



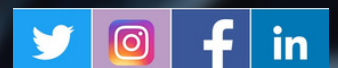
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ISSUE BRIEF

GROWING CHINESE INFLUENCE IN WEST ASIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA AND THE US

MS YASHIKA SHARMA

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GROWING CHINESE INFLUENCE IN WEST ASIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA AND THE US



Ms Yashika Sharma, is a Research Intern at CENJOWS.

Abstract

China is increasing its footprint in West Asia. The diplomatic machinery put to use in resolving the decades-old Saudi-Iran conflict bolstered China's position as a peacemaker, which has been held for long by the US, indicating the rise of a new power. However, the US had created a vacuum by unilaterally abdicating the nuclear deal with Iran. The US was in no position to broker the peace deal due to its confrontational approach with Tehran and recent strains in US-Saudi relations. This brief examines if China has effectively replaced the US in West Asia, and its implications for the region and India. This brief will further examine the upcoming players and their economic, diplomatic, and security agendas.

Introduction

The transformation of the world order after the Russia-Ukraine war has shifted focus towards Asia. West Asia has always held a geopolitically significant position due to its location, energy resources, and civilizational roots, but the region itself is plagued with intra-regional rivalries, primarily due to the contention of religious dominance, unresolved border disputes and the rise of non-state actors and extremist groups. However, West Asia is now undergoing significant geopolitical shifts, efforts towards peace and normalisation in the region have opened new doors for cooperation and integration, lessening the region's reliance on any foreign ally for undertaking any

geopolitical decisions. The West Asian countries are also playing their bid over the control of energy resources, which has given them power at their disposal.

The intra-regional rivalries in West Asia are largely a manifestation of religious contestations; being the birthplace of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, this has also caused rifts of communalism like the sectarian divide between Shia and Sunni Muslims leading to a long-drawn regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the issues of Palestine and Israel's statehood leading to Palestinian intifadas and Arab-Israeli wars, and the subsequent rise of extremist groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis, leading to transnational terrorism and instability. The constant instability within the region has paved the way for foreign powers to intervene and exploit the situation as per their national interests: a very prominent example would be the US, undertaking various military operations like Operation Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Inherent Resolve to secure a deep-rooted influence over the region and its energy resources. Allegiance to NATO and US-led coalitions against extremist forces like ISIS, many Western powers, including Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, have also maintained a significant presence in West Asia. These countries primarily contribute troops for training local Iraqi and Syrian forces against ISIS but have also established military bases on foreign soil. UK,¹ has bases in Bahrain, Iraq, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, France ², maintains bases in Djibouti and the UAE; and Germany has a comparatively smaller presence with only one base in Jordan. Additionally, since 2011, West Asia has been in the throes of the failed Arab Spring revolutions, with Russia and Turkey getting actively involved in Syria. The upcoming players in West Asia's geopolitics are China, India, Turkey, and Russia, with their own geopolitical agendas and interests in place. To name a few, some state actors are trying to curb the US influence, others are trying to secure lucrative markets and energy sources, etc.

Western governance and interference in the politics of the region only contributed to fueling the existing issues. Since World War I, the majority of West Asia was divided into artificial states by France and Britain, which consequently created haphazard borders irrespective of the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of the Arab population³, hence the legacy of imperialism was borne by the West Asian region as well. The US also started maintaining its position in West Asia after WWII. As the world's largest oil consumer and importer, the US has ensured its strategic interests under the pretext of securing stability in the region. These Western powers leveraged weapons and military support for allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia and established military bases in Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, with the efforts directed towards influencing the energy policies of its allies through power and coercion^[iii], while supporting authoritarian regimes that served their interests. However, this led to wars and conflicts in the region between these Western-backed regimes like Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and the Shah of Iran and their opponents, Islamists, nationalists, and democrats. The situation worsened to the extent that successive wars⁴ broke out in the region like the Iran-Iraq war, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Gulf War, the Syrian civil war, and the Yemeni civil war. The tipping point that caused strains between the US and its allies was the US withdrawal from the Iran

nuclear deal⁵. This move not only questioned the US' position as an ally, as a global power, and as a peace broker but also marked the beginning of the US influence waning off in the region, not drastically but gradually. The chances of a nuclear proliferation crisis in West Asia increased, which led to strained US relations with its European allies; nevertheless, the US remained consistent with its West Asian allies, maintaining strategic partnerships in the region⁶. However, the uncertainties in US policies gradually prompted the West Asian countries to move away from Western influence and seek other global power alternatives for partners like China, Russia, India, and Turkey.

Although the US influence in the region is waning, the US does not have much to lose as they have gradually withdrawn some stakes from West Asia. The US has increased its domestic production of oil and gas and became the world's largest exporter of liquified natural gas (LNG) in 2020⁷, surpassing Qatar and Australia. Nonetheless, the US has repeatedly stated its commitment to the region. The Abraham Accords which were signed in 2020⁸ formalised relations between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, and were later followed by Sudan and Morocco, aiding in the restoration of formal relations between Israel and West Asian countries is a significant diplomatic achievement for the United States. The establishment of I2U2⁹ (India, Israel, the UAE, and the US) had similar aspirations, i.e., increasing trade and coalition in West Asia while constraining Iran and China, however, after the Saudi-Iran and Saudi-Turkey détente, the I2U2 could be deemed to be a competitive block. The US also desires a Saudi-Israel normalisation deal.

China In West Asia

China has been steadily making space in the West Asian region and filling in the gaps left by the US. Although China's ex-foreign minister, Mr Wang Yi, stated that China is not asserting any kind of new role in the Middle East or taking advantage of a US-influence vacuum but the record of its progress suggests otherwise. China is following the West's strategy of leveraging weapons to create stronger influence in the region. China's arms exports to West Asia, with its no strings attached policy, include¹⁰ : -

- China has supplied anti-ship missiles such as the C-802 and C-704, along with type 69 and type 72Z tanks to Iran.
- China has sold F-7 and JF-17 fighter jets, along with the CH-4 and CH-5 MALE UAVs to Iraq.
- China has supplied the Type 053H3 and Type 54A frigates, along with JY-27A and JYL-1 radars to Saudi Arabia. The Cloud Shadow, HALE UAV was also delivered to Saudi Arabia.
- In August 2023, Falcon Shield, the first-ever joint air force exercise, was organised in Xinjiang by China and the UAE.

West Asian countries are moving closer to China and using this opportunity to apprise the US of the power play in the region to keep them fairly involved. When China successfully brokered the Saudi-Iran peace deal¹¹, it raised some concerns around the world that China is not only a regional behemoth but is also establishing itself as a

major global power. But why couldn't the US broker this deal? In light of Washington's confrontational approach towards Tehran and newly strained relations with Saudi Arabia due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the US was seen stating that "we are reevaluating our relationship with Saudi Arabia¹²". Hence, this might have made the Saudis turn to China; one of Saudi Arabia's former intelligence chiefs also said that neither the United States nor Europe would have been "honest brokers" in securing a deal between the kingdom and Iran like the one China has helped obtain¹³. This move emboldened China as a strong power in the world order. However, China is treading carefully without being entirely entangled in the region's chaotic geopolitics, as although they are the region's prominent arms supplier, they are not ready to make any military commitments like those of the US.

After establishing itself as a diplomatic success in the region, China aims to bolster its economic missions and is keen on securing access to energy resources, which to a great extent is being made sure by China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative¹⁴ (BRI). West Asia is an integral part of China's BRI due to its strategic locations and historical trade routes. China has signed BRI cooperation agreements with 20 Arab countries. China is also heavily investing in developmental projects in the region, such as railways, ports, pipelines, refineries, power plants, special economic zones, etc. The BRI is giving a strategic edge to China over the US in West Asia as it offers an alternative to the US-led order in the region.

To further bolster its position in the region, China has come up with the 'China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership', and the 'China-Arab States Cooperation Forum'.

- China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF)¹⁵ – It is a formal dialogue initiative between China and the Arab League, established in 2004. The forum has been a great success and has been fruitful for both China and West Asia; the trade volume between them increased from \$36.7 billion in 2004 to \$240 billion in 2019. The number of Chinese tourists to West Asia increased from 300,000 in 2004 to 2.5 million in 2019. CASCF has been successful in promoting cooperation in energy, infrastructure, education, culture, security, etc. One of the most important feats that CASCF achieved was setting the groundwork for further engagement on BRI projects with West Asian countries.
- China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership¹⁶ – This is a 25-year cooperation agreement signed in March 2021. This partnership is in direct opposition to the US-led order in West Asia, as according to the agreement, China will invest \$400 billion in Iran's oil, gas, transportation, and manufacturing sectors in return for which Iran will provide China with a heavily discounted supply of oil and gas along with access to its strategic locations and markets, China is now being seen as a lifeline for the Islamic Republic via Iranian oil purchases that reached \$47bn over the past two years. The pact also includes researching and deploying artificial intelligence technology for military applications such as drones, missiles, cyber warfare, and surveillance.

- China-Iraq Military and Technical Cooperation Agreement¹⁷ - Signed in September 2019 between China and Iraq, this five-year agreement covers various fields of cooperation such as the defence industry, equipment, training, logistics, and maintenance. The pact also includes the transfer and employment of artificial intelligence technologies for military applications such as counter-terrorism, border security, and intelligence analysis.
- China-Saudi Arabia Joint Research Center on AI¹⁸ - This is a collaborative research centre founded in November 2018 by China and Saudi Arabia that focuses on the study and development of AI technology and applications. The centre's mission is to foster AI innovation and collaboration between the two countries, as well as to investigate and apply AI technologies for military objectives such as the defence industry, equipment, command and control, and decision-making.

Turkey In West Asia

Turkey is a significant force in the Black Sea, which has propelled it to prominence in Europe, the Middle East, and Eurasia. The Turkish government recognised this role well and began to exercise its influence in West Asia. The primary reason for Turkey's engagement in Syria to help the Assad administration is to safeguard its national interests, namely the prevention of a Kurdish state along its borders. This move strengthened Turkey's position as a rising independent power¹⁹ in West Asia. The emphasis on independent power is because Turkey is a member of NATO and an aspiring candidate for EU membership; nonetheless, Turkey has always had an independent and assertive foreign policy, which sometimes also involved clashing with its Western allies if need be.

Turkey's staunch support for Azerbaijan²⁰ in its conflict with Armenia through crucial military and diplomatic help resulted in a victory for Baku, which consequently ascertained Turkey's position in West Asia. Turkey has also been supporting Ukraine by providing them with Turkey's indigenously made Bayraktar TB2 drones. The sides that Turkey has been taking during these conflicts reflect its intention of limiting Russia's expansionism in the West Asian region by backing the opposite sides. The rift between Turkey and Russia over West Asia mainly started with power competition after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Turkey is a proponent of Eurasianism²¹, an ideological and geopolitical idea emphasising Turkey's identity and role as a bridge between Europe and Asia, as well as distinct civilizations and cultures. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Eurasianism for Turkey meant assuming a leading role for Caucasus states, leaving out Russia of the picture.

Turkey has been siding with China, developing a China-Turkey²² nexus on numerous topics such as trade, investment, infrastructure, energy security, and so on has provided China an advantage in West Asia while giving Turkey an advantage in Central Asia and beyond. The China-Turkey relationship is threefold: (i) economic, (ii) security, and (iii) cultural. Turkey is an important partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), participating in projects such as the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline

(TANAP), the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, and the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway. Turkey supports China's position on the South China Sea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan; both countries also conduct joint counter-terrorism exercises and consultations. Cultural interactions are also improving people-to-people ties in both countries. It is also worth noting that Turkey has a sizable Uyghur diaspora who share cultural ties with the Uyghurs of China. This growing partnership has raised concerns for both India and the US threatening their economic and technological developments in the West Asian region.

Russia In West Asia

Russia's role in West Asia can be divided into two phases²³ : -

- Phase of Decline: - Historically Russia has been a major player in West Asia since the Soviet era and used to compete with other players like the US and Britain for power or influence in the region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia lost a considerable presence in the region, hence the phase of decline.
- The phase of Resurgence: - Under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russia has regained its stature as a power in West Asia. Hence, the phase of resurgence started in the late 2000s.

Every foreign power in West Asia seeks to secure its energy sources in the region, but for Russia, it is also a question of prestige. Given Russia's desire to project itself as a great global force, establishing a solid presence in West Asia serves as a stepping stone towards that goal. While maintaining a substantial military presence in the region, it attempts to counter the US presence by collaborating with its adversaries, such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Russia has maintained a major presence in the region since 2015, when it had to militarily intervene in Syria, deploying troops and aircraft to assist the Assad administration in its fight against extremist organisations²⁴. Russia's assistance helped to secure the regime and keep the civil war from growing, they also prevented a US strike in Syria against its chemical weapons; later, Russia was also involved in the political process of ending the conflict, such as the Astana talks and the Constitutional Committee, however, no side has achieved a lasting or comprehensive solution.

To further ensure a strong presence in the region, Russia is aligning with other powers like China and Iran and jointly forming an informal axis²⁵ for alignment and cooperation among these three countries. The grouping of this axis clearly defines their common motive of challenging the US-led world order and exerting their influence across West Asia and beyond. In 2022, Russia's exports to Iran rose by 27%, and Iran's exports to Russia rose by 10%. Both sides agreed to scale up trade in currencies other than the US dollar. Russia has invested \$40 billion in Iran and bought a large number of military drones and short-range ballistic missiles that are being used against Ukraine.²⁶ As a result of the ongoing Ukraine conflict, certain West Asian countries, such as Syria and Iran, have publicly supported Russia's invasion.²⁷ Other nations, such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt, are strengthening their connections

with Russia in the aftermath of the ongoing conflict by working in many sectors like energy, trade, defence, and security, while steadily drifting away from the United States and its allies. Other nations, such as Israel and Jordan, are attempting to strike a balance between Russia and the West without forsaking their own alliances.

Russia needs China's support to reshape the world order. After being sanctioned and having its trade cut off with the West, Russia has increased its closeness with Beijing, which has supported Moscow on the international stage. China has also openly criticised the West's sanctions on Iran. Russia, Iran, and China have also jointly held naval drills in the Indian Ocean, sending a united message to the West. The Russia-Saudi-China oil axis²⁸ is yet another grouping that will help Russia increase its cooperation in the region while ensuring energy supplies for itself and a market for Russian products in both China and West Asia.

However, Russia's proximity to Beijing is not without consequences for Moscow. Previously, the US and Russia were the more dominant countries in the region, but with the growth of China, not only has the US' position been weakened, but Russia's role has also been diminished. Another significant blow suffered by Russia following the Ukraine crisis was the imposition of major sanctions by the West, which effectively isolated Russia and decreased Russia's resources in the West Asian region. Russia's internal economic and political issues were exacerbated by dropping oil prices, COVID-19, and other factors, weakening Russia's ability in the region. As a result, it would not be incorrect to claim that Russia's influence in the region is waning, except for the leverage with OPEC.

India In West Asia

India's footprints in West Asia have been expanding over the years. West Asia is of significant interest to India since it accounts for more than 70% of India's oil imports making it critical for India's energy security. With a diaspora of 9 million people, India receives \$15 billion in remittances each year²⁹. To boost commerce even further, India and the UAE signed the region's first Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement and after 14 years of stall, India has finally resolved talks of a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Gulf Countries Cooperation (GCC). The 'Look West Policy'³⁰ of India is the Indian government's overarching strategy for dealing with West Asia. Although the policy was launched in 2005, it has only intensified under the present government. However, with regional power dynamics shifting and increased Chinese involvement, India's role in the area is affected. To counter increasing Chinese involvement in the West Asian region, which also poses a threat to India's security, India has built Chabahar port in Iran to counter China's Gwadar port, which is a part of BRI. Moreover, India is increasing its engagement in multilateral platforms and initiatives like the Hormuz Peace Initiative, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.

For a long time, India was the biggest trading partner of most West Asian countries, but recently this position has been overtaken by China, making it the largest trading partner of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq. Simultaneously, China is also heavily investing

in these countries through BRI, which is substituting India in the region, which consequently will also affect India's relations with its partners like the US, Russia, Israel, and the UAE. China's involvement can also pose a risk to India's energy security by disrupting supply routes. To counter China's BRI, India and the US have announced the ambitious India-Middle East-Europe Corridor³¹ (IMEC) multinational rail and shipping project on the sidelines of the G20 summit held in New Delhi. Prime Minister Modi and US President Joe Biden also co-chaired a special event on the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) on September 9 in New Delhi. The corridor aims to link West Asian countries to India by rail and ports. The corridor will include India, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, and the European Union. However, Turkey has been apprehensive of the IMEC, primarily because Turkey was not invited to be a part of this project, sparking an immediate response from the Turkish President, who was seen stating that there can be no corridor without Turkey. The main concern for Turks is how the corridor bypassing Turkey will not only reduce its influence in the region but will also benefit its regional rivals like Iran and Israel by increasing their security and cooperation through trade and investment. However, in response to this initiative, Turkey has diverted its focus towards the "Iraq Development Road Project³²". The Turkish President was also seen stating that this project is a priority for Turkey. The first phase of the Iraq Development Road Project is expected to be completed by 2028³³; this project is already materialising and will help Turkey connect to both Europe and Gulf states. As compared to the Iraq Development Project, IMEC is still in its initial theoretical phase. Nevertheless, both IMEC and India-GCC FTA are interlinked and imperative in ensuring India's success story in West Asia.

India's military diplomacy³⁴ has gained momentum in West Asia by securing some of the region's dominant players, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as close defence partners. The Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan has played a crucial role in gradually establishing a self-reliant domestic defence industry that is also capable of exporting defence technology and equipment. In February 2023, India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited and the UAE's defence firm EDGE signed a memorandum of understanding to explore the possibility of joint design and development of missile systems and UAVs. Saudi Arabia's Power for Defence Technologies Co. (PDTC) and India's DPSU Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) signed an agreement in late December 2022 to collaborate on aeronautical technologies, encompassing both civilian and defence uses. A source also mentioned a possible partnership between Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) and the Indian armed forces in the field of multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS). India is also looking forward to strengthening its military-to-military ties with Oman, including joint drills and defence industrial cooperation, while also closely working with Bahrain and Qatar to ramp up maritime security. However, India is a new player in the defence diplomacy of West Asia, and it is too soon to predict what shape this new venture will take in the future.

India's growing influence in the region can also be attributed to its technological success. As part of its 'Vaccine Maitri³⁵' India donated COVID-19 vaccinations to countries in West Asia, including Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the

UAE, and Iran. India has also worked with these countries on vaccine discovery, manufacturing, and distribution. Another important success story of India's leading role in digital technology and financial inclusion is the adoption of UPI by several countries; in fact, West Asian countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also adopted UPI³⁶ and launched their versions as 'UAE Pass' and Saudi Arabia's 'STC pay'. India has also elevated itself to a responsible and reliable partner by assuring West Asian countries of food and water security³⁷. India provides expertise in water management, irrigation, desalination, and conservation to countries like Israel, the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, and Iran and then further collaborates with these countries on agricultural research, crop diversification, organic farming, agro-processing, etc.

Way Forward For India

India's interests in the region can only be secured when it maintains its non-partisan stance and cooperates with different actors in the region, like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, etc. Taking this a step further, India must retain its independent stance on any regional dispute, such as the Iran Nuclear Deal, the Yemen crisis, and the Qatar blockade, among others, by adhering to its policy of 'Non-Alignment' and avoiding any regional bloc or alliance. However, if used effectively, India's soft power diplomacy³⁸ may be a powerful tool. India must use its leverage of the strong Indian diaspora, and historical and civilisational ties in the region to strengthen cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

India's military diplomacy is not well established when compared to the other giants supplying arms and weapons to the region, like the US, the UK, and France. India's defence exports will only grow gradually and at speed; in the meantime, the goal should be to strengthen defence and security cooperation. While retaining strategic autonomy, India must strengthen strategic partnerships with countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Oman. West Asian countries play a vital role in the Indo-Pacific paradigm; therefore, expanding defence engagements is critical. Organising and participating in naval exercises in the Indian Ocean Region, as well as joint exercises with partners, can prove to be conducive to sending a strong message across the adversaries.

India could utilise its diplomatic clout to help arbitrate between the conflicting parties in the region to promote peace-keeping, and institutional building, while also working with other foreign players such as the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union. By projecting itself as a responsible and reliable partner who can contribute to West Asia's peace and prosperity, India can emerge as a key player and a constructive force in the area.

Conclusion

Countering China is a complex diplomatic challenge because, sooner than any country could imagine, China spread out its roots deep into West Asian geopolitics by making large investments in development projects, potentially promising these countries a more reliable and accountable partner than the US. To compete with China, India and

the United States will need to expand bilateral relations with West Asian countries, with increased defence and intelligence collaboration being a good place to start. India took a nonpartisan approach to all West Asian conflicts, which had a significant impact on India's diplomatic partnership in the region, whereas many other countries, such as China and Russia, would use the situation to boost their stature and assist in mediating and resolving the disputes. As a result, both individually and collectively, India should enhance its diplomatic interaction with West Asian countries. India must also pursue its soft power diplomacy to emphasise its historical, cultural, and civilizational ties with West Asian countries.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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