



Asia & the Middle East Beyond Energy: Towards Security and Defense Cooperation



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Introduction

Adel Abdel Ghafar and Alaa Tartir

The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East has long been shaped by the interests of major global powers. Traditionally, Western powers, particularly the United States and a number of European countries, have played dominant roles in the region's defense frameworks and security architecture. However, recent years have seen a notable shift in this dynamic, with Asian countries increasingly emerging as contributors in the Middle East's security and defense.

MENA-Asia defense cooperation has witnessed considerable developments over the last couple of years. Under its "Look West" policy, India has expanded its bilateral maritime defense cooperation with a number of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Signaling growing trilateral cooperation, India, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and France concluded their first joint maritime exercise in 2023. The UAE is also host to the "Akh unit" which remains South Korea's only military unit deployed overseas beyond its peacekeeping missions. In North Africa, China has conducted joint military exercises in the Mediterranean, and continues to be a major defense partner with countries such as Egypt and Algeria, although its share of imports of major weapons and conventional arms to North Africa as a region declined by 81% from 13% of all imports between 2014 and 2018 to 7.2% between 2019 and 2023, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) data.

Asia's widening security role in the Middle East can primarily be attributed to strengthening economic ties between both regions. Notably, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments, across the Middle East, which have increased Beijing's interests in the region's security. Japan's reliance on the Gulf's energy supplies has also paved the way for greater defense cooperation. Last year, Japan held inaugural military-to-military dialogues with Oman and Qatar respectively.

The Middle East has also become a key market for Asian arms. In just the last decade, China's arms exports to the region increased by 80%, although China's share of imports of major weapons in the Middle East was only 0.5% between 2019 and 2023, according to SIPRI data. South Korea is also increasingly playing an important role in the region's defense markets with various multi-million-dollar arms deals inked with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt in 2022 alone.

The shifting dynamics of global power and the evolving interests of Asian countries in the Middle East present new challenges and opportunities for regional and global security. What is motivating growing Asia-Middle East defense cooperation? How will rising geopolitical tensions across the Middle East impact security ties? What are the limitations of Asia-Middle East defense cooperation? Against a looming decline in the United States' security presence in the Middle East, how can/are the Asian powers contributing to re-shaping the region's security architecture? And how can the Asian powers enhance their role in the Middle East's security landscape?

To answer these questions, and more, the Middle East Council on Global Affairs (ME Council) and SIPRI organized a two-day workshop in Doha on the 8th and 9th of September 2024. The workshop brought together experts to explore these dynamics and foster dialogue on enhancing security and defense partnerships between Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Through collaborative discussions and strategic insights, the workshop contributed to a deeper understanding of this emerging geopolitical landscape.

It also served as an opportunity to openly exchange research ideas among the invited experts. Over the course of two days, the sessions explored the four major Asian powers, China, India, South Korea, and Japan, along with a close analysis of SIPRI's data on defense trends in the region, and a forward-looking session on future trends and trajectories in regional security and defense. The workshop in Doha was the second iteration following a December 2023 workshop in Stockholm, Sweden titled "MENASIA: Geopolitics, Energy and Security," which focused on three broad themes: geopolitics, economics, and regional dynamics; hydrocarbons, energy transitions, and environmental risks; and defense and technology.

Strategic Interests and Motivations- China

Enhancing Strategic Engagement with the Middle East

China's increasing importance in the region's security landscape can be attributed to several factors. For one, China's sizable economic investments in the MENA, namely through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), necessitate a Chinese security role to safeguard these interests. The Middle East has also become a crucial market for Chinese arms with countries including the UAE and Saudi Arabia acquiring Chinese drones in recent years. These arms are appealing to the Middle East due to their relative affordability, advanced technology, and effectiveness. Maritime cooperation has also become an integral space for China-MENA defense collaboration. While U.S. concerns surrounding China-MENA aerial cooperation will likely limit aerial engagement, maritime cooperation will continue to expand.

Towards Inclusive Engagement: Non-State Actors in China's Regional Diplomacy

Non-state actors have grown to be key players in the MENA. To date, China has adopted a cautious approach centered around recognizing groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, as consequential actors, whilst limiting engagement in line with its principles of non-alignment and non-interventionism. Notably, China's attempt to reconcile rivaling Palestinian factions, including Hamas, in 2024, under the Beijing Declaration. Looking ahead, China will focus efforts on better understanding effective and non-contentious approaches to engage these important non-state actors. Beijing is currently maintaining its cautious posture by limiting its role in the U.S. led naval coalitions countering the Houthis in the Red Sea. China's engagement with these actors will be shaped by the international community's attitudes and striking a careful balance between retaining relations and limiting entanglement in regional tensions.

Multilateralism in China-MENA Relations

China has introduced various frameworks cementing multilateral engagement and expanding cooperation with the Middle East, including the appointment of Special Envoys on the Middle East, since 2002. The most important frameworks in recent years include the 2016 Arab Policy Paper which stressed China's commitment to the realization of Palestinian statehood. It also outlined key areas of interest for China which include energy cooperation, increasing trade, investment, and infrastructure cooperation, through the BRI, and sights to cooperate in emerging areas such as space and renewable energy. The Global Security Initiative, Global Civilization Initiative, and the Global Development Initiative will also direct China's MENA ties on both a bilateral level and multilateral cooperation through the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China's focus on reconciling regional rivalries and fostering cooperation will likely center multilateralism in China's diplomacy. The 2023 Iran-Saudi normalization agreement brokered by Beijing is a case in point.

Different Actors, Different Expectations for China's Future Role

Regional and global actors share diverging views on China's expected role in the Middle East's future. The United States perceives China as a free rider, asserting that Beijing is able to pursue its economic interests whilst relying on a security architecture largely developed and maintained by Washington. Some regional states however aspire for a broadened Chinese security role. A wider Chinese role would provide Middle Eastern countries with alternative partners that can contribute to increasing regional autonomy and enhance diversification efforts. Despite heightened expectations for a more substantive Chinese role in the region's defense frameworks, China's strategic

focus and direction will primarily remain within the Asia-Pacific region. However, China's growing economic role will invariably translate to an expanded political and security presence in the Middle East.

Limits of Great Power Competition

There are numerous avenues for greater cooperation between China and the United States both regionally and globally. Both countries heavily rely on the region's energy supplies and critical trade routes which makes the MENA's security and stability in both Washington and Beijing's interest. While prospects for a potential decline in the United States' security engagement abound, China lacks the capacity and interest to replace Washington's role in the Middle East. Rising great power competition is also exerting pressure on MENA states to choose between upholding their traditional and long-standing alliance with the United States or expanding cooperation with China. As the region charts this difficult course, through an intricate balancing act, the United States and China will remain central security and economic partners respectively.



This photo taken on August 1, 2017, shows Chinese People's Liberation Army personnel attending the opening ceremony of China's new military base in Djibouti. (Photo by AFP) / CHINA OUT

Strategic Interests and Motivations- India

From Economic Ties to Political and Security Relations

India has long served as a vital trade partner in the Middle East, particularly to the Gulf. India-Gulf trade ties were facilitated by the Indian Ocean. During the Cold War, India expanded its political relations with various countries across the region while maintaining a limited security presence. At the time, Pakistan became the Gulf's primary defense partner. India's growing role in regional security can be attributed to the expansiveness of its economic interests; namely, the over 9 million large¹ Indian diaspora hosted across the Gulf states. While India's security ties with the region have expanded; they are challenged by India's contentious domestic politics with key issues including Kashmir and India's relationship with Israel.

Empowered Middle Powers in a Multipolar World

Shifts towards a multipolar order are highlighting the roles of middle powers. Against a complex political and security landscape, middle powers are carving diverse economic, diplomatic, and security spaces to affirm their autonomy and agency. Regional middle powers are configuring their security alignments considering critical factors such as capital, commerce, collaboration, connectivity, climate, and technology. The rising salience of non-state actors is also a key driver of regional middle powers' defense partnerships and approaches. Competitive dynamics further accelerate these trends and play an imperative role in the MENA states' approaches to the Asian powers. For instance, the recently announced India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor's (IMEC) exclusion of major players such as Qatar and Oman will test India's ability to enhance relations with the region.

The Rise of Minilateralism: Strengthening Connectivity

Minilaterals, loosely defined as groupings established around a set of shared interests, are re-shaping the MENA and the Asian powers' cooperation. The rapid growth of minilaterals is particularly notable in the Indo-Pacific, with the Quad and I2U2. Regionally, major players such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are actively seeking integration in frameworks such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These trends reflect increasing multilateral engagement alongside robust bilateral relations. Moreover, minilaterals draw interest from potential partners due to their strategic ambiguity which allows members to frame their engagement in alignment with their respective interests and exercise higher autonomy. However, the future of minilaterals will be defined by member states' abilities to manage geopolitical tensions and competition. India and the GCC can benefit from the establishment of maritime minilateral cooperation.

U.S. Foreign Policy Shifts Accelerate Regional Security Diversification

Ambiguities in U.S. foreign policy are fueling regional powers' pursuits to establish new security partnerships; namely, the impact of changing administrators on foreign policy priorities, alignments, and strategies. For instance, under the Obama administration, the United States struck the JCPOA with Iran; however, it was halted shortly after by the Trump administration. These uncertainties raise concerns in MENA countries around the reliability and stability of their alliance with the United States. Conversely, India's foreign policy is less malleable to administration changes

1. "GCC countries host 9 million Indians," *Emirates News Agency- WAM*, July 27, 2024, <https://www.wam.ae/en/article/b4dfcy1-gcc-countries-host-nine-million-indians>.

which provides the region with a degree of reliability. While regional states might find higher stability with India as a partner, the role of the United States in shaping, and contributing to, the region's security landscape remains unparalleled by any alternative partner, affirming Washington's dominant role in the region.

India's Growing Security Footprint in the Middle East

India's ties with the MENA are shaped by the confluence of economics, diplomacy, and security. Shifts in regional relations are also shaping these dynamics including warming Saudi-Iran ties and UAE-Iran ties. In recent years, GCC countries have conducted various joint naval exercises with India. India has also established security arrangements with a number of countries in the Middle East such as Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. These arrangements are comprehensive and stress India's commitments to supporting the stability and security of its allies; however, they stop short of deploying soldiers on the ground. China's cautious approach could benefit from India's no boots on the ground model to enhance security relations with the Middle East.



This handout picture provided by the UAE Presidential Court shows UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (L) and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (C) inspecting an honor guard during a reception for the latter at the Presidential Airport in Abu Dhabi on February 13, 2024. (Photo by Ryan CARTER / UAE PRESIDENTIAL COURT / AFP)

Strategic Interests and Motivations- South Korea

Balancing Self Reliance and Integration in U.S. Led Frameworks

South Korea's approach to the Middle East falls in line with Seoul's strategic goals of increasing self-reliance whilst maintaining alignment and integration in U.S. led frameworks. The Middle East's security ties with Korea have largely been shaped by securing supply chains, exchange of advanced defense technology, and Free Trade Agreements. South Korea-MENA relations are challenged by wider geopolitical dynamics including escalating tensions in the Indo-Pacific and Russia's war on Ukraine. In light of this, South Korea's security interests are therefore focused on consolidating cooperation with Japan and the United States to challenge shared threats. As an integral part of the U.S. led industrial and defense systems in the Indo-Pacific, Seoul's security interests remain aligned with the United States in efforts to secure the Indo-Pacific.

Economic Interests and Energy Security Key to Harnessing Strengthened Cooperation

While the Indo-Pacific is primal in Seoul's defense strategies, economic interests in the Middle East raise prospects for broader MENA-ROK security cooperation. Seoul has extensively cooperated with the region in vital areas including technology transfer, supply chains, semiconductors, batteries, space, etc. Seoul's demonstrated openness to exchange technology expertise and know-how with the Middle East is enhancing local production capacities across the region, further highlighting South Korea's strategic importance. By bolstering regional defense capacities, South Korea is advancing the Middle East's ability to secure shipping lanes which are crucial for the safe and stable delivery of energy exports. This is essential for South Korea as an energy intensive economy and one of the largest importers of energy from the region.

MENA Seeks South Korea as Defense Partner

Amidst rising regional tensions and global instability, MENA countries are cautiously upholding their balancing act between their long-standing traditional ally, the United States, and new allies. Engaging South Korea presents the region with the opportunity to strengthen relations with a U.S. ally, avoiding tensions resultant from cooperation with non-U.S. allies such as Russia and China. While Seoul will likely maintain its alignment with the United States in the Indo-Pacific to protect its security, it is increasingly attempting to chart its own course in other regions. In the MENA, South Korea serves as a reliable defense partner that can address regional security needs without risking relations with the United States.

Treading with Caution: South Korea's Approach to the MENA

South Korea's status as the fifth largest military power² in the world makes it a crucial defense partner for the MENA. In recent years, South Korea has signed security cooperation partnerships with various states. Currently, the UAE is South Korea's biggest security partner in the region. Ties particularly accelerated following the UAE and ROK's 2006 military cooperation agreement and Seoul's subsequent historic decision to deploy the Akh Unit in 2011. Korea offers the region access to efficient and relatively cheaper arms. Despite a relative openness, South Korea remains reserved in its security engagement with the region. To address these gaps, South Korea can utilize alternative channels such as boosting contributions to aid and increased advisory roles.

2. "S. Korea ranks 5th in military power worldwide; N. Korea is 36th: index," *The Korea Times*, January 19, 2024, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/10/113_367228.html.

Challenges to Broadened Security Role

South Korea's growing defense capacities may be challenged by the potential for strategic overstretch and conflict with major powers like Russia and China. These challenges extend to South Korea's security engagement with the MENA. Should Seoul sell arms and/or send personnel to NATO countries hostile to Russia, it might risk a confrontation with Russia; particularly if it sends weapons to Ukraine. South Korea will also be tested by economic competition, within the defense industry, by other major global players such as Australia and European countries' and a dwindling military due to a shrinking population. South Korea should therefore balance its industrial defense expansion with its strategic priorities and national interests.



South Korean peacekeeping soldiers with the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) march with flags during a parade at their base in the southern Lebanese town of Tayr Dibba on October 27, 2010. (Photo by MAHMOUD ZAYYAT / AFP)

Strategic Interests and Motivations- Japan

Security Strategy

Japan has a complex security strategy, defined by three main frameworks. The National Security Strategy (NSS), which adopts a whole-of-government focus. The National Defense Strategy (NDS), specifically geared towards Japan's defense ministry, and the Defense Buildup Program (NBP), a forward-looking framework which aims to develop Japan's future security strategy. Japan's strategy is shaped by a recognition of global shifts towards a multipolar order and concerns over North Korea, Russia, and China. Tokyo's approach also relies on active diplomacy and extensive security engagement with allies and partners. Currently, Japan has defense partnership agreements with 15 countries.³ Japan is expanding and diversifying defense relations across the MENA in domains such as cybersecurity.

Foreign Strategic Relations to be Defined by the Incoming Ishiba Administration

Constitutional frameworks determine Japan's limits on arms exports. Currently, Japan's arms exports are still largely limited due to constitutional constraints. With an incoming new administration, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba will be critical to the future of Japan's foreign defense relations. Japan's evolving defense partnerships with regional states will be shaped by the Ishiba administration's willingness to broaden defense relations with the Middle East. For instance, in 2023, Saudi expressed⁴ interest in joining Japan, Italy, and the UK's joint project to build the next generation of combat jets. Restrictions on Japan's ability to export arms limited its openness to this arrangement. The future of Japan's increasing engagement therefore rests on the Ishiba administration's direction.

Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

Given its proximity, the Indo-Pacific remains consequential to Japan's foreign policy. However, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy is expanding the geographical contours of the Indo-Pacific, thereby allowing Japan to reconcile its primary interest in the Indo-Pacific with its pursuit to diversify alliances. Japan maintains extensive maritime cooperation with MENA states including Japan's coast guard which trains Yemen's coast guards among others across the region. Defense dialogues have also increased in recent years, in 2023, Qatar and Japan hosted an inaugural military to military dialogue. These initiatives reflect a shared interest in confidence-building exercises between Japan and MENA states. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy will be a central pillar in enhancing Japan-MENA defense cooperation, particularly multilateral engagement.

Geopolitical Tensions Complicate Wider Role

Japan is seeking new partners; however, its efforts are limited by several geopolitical dynamics. Japan's expansive cooperation with Israel could complicate its relations with the MENA. Mounting concerns over the potential transfer of Japanese technology to non-allies could also limit de-

3. Mari Yamaguchi, "Why is Japan changing its ban on exporting lethal weapons, and why is it so controversial," Associated Press, March 26, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/japan-military-sale-lethal-weapons-fighter-jet-f6d578f8256ec87a44fd86f5240f8c36>.

4. Tomohiro Ebuchi and Rhyannon Bartlett-Imadegawa, "U.K. 'exploring' Saudi entry to fighter jet project with Italy and Japan," Nikkei Asia, September 24, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/U.K.-exploring-Saudi-entry-to-fighter-jet-project-with-Italy-and-Japan2>.

fense ties. For instance, defense ties between Saudi and Japan are growing but there are concerns around the potential of Saudi transferring/sharing of Japanese military technology with China. Regional states are also exercising caution in their relations with Japan particularly within joining minilateral arrangements. In line with their balancing acts, regional states will not pursue minilateral/multilateral cooperation that could be perceived as anti-China.

Development Assistance and Diplomacy Retain Primacy in Foreign Relations

When compared with other Asian powers, Japan might be playing a limited security role; however, Tokyo still plays a major role in diplomacy and development assistance. Japan has been a principal supporter of The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), a lifeline for many refugees in the region, since 1953, and maintains support to date. Japan has also established synergies and alignments with the region's ambitious development projects such as the establishment of Japan-Saudi Vision 2025, under the framework of Saudi's ambitious Vision 2030. To garner support and traction from the region, Japan will have to affirm the inclusivity and diplomatic mission of its Free and Open Indo Pacific strategy. It will also have to be cautious in its relationship with the United States and how their cooperation translates in the region.



This handout photo taken on July 31, 2023 and released by Japan's Ministry of Defense shows visiting Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman Al Saud (L) shaking hands with his Japanese counterpart Yasukazu Hamada prior to their talks in Tokyo.

Defense and Armaments: Trends of Arms Transfers in the MENA Region

MENA Importers of Major Arms

SIPRI's 2023 Trends in International Arms Transfers report⁵ highlighted that Asia and Oceania, and the Middle East are still the largest two regions importing arms. The Middle East accounted for 30% of arms imports between 2019 and 2023 vs 33% between 2014 and 2018. The United States continued to be the region's major arms supplier, responsible for 52% of the region's imports, followed by France (12%), Italy (10%), Germany (7.1%) and Russia (4.6%). Accounting for 0.5% of imports, China was the largest Asian supplier to the region, of all weapons imports, the largest category imported by the MENA was aircraft (44% between 2019 and 2023) – primarily fighter-ground attack aircrafts, followed by ships (17% between 2019 and 2023) – primarily frigates, and then missiles (17% between 2019 and 2023) – primarily anti-ballistic missiles.

The MENA region also accounted for 17% of all U.S. arms exports, ranking highly in the United States' overall exports. Saudi Arabia was the number one recipient of U.S. exports while five countries in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Israel, and Kuwait) ranked in the top 10 export destinations for the United States between 2019 and 2023. MENA countries also ranked in the top ten importers of Chinese arms, with Algeria (3), Saudi Arabia (6), and Morocco (10).

In North Africa, the largest importers of arms were Algeria (53%), and Morocco (35%). Additionally, Russia (32%), the United States (28%), France (9.4%), Germany (8.4%), and China (7.2%) were the region's largest suppliers.

MENA Exporters of Major Arms

While the region is a net importer of arms, several countries export some conventional arms⁶ as well. Missiles (26%), armored vehicles (21%), and aircraft, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) (19%), were the largest weapon categories exported by the region between 2019 and 2023. Surface-to-air missiles were 43% of all missile exports, infantry fighting vehicles were 37% of armored vehicle exports, and armed UAVs were 45% of all aircraft exports from the region. The top exporters from the region were Israel, Türkiye, and the UAE between 2014 and 2018 and 2019-2023 with the only difference between both periods being the recipients of arms from these countries. As suppliers, countries in the Middle East accounted for 5.4% of Asian and Oceanian countries' total arms imports. Israel alone accounted for 3.9% of Asia and Oceania's arms imports.

East Asian Countries and MENA Security Capacities

China's share of arms imports in the Middle East was only 0.5% between 2019 and 2023, a decline of 67% in comparison to its 1.3% between 2014 and 2018. In North Africa, imports of China's arms decreased from 13%, of all imports, between 2014 and 2018, to 7.2% between 2019 and 2023, an 81% decline. As per available data, South Korea did not export arms to North Africa, whereas its exports to the Middle East declined from 1.1%, between 2014 and 2018, to 0.1%, between 2019 and 2023. Most other Asian exporters (Malaysia, North Korea, New Zealand, and Singapore) declined further. Combined, their arms exports to the Middle East were a mere 0.2% of total arms exports to the region between 2019 and 2023, only Australia and Pakistan showed an increase in that period.

5. Pieter D. Wezeman, Katarina Djokic, Mathew George, Zain Hussain, and Siemon T. Wezeman, Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2023, SIPRI Fact Sheet, (Stockholm, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2024), <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2024/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2023>.

6. "Sources and Methods," SIPRI, accessed October 21, 2024, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods#Coverage>.

The presence and activity of the Asian powers, in the region, is expanding to strengthen the protection of sea lines of communication through the development of bases and military and diplomatic cooperation to ensure economic and energy security. However, arms transfers and trade volumes remain relatively low.



A military armored vehicle is displayed in the Chinese pavilion at the 'World Defense Show 2024', north of the Saudi capital Riyadh on February 4, 2024. (Photo by Fayez Nureldine / AFP)

Future Trajectories and Trends

The Middle East's Current Strategic Environment

The Middle East's strategic landscape is marked by a set of defining features. It comprises regional actors that are unable to provide for their own security needs, rising tensions between major players, and attempts by a number of states to engage new allies and partners. The middle power dilemma, where regional states with varying levels of power compete to assert dominance in shaping regional affairs, is also critical. Particularly as major players such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, and Türkiye vie for dominance in the region. The future of the region's security landscape will be closely tied to the future of oil, the United States' eroding defense capabilities, and the outcome of its 2024 presidential elections and the future of the Abraham Accords, and the Asian powers' emerging roles as central partners.

The MENA's Pursuit for a Broader Asian Role

Regional efforts to diversify security partners are carving a wider space for the Asian powers to play a role. MENA countries are increasingly consolidating bilateral relations and working towards substantiating Asian defense commitments. However, as the Asian powers' roles increase, they will have to balance engagement with avoiding entanglement in regional dynamics. The Asian powers' willingness to exchange technology know-how and support local production efforts are gaining traction across the region and will advance the Middle East's defense indigenization efforts. As opposed to building transactional relations, the Asian powers have demonstrated interest in accounting for local concerns, highlighting their strategic importance to the MENA.

Gulf States Seek Diversification

Security diversification is particularly pressing for the Gulf, a region that has historically relied on the United States for the development and maintenance of its security architecture. This reliance has led to heightening U.S. pressure on the Gulf to limit arms acquisition from non-U.S. allies, particularly China. Gulf states have adopted diverging approaches in their openness to diversify away from the United States. Some states have been more open than others, such as the UAE and Saudi, while others have maintained a cautious posture such as Kuwait and Bahrain. Qatar has struck a careful balancing act by pursuing new allies while still maintaining robust ties with the United States. Gulf states are also largely driven to establish and strengthen new alliances due to rising regional tensions and rivalries. Operation Prosperity Guardians', launched late 2023, failure to attract support from within the region, apart from Bahrain, signals looming doubts on the future of U.S.-Gulf security relations.

The Future of the U.S. Role

Fears and perceptions of a decline in the United States' role in regional security are advancing the MENA's pursuit for expanded ties with the Asian powers. For Washington, China-MENA security engagement poses risks; particularly in terms of air defense where the United States fears an expanded Chinese role might compromise strategic American assets. China has thus far centered its role around the maritime domain but aerial cooperation might test the United States' tolerance. Regional powers are also leveraging growing relations with China to acquire greater concessions from the United States. The view of the United States' role in fueling regional instability coupled with recent U.S. failures to stabilize the region leave an uncertain future for Washington in the MENA.

Avenues for Asia-MENA Security Cooperation

The Asian powers are participating in maritime coalitions across the MENA. This signals the importance maritime cooperation will hold in the future of Asia-MENA security relations. While the region can expand its security cooperation with Asia through the maritime domain, three areas will remain contentious— competition in base access, the geopolitics of ports, and the region’s ability to acquire resources from the Asian powers. China, India, Japan, and South Korea all adopt different degrees of caution and openness in foreign defense relations. While the Gulf is cognizant of the United States’ importance in its security architecture, it will continue to explore efforts to broaden relations and alliances, with sights to expand aerial and maritime collaboration with the Asian powers.



This handout image provided by the UAE Ministry Of Presidential Affairs on January 16, 2023 shows UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (C-R) and South Korea’s President Yoon Suk-yeol (C) posing for a group photo with other officials during a visit to the Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant in al-Dhafra region of the Gulf emirate of Abu Dhabi. (Photo by Mohamed AL-HAMMADI / UAE’s Ministry of Presidential Affairs / AFP)

About the Middle East Council on Global Affairs

The Middle East Council on Global Affairs (ME Council) is an independent, non-profit policy research institution based in Doha, Qatar. The ME Council produces policy-relevant research, convenes meetings and dialogues, and engages policy actors on geopolitical and socioeconomic issues facing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The ME Council serves as a bridge between the MENA region and the rest of the world, providing a regional perspective on global policy issues and establishing partnerships with other leading research centers and development organizations across the MENA region and the world.

About Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)

SIPRI is an independent international institute dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament. Established in 1966, SIPRI provides data, analysis and recommendations, based on open sources, to policymakers, researchers, media and the interested public. Based in Stockholm, SIPRI is regularly ranked among the most respected think tanks worldwide.



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