for Chinese Arms Exports", 2021, <https://the-diplomat.com/2021/06/the-middle-east-an-emerging-market-for-chinese-arms-exports/>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

⁵ Camille Lons, Jonathan Fulton, Degang, Sun, Naser Al-Tamimi, European Council On Foreign Relations, "China's Great Game in the Middle East", 2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/, (access Jun 30, 2022)

⁶ Dorsey, James, "China and the Middle East", 2019, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/736478/pdf>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

⁷ Yaari, Ehud, The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, "China's Middle East Policy: Speak Softly and Wave a Large Purse", 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-middle-east-policy-speak-softly-and-wave-large-purse>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

China-Iran's 25-year strategic cooperation agreement was signed in 2021, covering economic, military, and security cooperation between the two nations.⁸ Beijing has focused on developing relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf states. It also seems willing to provide Riyadh with advanced missile technology and perhaps even nuclear know-how. China will continue handling Israel with caution. The relations between the two countries are broadening and deepening on multiple fronts and the Chinese are keenly interested in innovative Israeli technologies but they do not believe that developing economic ties requires them to change their foreign policy. Egypt and China signed an economic and technical cooperation agreement last year to enhance their joint cooperation efforts.⁹ In January 2019, Qatari and Chinese officials agreed to deepen the bilateral strategic partnership and establish a strategic dialogue between governments. A road map was drawn to increase strategic partnership between the two countries in the fields of politics, economy, investment, energy, and technology and security cooperation.¹⁰ The officials of both sides stated in August 2021 that military relations between Qatar and China have improved through increased exchange and cooperation.¹¹ China uses soft power strategies in Iraq, particularly economic investments and non-intervention politics.

Beijing is ready to expand its influence in Iraq. A recent report revealed that Beijing secured a new construction deal in Iraq for around \$10.5 billion in 2021.¹² It is evident that the increasing economic relations with Baghdad will probably turn into political influence over time. Beijing is not yet ready to consider major investment in Syria, where it is interested in the presented opportunities there but is not in a hurry to explore them.¹³

An expanding instrument of countries' foreign policy: Security Cooperation

The term "Security Cooperation" encompasses programs and activities spanning the strategic, operational, and tactical levels that encourage countries to act in support of each other's strategic goals. Security cooperation is an essential and expanding instrument of countries' foreign policy employed widely to accomplish a diverse set of objectives. China is willing to use the security cooperation tool to achieve its economic, political, and military goals.

China emphasizes this intention in "China's Arab Policy Paper" published in 2016 as follows:

China is ready to strengthen anti-terrorism exchanges and cooperation with Arab countries to establish a long-term security cooperation mechanism, strengthen policy dialogue and intelligence information exchange, and carry out technical cooperation and personnel training to jointly address the threat of international and regional terrorism.¹⁴

⁸ Motamedi, Maziar, "Iran says 25-year China agreement enters implementation stage", Jan 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/15/iran-says-25-year-china-agreement-enters-implementation-stage>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

⁹ Egypt Today, "Egypt, China Sign New Economic, Technical Cooperation Agreement To Enhance Joint Cooperation Efforts", 2021, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/109706/Egypt-China-sign-new-economic-technical-cooperation-agreement-to-enhance>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

¹⁰ Chaziza, Mordechai, Sussex Academic Press, "China's Middle East Diplomacy, Belt and Road Strategic Partnership", 2020, http://www.sussex-academic.com/sa/titles/middle_east_studies/chazizame.htm, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

¹¹ Tactical Report, "Qatar, China and Military Relations", 2021, <https://www.tacticalreport.com/news/article/56812-qatar-china-and-military-relations>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

¹² Alaca, Mehmet, TRT World, "China's Iraq Investments and Its Growing Foothold in the Middle East", <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/china-s-iraq-investments-and-its-growing-foothold-in-the-middle-east-56150>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

¹³ Yaari, Ehud, The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, "China's Middle East Policy: Speak Softly and Wave a Large Purse", 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-middle-east-policy-speak-softly-and-wave-large-purse>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

¹⁴ "China's Arab Policy Paper", 2016, http://www.china.org.cn/world/2016-01/14/content_37573547.htm, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

According to this document, China's overall strategy in the region is to achieve win-win cooperation, common development, and build a better China-Arab strategic and cooperative relationship. It also understates the need to increase China's military cooperation with the Arab countries, deepen cooperation on weapons, equipment, and various specialized technologies, and carry out joint military exercises. Moreover, it highlights that China will continue to support the development of the national defense and military forces of Arab States to maintain peace and security in the region. From this, it is evident that China is intensely interested in including military-security cooperation, particularly arms deals and weapons co-production, as a component of its Middle East strategy.

Countries such as Saudi Arabia remain cautious about threats to their internal security, like frequent drones and missiles perpetrated by Yemen-based Houthi rebels from across the southern border. Difficulties and the restrictive arms sales policies of major exporters like the U.S., mostly pertaining to items such as armed drones, have pushed countries like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to look for other available alternatives with fewer strings attached.

Lately, the most significant growth in arms imports has been seen in the Middle East. Middle Eastern states imported 25 percent more major arms in 2016–20 than in 2011–15. Saudi Arabia—the world's largest arms importer—increased its arms imports by 61 percent and Qatar by 361 percent.¹⁵ A certain amount of headway has been made by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in their respective cooperation with China in the military-defense spheres. This development has triggered renewed discussions over China's increasing military-security ties with the Middle East. Between 2016 and 2020, China increased its volume of arms transfers to these two countries by 386 percent and 169 percent, respectively, compared to 2011-2015.¹⁶

China's share of the KSA and UAE arms market is still insignificant compared to other traditional arms exporters, but these figures signal China's systematic entry into the region. This is an important gap that China hopes to fill.

Case Study: Security Cooperation between China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1990, the ties between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Saudi Arabia have witnessed sustained and rapid development, characterized by enhanced mutual political trust. These ties were elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016. This partnership level means that Beijing has built a deep relationship with the Kingdom and maintains significant cooperation on economic, political, and security issues.¹⁷ Other than that, China and Saudi Arabia have developed a new framework for their relationship in the last few years. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is situated close to the center of a Belt and Road megaproject that connects Asia, Africa, and Europe. This strategic location means that Saudi's Vision 2030 could fuse perfectly with the BRI.¹⁸

¹⁵ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "International Arms Transfers Level Off After Years Of Sharp Growth" <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/international-arms-transfers-level-after-years-sharp-growth-middle-eastern-arms-imports-grow-most>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

¹⁶ Bowman, Bradley, Maj. Jared Thompson, and Ryan Brobst, "China's Surprising Drone Sales In The Middle East", 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/2021/04/23/chinas-surprising-drone-sales-in-the-middle-east/>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

¹⁷ Chaziza, Mordechai, Sussex Academic Press, "China's Middle East Diplomacy, Belt and Road Strategic Partnership", 2020, http://www.sussex-academic.com/sa/titles/middle_east_studies/chazizame.htm, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

¹⁸ Ibid

Beijing's comprehensive strategic partnerships with Riyadh include policy, trade, energy, military, and security ties. When we focus on the relations of China and KSA regarding security cooperation, rather than on other domains, it is seen that the relations between the two countries have also developed in this domain.

China has supplied UAVs to Saudi Arabia since 2014. Riyadh confirmed in December 2015 that Saudi Arabia had acquired a number of UAVs from China to operate in Yemen. In 2016, roughly 50 Special Forces personnel (25 each from China and Saudi Arabia) took part in the first-ever joint counterterrorism exercise between the two countries. In 2017, China and Saudi Arabia agreed to build a factory in Saudi Arabia to manufacture its CH-4 Caihong ("Rainbow") UAVs. In July 2019, the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia agreed on a draft MoU to cooperate in the military use of the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System ("BDS"), China's alternative to GPS. On a state visit to Beijing in March 2017, King Salman and President Xi Jinping signed a series of agreements worth \$60 billion. Saudi Arabia has deployed armed Chinese-made drones in Yemen.¹⁹ In February 2019, following Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Beijing, the two countries signed 35 agreements worth \$28 billion. These agreements gradually transformed relations between the two countries from a transactional cooperation to a comprehensive strategic partnership.²⁰ In November 2019, China and KSA conducted a three-week joint naval exercise at a Saudi Arabian naval base. The exercise was designed to build trust between the two sides to combat maritime terrorism.²¹

The most recent meeting between the two sides took place in the first month of this year. The Chinese State Councilor and Minister of National Defense met with Saudi Arabia's Deputy Defense Minister in January 2022. Both sides suggested that their countries should reinforce coordination and cooperation, jointly oppose hegemonic and bullying acts, and together protect international fairness and the interests of developing countries. The Chinese side showed its willingness to maintain military-strategic communication with the Saudi military, make good use of the cooperation mechanism, boost practical cooperation, and strengthen solidarity in combating the COVID-19 pandemic to promote the continuous development of bilateral military relations. The Saudi side stated that the comprehensive strategic partnership between KSA and China has been developing steadily and the military cooperation between the two countries has made significant progress, yielding substantial results.²²

As for the Saudi-Chinese cooperation in the production of ballistic missiles, which has been an important topic in recent times: as known, the United States has repeatedly refused to sell ballistic missiles to Saudi Arabia, citing proliferation concerns and a commitment to remain within the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), which seeks to limit the spread of ballistic missile technology.²³

Saudi Arabia is known to have purchased ballistic missiles from China in the past but has never been able to build its own until now. On December 2021, the US intelligence agencies announced that Saudi Arabia, with the help of

¹⁹ Congressional Research Service, "Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy", 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R44984.pdf>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

²⁰ Salami, Mohammad, Al Sharq Strategic Research, "Saudi-Chinese Cooperation in the Production of Ballistic Missiles", 202, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2022/04/03/saudi-chinese-cooperation/>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

²¹ Fulton, Jonathan, "Routledge Handbook on China-Middle East Relations", 2022, <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Handbook-on-ChinaMiddle-East-Relations/Fulton/p/book/9780367472702#>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

²² The State Council of the PRC, "China, Saudi Arabia Agree To Enhance Military Relations", 2022, http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/weifenghe/202201/26/content_WS61f14c83c6d09c94e48a451d.html, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

²³ Arms Control Association, "Saudi Arabia Said to Produce Ballistic Missiles", 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-01/news/saudi-arabia-said-produce-ballistic-missiles>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

China, was producing solid-propellant ballistic missiles. Perhaps Saudi Arabia's cooperation with China in the production of ballistic missiles is not just about the "transfer of expertise."²⁴

Since Riyadh has experience buying two missiles from Beijing, China is the best option Saudi Arabia currently has for starting a ballistic missile program. Saudi Arabia views China as a reliable partner, as it has fewer restrictions on sharing technology than the United States. Here, Beijing and Riyadh have much to offer each other. The bilateral relations are likely to expand over the next decade. Riyadh certainly sees China as a rising superpower in the making and expects the country to stay a top destination for its energy exports. Thus, it would make sense for Saudi Arabia to strengthen ties with this rising power. Consequently, China's bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia will continue to be an important pillar of its role in the region. That said, Saudi Arabia is unlikely now, or in the immediate future, to seek to use China as a military replacement for the United States. Maintaining good relations with the United States remains a key foreign policy objective for the Kingdom. Riyadh is likely in the longer term to seriously consider multiple political-security arrangements if Washington were to put some distance between itself and the Middle East, or if the rift developing between Saudi Arabia and the United States were to widen.²⁵

Here, if we open a small parenthesis to President Biden's visit to the Middle East in July 2022, this visit was of great importance with the economic difficulties in the US and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With this visit, the US president was focused on repairing ties with traditional regional partners, but he also aimed to redefine the contours of future US regional cooperation. Biden's trip to the Middle East has shown that his purpose in the Middle East is for the long-term. Therefore, even if it is thought that the visit did not reach its purpose, for now, we will see how much value it will add to relations in the medium and long term.

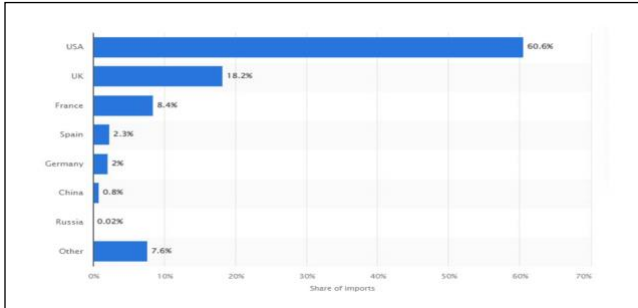
Despite China's position as the sixth-largest arms supplier to Saudi Arabia and all the agreements mentioned above, in short, military cooperation between China and Saudi is still in its infancy. The Saudi military's long-term dependence on US hardware is an advantage for the US, while any new Chinese weapons will not easily integrate with pre-existing systems.

To summarize the relationship between the two countries: when the developments in the last decade are scrutinized, despite the increasing economic and political engagement between the two states, the Sino-Saudi defense relations seem to be limited to several joint exercises, counter-terrorism cooperation, the sale of some weapon systems and the joint production of armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). If we look at the statistics regarding arms sales, the United States is still by far the leading arms supplier to Saudi Arabia. According to SIPRI data, the United States provided approximately 61 percent of all weapons imported by Saudi Arabia, from 2000 to 2019.²⁶ (See figure 1)

²⁴ Salami, Mohammad, Al Sharq Strategic Research, "Saudi-Chinese Cooperation in the Production of Ballistic Missiles", 202, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2022/04/03/saudi-chinese-cooperation/>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

²⁵ Fulton, Jonathan, "Routledge Handbook on China-Middle East Relations", 2022, <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Handbook-on-ChinaMiddle-East-Relations/Fulton/p/book/9780367472702#>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

²⁶ Figure 1. Statista, showing "Share of arms imported in Saudi Arabia between 2000 and 2019", <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1210951/saudi-arabia-share-of-arms-imports-by-supplier-country/>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)



*The largest share of arms imported to Saudi Arabia between 2000 and 2019 was from **the United States at about 60.6 percent**. It was followed by the United Kingdom as the second largest exporter to the country at a share of about 18.2 percent.*

***China ranked 6th.** The total value of arms imports to the country in that period was about 29.3 billion U.S. dollars.*

(Figure-1) Share of arms imported in Saudi Arabia between 2000 and 2019, by supplier country

However, as a country determined to create its destiny and future, Saudi Arabia reserves the right to decide whether its relations with China will reach significant levels of security cooperation.

Case Study: Security Cooperation between China and the United Arab Emirates

Relations between China and the United Arab Emirates reached new heights in the summer of 2018. The upgrading of China–UAE bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership following the state visit of President Xi Jinping clearly indicates the crucial position of the UAE to China’s economic and political interests in the Gulf region in particular, and the Middle East in general.²⁷

Under China’s comprehensive strategic partnership with UAE, defense cooperation, including arms and technology trade and high-level exchange of visits, has become an increasingly significant part of integrating UAE Vision into the BRI framework.²⁸

In recent years, military ties between the two countries have witnessed rapid and in-depth development, demonstrated by the frequent mutual visits by top military officials and the fruitful cooperation in related areas.²⁹

According to a UAE–China joint statement on strategic partnership, the two countries are ready to enhance practical cooperation between the two armies. This aim is represented in high-level exchange visits and communication, joint weapons training, and the training of military personnel. China and UAE agree on enhancing cooperation and exchange of information on maritime security. The two sides also agree on rallying efforts on counter-terrorism issues, exchanging expertise and information on combating terrorism, and strengthening individual training and capacity building in that regard.³⁰ Both countries also want to enhance cooperation in nuclear technology, boosting regional and international cooperation mechanisms in the nuclear non-proliferation area, related export control arrangements, and to participate in efforts to combat the smuggling of nuclear materials.³¹

China was a significant supplier of military drones to Middle East countries, especially those that are barred from importing them from the US. The UAE has had Chinese Wing Loong I drones since 2016 and started receiving its

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Chaziza, Mordechai, Sussex Academic Press, “China’s Middle East Diplomacy, Belt and Road Strategic Partnership”, 2020, http://www.sussex-academic.com/sa/titles/middle_east_studies/chazizame.htm, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

²⁹ Zhuo, Chen, China Military, “Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Says Committed To Advancing UAE-China Relations”, 2019 http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-03/22/content_9456744.htm, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

³⁰ Chaziza, Mordechai, Sussex Academic Press, “China’s Middle East Diplomacy, Belt and Road Strategic Partnership”, 2020, http://www.sussex-academic.com/sa/titles/middle_east_studies/chazizame.htm, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

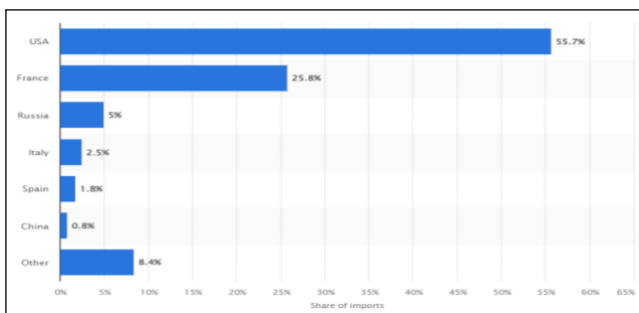
³¹ UAE Government, “UAE-China Joint Statement On Strategic Partnership”, 2018, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/full-text-uae-china-joint-statement-on-strategic-partnership-1.2254614>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

purchases of the upgraded and deadlier Wing Loong II in early 2018. The UAVs, intended for surveillance and reconnaissance, can carry a range of weapons, including missiles and laser-guided bombs, to engage targets on land or in the air.³²

Within the scope of military cooperation between the two countries, in a recently announced agreement between China and the UAE, the UAE has announced that it will buy a dozen of China's first fixed-wing military aircraft, the L-15 trainer.³³

Washington is clearly uncomfortable with signs of nascent China-UAE security cooperation. In fact, cooperation between China and the UAE is being closely scrutinized by US intelligence and national security institutions. For example, the Intelligence Authorization Act (IAA 2022) drafted in October 2021, called for the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) to submit a report within two months on Chinese Emirati cooperation in strategic sectors and the potential for transferring sensitive American technology to China via Abu Dhabi.³⁴

To summarize, security cooperation activities between China and the UAE are developing. Like KSA, despite declining in arms imports during the 2016-2020 periods, the UAE has also emerged as one of the largest arms importers in the Arabian Gulf. These markets are seen by China as lucrative places to export military technology. However, again like the KSA situation, according to the SIPRI data, with 56 percent of all weapons imported by the UAE, the USA still remains the largest arms supplier.³⁵ (See figure 2)



*The largest share of arms imported to the United Arab Emirates between 2000 and 2019 was from **the United States at about 55.7 percent**. It was followed by France as the second largest exporter to the country at a share of about 25.8 percent.*

***China ranked 6th.** The total value of arms imports to the country in that period was about 20 billion U.S. dollars.*

(Figure-2) Share of arms imported in UAE between 2000 and 2019, by supplier country

Conclusion

When we look at the steps that China has taken or tried to take in the Middle East, especially since 2010, we can summarize its targets in three bullets: (1) to increase its political influence in the region in order to oppose the US

³² Turak, Natasha, "Pentagon Is Scrambling As China 'Sells The Hell Out Of' Armed Drones To US Allies", 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/21/pentagon-is-scrambling-as-china-sells-the-hell-out-of-armed-drones-to-americas-allies.html>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

³³ Kahwaji, Riad, Breaking Defense, "UAE agrees to buy its first Chinese fixed wing military aircraft: L-15", 2022 <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/02/uae-agrees-to-buy-its-first-chinese-fixed-wing-military-aircraft-j-15/>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

³⁴ Intelligence Online, "Washington Concerned About Joint Chinese-Emirati Push Into Europe", 2021, <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2021/10/12/washington-concerned-about-joint-chinese-emirati-push-into-europe,109698004-art>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

³⁵ Figure 2. Statista, showing "Share of arms imported in UAE between 2000 and 2019", <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1210952/uae-share-of-arms-imports-by-supplier-country/>, (accessed Jun 30, 2022)

policies in the region, (2) to ensure continuous energy supply from the region to maintain the growth of its economy, (3) to increase BRI's success on a global scale by collaborating with the Middle Eastern states.

Overall, the demand for defense technologies and advanced weapon systems is increasing in the Middle East. This is mainly due to the existing threats that some countries continue to face, as well as tensions between several states in the region. The Gulf States want to transcend their exclusive military cooperation with Washington and bolster relations with other powers, especially China, ultimately determining who emerges as the region's next partner in the era.

In the long term, countries may think that China's economic growth will eventually translate into increased military power in the Middle East, allowing it to adopt superior regional policies in line with its strategic goals.

Ongoing negotiations between the US and Gulf countries over what each can offer the other and alternative options remain on the agenda. However, there is no doubt that China's presence in the equation provides room for maneuvering the Gulf States' relations with Washington and makes them stronger at the negotiating table.

Considering the US restructuring in the Middle East, it will tend to force China to protect and even increase its interests in the region. Moreover, even if China does not want to strengthen its political and security presence in the region, it may feel that it has no other choice.

It is a fact that China's cheap consumer goods, infrastructure projects, and financial aid and lending moves to Middle Eastern countries undermines the US influence in the region. If China's activities in the region continue with the current momentum, it may make China an irreplaceable partner among many countries in the future.

As the statistics show, the preferred position of the US as a military and security partner is still secure. But suppose the US does not react to China's expansion. In that case, China could achieve its goals in a shorter time than it initially expected, and it may weaken Washington's power and potentially endanger core US interests. It may, even more, displace the US as a global superpower.

The bottom line is that it is impossible to ignore countries' relations and the emerging great power of China. At this point, the importance of the breadth and depth of security cooperation activities undertaken by the US should not lag behind China's activities.

Recommendations for the US/USCENTCOM

- Understand China's approach to protecting its interests to anticipate possible collaboration and competition areas.
- Avoid arbitrarily opposing China's economic and development assistance that benefits and stabilizes the region.
- Develop more cooperative military relations with Middle Eastern countries to promote regional stability and support regional partnership efforts.
- Shape individual security cooperation for countries in the region to compete strategically with China and Russia.
- Analyze the conditions/restrictions on arms sales and how they motivate potential operators to seek other suppliers.
- Considering that the countries of the region may seek new suppliers if the US is not replying to their demands, find alternative means to prevent efforts by AOR countries to reduce their reliance on US security by strengthening ties with other security providers (particularly Russia and China),

- Closely monitor Chinese operations and military activities in the CENTCOM AOR and globally to prevent Chinese dominance.
- Continue to engage with PACOM, EUCOM, and AFRICOM AOR key leaders related to the Chinese naval activities.