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THE RIVALRY BETWEEN USA, RUSSIA AND CHINA FOR DOMINATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Mediterranean area still remains a key operational theater of confrontation between the dominant powers

The government of the United States of America in 2017 and 2018, respectively with the U.S. National Security Strategy and with the U.S. National Defense Strategy, has elevated strategic competition with China and Russia to a key element for the US grand plan with a significant change of vision with respect to the low-intensity conflicts against non-state actors that have been going on since September 11, 2001.

Although the competition must be understood globally, the main attention has been paid to Europe and Asia.

In 2022 the Rand Corporation think tank, which provides analysis and policy research on a wide range of issues and is officially independent although notoriously close to the US Department of Defense, produced an interesting study entitled "Crossroads of Competition. China, Russia and United States in the Middle East" which focuses on the strategic analysis of the geopolitical dynamics and interests of the three global Powers in the Middle East region, where they are competing for political and economic influence in one of the most complex and strategically important areas on the planet.

In fact, the Middle East is a crossroads that attracts the attention of China, Russia and the United States, each with its own specific agenda and objectives.

Their competition in the Middle East area reflects the interests and ambitions of these global players.

Historical events have demonstrated in fact that for a State to be a great Power, it must be active and have influence in the Middle East.

The report analyzes the political, economic, and military interests and activities of China and Russia in

that theater and identifies where their efforts conflict, intersect, or complement U.S. interests and activities.



Fig 1.

Countries belonging to the so-called Near East (Levante).
(photo by Lara Jameson, pexel.com)

It also systematically identifies the extent and places where strategic competition occurs, where it is most likely to occur in the future, and where and how it is most likely to threaten US interests.

It also provides recommendations on steps politicians in Washington could take to maintain an advantageous position in the region and in strategic competition with China and Russia.

As regards the geostrategic context, the research highlights how the Middle East is a complex region characterized by numerous conflicts, political instability and religious and ethnic tensions. China, Russia and the United States are all involved in the region for various reasons with different but interconnected interests.

Russian goals often conflict with those of the United States and its allies. Russia considers itself within its right and duty to occupy a place of privilege and significant influence in its immediate post-Soviet neighborhood and seeks recognition as a great power.

China and Russia have approached the region differently, but both have tried to remain on good terms with all Middle Eastern states regardless of intra-regional disputes and are diplomatically active, as evidenced by their senior leaders who frequently visit most of those nations.

Russia has been much more enterprising in the military field, even before its armed intervention in Syria in 2015, compared to China which has preferred to pursue the economic commitment, while remaining cautious in deepening its involvement in the diplomatic and security affairs of those territories.



Fig. 2

Constantinopoli (Photo by Faruk Tokluoğlu, pexel.com)

Russia, which boasts close historical ties and has a long history of influence in the Middle East, has once again become a major player in recent years.

In an attempt to preserve its political and military influence, it moves to exploit the local context to promote its interests. It has engaged militarily in Syria by supporting the Assad regime, thus increasing its regional influence. It has also forged relations with Iran and played an active role in the sale of weapons systems, energy competition and diplomatic efforts.

While Russia presents short-term challenges, China poses a far greater threat as it could dent US interests in the Middle East in the long term. The country of the Dragon is economically and demographically larger, engaged globally and has strengthened its armed forces in all sectors.

Chinese documents systematically accuse the United States of maintaining a "Cold War mentality" as the current strategic competition is similar to the Cold War, being global in scope and not geographically contained in the Indo-Pacific region.

China is trying to secure the supply of energy resources to support its economic growth, as well as looking for new markets for its exports. Beijing has invested heavily in energy and commercial infrastructure in countries in the region, particularly those participating in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The United States has been the dominant power in the Middle East theater for several decades, motivated mainly by the need to guarantee security, the fight against terrorism and access to energy resources. After having been involved in various conflicts, they protect their multiple interests trying to maintain them by moving in a delicate balance that can guarantee stability, energy supplies and help to key allies, without neglecting at the same time to contain the influence of China and Russia in the region.

The Middle East appears to be characterized by a complex and articulated network of political relations, conflicts and socio-economic challenges that influence the positions and strategies of the three superpowers in that chessboard where there is no lack of elements of cooperation, competition and struggle for influence. While there are areas of common interest, such as energy security and regional stability, each actor also pursues specific objectives.

In the course of exploring the economic competition between the three powers in the Middle East, it is noted that China has become an increasingly prominent presence in the region with massive investments in infrastructure, energy resources and trade through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which aims to create infrastructure, trade and investment networks in many Middle Eastern countries. The initiative aims to link China to the Middle East by creating new economic opportunities but also by raising concerns about the economic-strategic dependence and full sovereignty of the states concerned.

These efforts contribute to China's economic diversification and its growing presence in this area without, however, emphasis on the military implication.



Fig. 3

Oil tanker at the dock (photo by Tom Fisk, pexel.com)

Russia has maintained long-standing relationships with various local actors and seeks to consolidate and enhance its brokerage and economic position through energy sector and military cooperation agreements, including, as an alternative, arms supplier. To expand its influence, Moscow aims to project power, balance US influence and maintain access to warm Mediterranean ports.

The United States aims to preserve its interests by maintaining a significant and entrenched economic, commercial and military presence, which includes the importation of oil and natural gas and the promotion of its investments.

At the same time, they pay particular attention to maintaining the regional balance of power without however appearing to have the intention of committing themselves beyond a certain limit, evidently recognizing the need to devote every resource to the Indo-Pacific theater in the near future.

The rivalry between these Powers has significant implications and creates challenges and opportunities for regional actors, where it can affect the economic development, energy security and stability of the Middle East.

The study then focuses on the political competition between China, Russia and the United States in the region in relation to the fact that the Powers in question use different strategies to pursue their interests.

China seeks to establish close diplomatic ties and promote a stronger political presence in the Middle East, offering through the BRI investments, economic assistance and cooperation in various sectors in order to build deep economic-financial ties and expand its political influence. This strategy aims to ensure the

security of its energy imports, build political alliances and promote China's image in the region.

Russia, with its long history of relations in the area, seeks to exploit the internal dynamics of Middle Eastern countries to further its political agenda. Using diplomacy, military assistance and intervention as well as support for friendly governments or even non-state realities, Moscow intends to strengthen and consolidate its presence particularly with a view to increasing its own security.

China and Russia, as a secondary target, both aim to erode US influence in the region.

The United States, determined to protect its strategic interests and to promote regional stability perceived as a priority, maintains a significant military presence, supporting friendly governments, participating in peace negotiations and trying to contain terrorist threats.

The US has two key allies in Israel and Saudi Arabia pursuing a policy of containment towards Iran. However, in recent years there has been a shift in Washington's priorities, with an increased focus on strategic competition with China and Russia on a global level, leading to a recalibration of Middle East policy.

Political competition between these powers can influence the balance of power, conflict resolution and the evolution of regional politics.

The study continues by making the following recommendations.

There is much the United States can do, if it chooses, in the Middle East, independently of the activities of Russia and China. They are already working to resolve international disputes, helping build trade and investment relationships between US companies and the region, and providing aid where needed and helpful.

Some Chinese and Russian assets could be beneficial to countries in the region, such as Chinese infrastructure construction projects. The United States could commit to helping local governments take advantage of such investments in ways that enhance benefits to the region without harming American interests. These actions would strengthen the role of external leading power in the area.

The US should be selective in the Chinese and Russian activities it seeks to counter in the region, taking

response actions only when Washington deems US interests are actually at risk.

The US may consider prioritizing countering those countries that host significant Chinese and Russian assets that go against US interests. The main areas for future competition are Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, all of which are prime US interests in the region.

The United States may choose to implement cost imposition strategies intended to create dilemmas for Beijing and Moscow, dilemmas that impact their resources and attention and reduce their ability to compete. Such strategies in the Middle East would complement those already being implemented in Asia and Europe and would likely be lower risk. Although the United States may try to counter Chinese and Russian activities, the determining element in deciding the success or failure of any action is given by the countries of the region. The US can pull a variety of levers of influence but must weigh local reactions, calculating how far its vital interests need to be safeguarded. Finally, the United States should seek areas of cooperation, limited as they may be. In

conclusion, the Rand Corporation research highlights how the complexity and importance of the competition between China, Russia and the United States in the Middle East constitutes a complex and constantly evolving phenomenon. The geopolitical, economic and political dynamics of the region are deeply influenced by the strategies and interests of these three global powers. It is crucial for regional actors to understand these dynamics and adopt informed and balanced foreign policies to protect their interests and promote stability in the Middle East. Furthermore, the importance of multilateral cooperation is underlined to address common challenges in the region and promote sustainable development and stability, essential conditions for lasting peace. The competition between the three great powers will have significant consequences not only on the region itself, but also on the international system as a whole.

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Pier Riccardo Piovesana is a retired Director General of Polizia di Stato. He attended the Academy of the Guard Corps of P.S. from 1974 to 1978 and subsequently various courses including that of Management Training and that of "Public Order and Crowd Management. Security During Major Events" at the Polizei-Führungsakademie in Münster, Germany. He was Quaestor of Gorizia and Parma. He has held various positions in Police Headquarters, Specialty Departments and Educational Institutes where he has also carried out numerous lectures. He has been a member of many collegial bodies, including international ones. For his professional activity he has received various honors and national and foreign certificates. He has been a member of CeSMar since 2021.

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