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China's engagement in the Middle East shows a growing tendency and a multifaceted character (Eslami & Papageorgiou, 2023).<sup>1</sup> The primary area of focus still remains economic, with a number of investments and technological cooperation initiatives. Since 2020, China has become the largest partner of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and 16 Middle Eastern countries have joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), enhancing their cooperation by signing numerous Memoranda of Cooperation.<sup>2</sup> China's engagement centers around energy cooperation due to its reliance on fossil fuels, but it has extended to promoting initiatives in harnessing solar, hydro, wind, and nuclear technologies and fostering collaborative projects in the region.

China has promoted soft power initiatives, such as culture and educational exchanges, with countries in the region. Its engagement is based on the peaceful coexistence of civilizations, acknowledging the diverse cultures and political systems in the region, which has been well received by the countries involved. Since 2019, when China upgraded its strategic partnership with the UAE<sup>3</sup> to a comprehensive strategic partnership, ties with the members of the GCC have increased. However, since the war in Ukraine, China has doubled down its efforts in the Middle East due to its dependence on energy and to secure its maritime routes and interests amidst the conflict in the region. This also indicates broader geopolitical and strategic considerations.

In 2022, China also upgraded its relationship with Saudi Arabia<sup>4</sup> to a comprehensive strategic partnership, deepened its partnership with Qatar<sup>5</sup>, and engaged more closely with Bahrain<sup>6</sup>. Although China prefers bilateralism as a form of engagement in the Middle East (Papageorgiou

<sup>1</sup> Eslami, M., & Papageorgiou, M. (2023). China's Increasing Role in the Middle East: Implications for Regional and International Dynamics. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/06/02/chinas-increasing-role-in-the-middle-east-implications-for-regional-and-international-dynamics>.

<sup>2</sup> Evolution of China's interaction with Middle Eastern countries under the Belt and Road Initiative  
Junhua Chen, Xiaolu Yang, Meijun Wang, Min Su

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/MediaHub/News/years/2019/7/23/23-07-2019-uae-china-statment1>

<sup>4</sup> [Saudi Arabia, China sign comprehensive strategic partnership agreement \(alarabiya.net\)](https://www.alarabiya.net/en/saudi-arabia/china-sign-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-agreement)

<sup>5</sup> [China, Qatar to build higher level of bilateral strategic partnership - CGTN](https://www.cgtn.com/news/China-Qatar-to-build-higher-level-of-bilateral-strategic-partnership)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.newsofbahrain.com/bahrain/93072.html#google\\_vignette](https://www.newsofbahrain.com/bahrain/93072.html#google_vignette)

& Eslami, 2024), it has also promoted multilateralism and engaged closely with both the GCC and the Arab League. The two meetings with these institutions in 2022 further indicate a growing focus in the region.

The first China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit took place on December 9, 2022<sup>7</sup>, at the King Abdulaziz International Conference Center in Riyadh, focusing on the China-GCC strategic partnership. Another summit between China and the Arab states took place also on December 9, 2022<sup>8</sup>, highlighting economic development and promoting win-win cooperation. The timing of these meetings indicates the importance of the region in China's geopolitical considerations and its attempts to capture dissatisfaction with the Western response to the conflict in Gaza to promote a more positive image of itself and secure contracts. China's "non-interventionist" approach to conducting business in the region has made it a preferred choice for partnership. Even in military cooperation, whether it involves arms transfers, military exercises, or security training, China's stance is appealing to Middle Eastern states, especially GCC members, who view their growing ties with Beijing as a means of diversification (Eslami & Papageorgiou, 2023).<sup>9</sup>

Military cooperation has been high on the foreign policy agenda of China and Middle Eastern partners, including Kuwait, Oman<sup>10</sup>, and Qatar. They have emphasized their intention to increase cooperation with China, particularly in defense and military matters, and have facilitated high-profile defense visits with the respective countries to enhance mutual interests. Moreover, in mid-January 2022, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) foreign ministers visited Beijing, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made the following statement: "China emphasizes that the Middle East is suffering from long-existing unrest and conflicts due to foreign interventions... we believe the people of the Middle East are the masters of the Middle East. There is no 'power vacuum,' and there is no need for 'patronage from outside'."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> [President Xi Jinping Attends First China-GCC Summit and Delivers Keynote Speech \(fmpc.gov.cn\)](https://fmpc.gov.cn)

<sup>8</sup> [President Xi Jinping Attends the First China-Arab States Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech, Underscoring the Importance of Carrying Forward the Spirit of China-Arab Friendship Featuring Solidarity and Mutual Assistance, Equality and Mutual Benefit, and Inclusiveness and Mutual Learning and Jointly Building a China-Arab Community with a Shared Future in the New Era \(mfa.gov.cn\)](https://mfa.gov.cn)

<sup>9</sup> Eslami, M., & Papageorgiou, M. (2023). China's Increasing Role in the Middle East: Implications for Regional and International Dynamics. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/06/02/chinas-increasing-role-in-the-middle-east-implications-for-regional-and-international-dynamics>.

<sup>10</sup> <sup>10</sup> <https://omannews.gov.om/topics/en/79/show/108515>

<sup>11</sup> [Middle East has no 'power vacuum,' needs no 'foreign patriarch': Wang Yi - Global Times](https://www.globaltimes.cn)

This statement indicates China's military cooperation in the region, which primarily focuses not on becoming an important exporter or security actor, but on boosting the strategic autonomy of the states in the region and reduce US influence.

When it comes to arms sales in the region, China has managed to enter third-world markets, particularly due to its low-cost, affordable services, lack of geopolitical strings, and offering of upgrade packages and training, which come as particularly appealing options (Lin & Singer, 2016).<sup>12</sup> China's arms sales continue to adhere to three principles "First, our military products export should help strengthen the legitimate self-defense capability of the countries concerned; second, it should help safeguard and promote peace, security, and stability in the regions concerned; and third, we do not use the military sale to interfere in the internal affairs of other nations" (Foreign Ministry, 1988)<sup>13</sup>. This approach seems to be gaining ground in its relations with Arab states in the Middle East. Its "blanket" style in arms transfers, including exporting various types of weapons to diverse states (Tian, 2018)<sup>14</sup>, as well as its willingness to sell high-tech sensitive weapon technology, which Western countries have refrained from doing, have made it a considerable market. This was exhibited in its participation in the two recent defense expos in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

China's charm offensive in arms sales was evident in its presence at the Saudi Arabia expo in 2024<sup>15</sup>, where its floor space amounted to 4,668 square meters (over 50,000 square feet), the largest of any international invitee. Similarly, at the UAE Expo<sup>16</sup>, Chinese companies held the second-largest space, ahead of the US and behind only the host country. Chinese company Norinco, displayed under the banner of the Emirati defense distributor International Golden Group after its acquisition by UAE conglomerate EDGE Group, showcased systems such as BLUE ARROW missiles and the BZK-005E MALE UAV<sup>17</sup>. The exhibitions of UAVs further indicate their demand in the region and also China's willingness to provide new and advanced models.

Nevertheless, when considering arms sales, China's market share in the region is still minimal compared to the USA, Russia, and other European countries. An analysis of its arms exports in

<sup>12</sup> Lin, J. & Singer, P. W. (2016). The Dragon Muscles In: Growing Number of Victories in Chinese Arms Exports, Popular Science, 9 June 2016, <http://www.popsoci.com/>

<sup>13</sup> Foreign Ministry Holds Weekly News Briefing. Xinhua in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report, China (hereafter FBIS, DR/CHI), 8 September 1988, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Tian, N. (2018). China's arms trade: A rival for global influence. Lowy Institute.

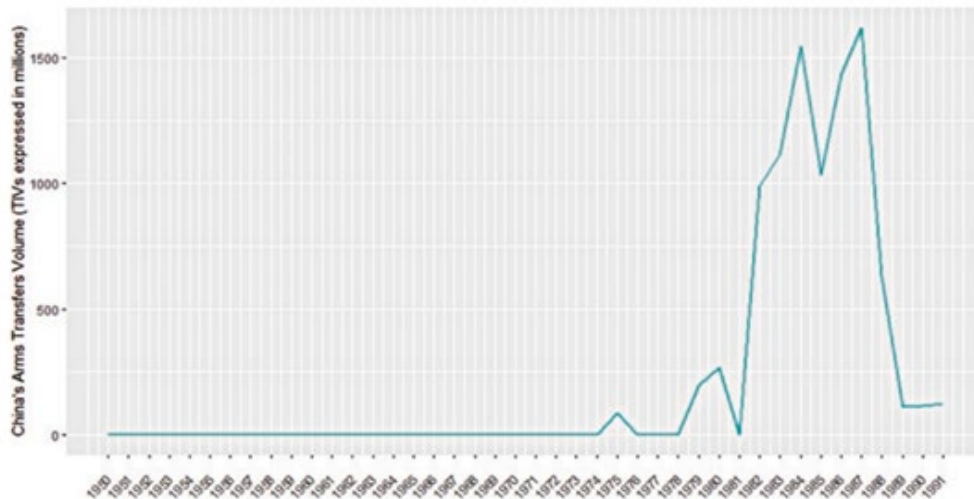
<sup>15</sup> [China makes presence felt at Saudi Arabian defense show, outpacing US, Russia - Breaking Defense](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Outdoing US, China makes a splash at Emirati unmanned defense tech show - Breaking Defense](#)

<sup>17</sup> ibid

the region reveals that China has not yet reached the level of exports it achieved during the height of the Cold War period (graph 1), particularly during the Iran-Iraq war (Papageorgiou, 2023).<sup>18</sup>

Graph 1. Chinese arms exports to the Middle East during Cold war<sup>19</sup>



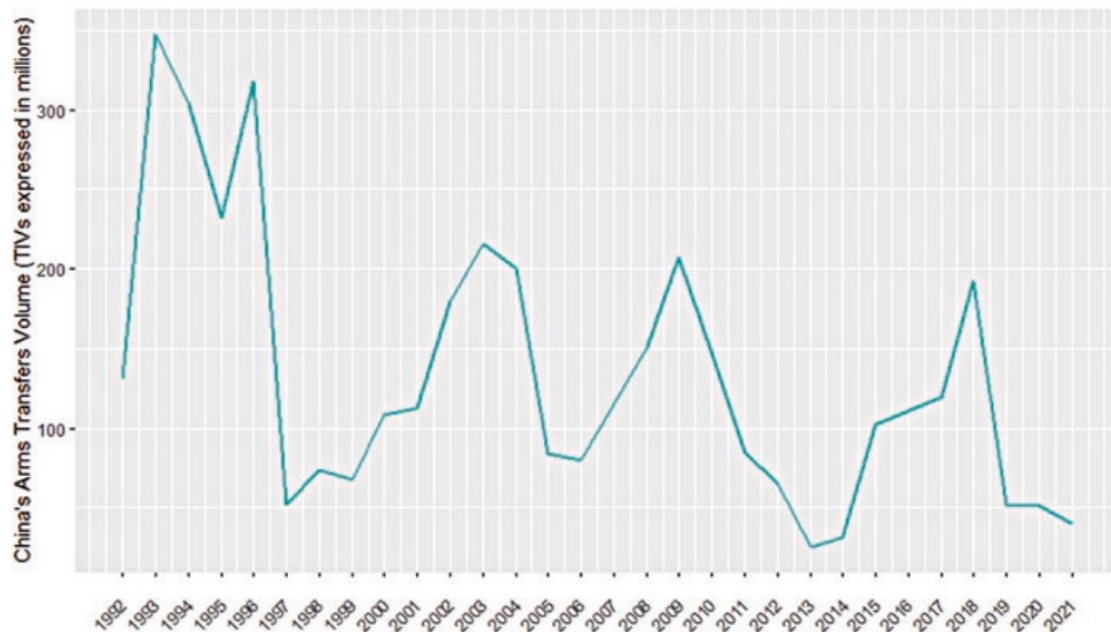
Source: Papageorgiou (2023) data from SIPRI

In the post-Cold War period (graph 2), Chinese arms transfers exhibited a volatile downward trajectory with peaks in 1993, 1996, 2003, 2009, and 2018, and lows in 1992, 1997, 2005, 2009, 2013, and 2014. Since 2019, there has been a relatively steady trend, albeit at a low level compared to the peaks of the 1980s. The decline in 2020 and 2021 is partly attributed to the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Papageorgiou, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Papageorgiou, M.M. (2023). China's Growing Presence in the Middle East's Arms Race and Security Dynamics. In: Eslami, M., Guedes Vieira, A.V. (eds) *The Arms Race in the Middle East. Contributions to International Relations*. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32432-1\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32432-1_16)

<sup>19</sup> 16 countries: Afghanistan, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, UAE, Israel, Lebanon, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain

Graph 2. Chinese arms exports to the Middle East in the post-Cold war period <sup>20</sup>



Source: Papageorgiou (2023) data from SIPRI

However, what differentiates these two periods is the number of recipient countries and their strategic selection. In the post-Cold War period, almost all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Iran, have purchased weapons from China.

Graph 3. Recipients of China's arms transfers in the Middle East

<sup>20</sup> same

|              | <b>Arms Transfers Volume (1950-1991)</b> | <b>Proportion</b> |
|--------------|--|-------------------|
| Iraq         | 4263                                     | 45.96%            |
| Egypt        | 2357                                     | 25.41%            |
| Iran         | 2201                                     | 23.73%            |
| Saudi Arabia | 450                                      | 4.85%             |
| Syria        | 4  | 0.04%             |

Arms Transfers Volume is the Trend Indicator Values (TIVs) expressed in millions.

|              | <b>Arms Transfers Volume (1992-2021)</b> | <b>Proportion</b> |
|--------------|--|-------------------|
| Iran         | 6220                                     | 36.0%             |
| Iraq         | 4475                                     | 25.9%             |
| Egypt        | 3536                                     | 20.5%             |
| Saudi Arabia | 1085                                     | 6.3%              |
| Turkey       | 596                                      | 3.4%              |
| UAE          | 360                                      | 2.1%              |
| Yemen        | 300                                      | 1.7%              |
| Qatar        | 235                                      | 1.4%              |
| Kuwait       | 197                                      | 1.1%              |
| Syria        | 157                                      | 0.9%              |
| Jordan       | 70                                       | 0.4%              |
| Oman         | 36                                       | 0.2%              |
| Bahrain      | 8  | 0.0%              |
| Afghanistan  | 2  | 0.0%              |

Arms Transfers Volume is the Trend Indicator Values (TIVs) expressed in millions.

Source: Papageorgiou (2023) with data from SIPRI

In the post-Cold War period, Saudi Arabia and the UAE saw the greatest increase in Chinese arms transfers from 2016 to 2020, with increases of 386% and 169%, respectively. Specifically, during this period, the highest number of Chinese purchases was initiated on drones,

particularly the Wing Loong 1 and its upgraded version, the Wing Loong 2, as well as guided bombs. Saudi Arabia began acquiring Chinese CH-4 drones in 2014 and has since acquired at least 15 of the more lethal Wing Loong II drones. The United Arab Emirates also bought 500 Blue Arrow-7 missiles<sup>21</sup>. Thus, China has positioned itself as the main supplier of drones in the region, including Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Jordan<sup>22</sup>, giving it a strategic advantage in selling UAVs in the region. The Wing Loong UAV is a medium-altitude, long-endurance drone that can also be armed with missiles, while its third generation, an intercontinental drone that can fly 10,000km, made its debut at China's Zhuhai Air Show in 2022.<sup>23</sup> Saudi Arabia also purchased this Wing Loong-10 Drone, which is a High Altitude Endurance drone that can carry several munitions, during the World Defense Show that took place in Riyadh from February 4th–8<sup>th</sup>, 2024.<sup>24</sup> In regards, to missiles UAE announced during the IDEX show held in Abu Dhabi from 20 to 24 February, 2023 that it has awarded a \$245 million contract to procure AR3 multiple rocket/missile launchers made by Chinese company Norinco.<sup>25</sup>

Table 4. Types of Chinese arms purchases

| Recipient    | Supplier | Designation  | Description        | Weapon Category | Order Year | Number Ordered | Delivery Years |
|--------------|----------|--------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------|----------------|----------------|
| Saudi Arabia | China    | Wing Loong-1 | armed UAV          | Aircraft        | 2014       | 15             | 2017           |
| UAE          | China    | Wing Loong-1 | armed UAV          | Aircraft        | 2011       | 25             | 2017           |
| Saudi Arabia | China    | CH-4B        | armed UAV          | Aircraft        | 2014       | 20             | 2018           |
| Bahrain      | China    | SR-5         | self-propelled MRL | Artillery       | 2015       | 4              | 2016           |
| Saudi Arabia | China    | CH-4A        | UAV                | Aircraft        | 2017       | 5              | 2018           |
| Saudi Arabia | China    | FT-9         | guided bomb        | Missiles        | 2016       | 50             | 2018           |
| Saudi Arabia | China    | Wing Loong-2 | armed UAV          | Aircraft        | 2017       | 50             | 2022           |
| Qatar        | China    | BP-12A       | SSM                | Missiles        | 2016       | 48             | 2018           |
| Qatar        | China    | SY-400 MRL   | self-propelled MRL | Artillery       | 2016       | 8              | 2018           |

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/2021/04/23/chinas-surprising-drone-sales-in-the-middle-east/>

<sup>22</sup> [CNASReport-DroneProliferation-Final.pdf \(ethz.ch\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Why is Saudi Arabia looking to China to buy weapons after years of arms deals with the US? | South China Morning Post \(scmp.com\)](#)

<sup>24</sup> [Saudi Arabia to Acquire Wing Loong-10 Drone | Atlas News \(theatlansnews.co\)](#) and [Saudi Air Force Acquires Chinese Wing Loong-10B Reconnaissance-Strike Drones | Al Defaiya](#)

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/idx-2023-uae-orders-norinco-ar3-launchers>

|              |       |              |                         |           |      |     |      |
|--------------|-------|--------------|-------------------------|-----------|------|-----|------|
| UAE          | China | Wing Loong-2 | armed UAV               | Aircraft  | 2017 | 15  | 2018 |
| UAE          | China | AH-4 155mm   | towed gun               | Artillery | 2018 | 6   | 2019 |
| UAE          | China | Blue Arrow-7 | anti-tank missile       | Missiles  | 2017 | 500 | 2020 |
| UAE          | China | SR-5         | self-propelled MRL      | Artillery | 2018 | 5   | 2020 |
| UAE          | China | CR-500       | armed UAV               | Aircraft  | 2019 | 10  | 0    |
| Saudi Arabia | China | TWA          | air search radar        | Sensors   | 2020 | 5   | 2021 |
| UAE          | China | L-15 -       | trainer/combat aircraft | Aircraft  | 2023 | 15  | 0    |
| UAE          | China | AR-3 MRL     | self-propelled MRL      | Artillery | 2023 | ?   | 0    |

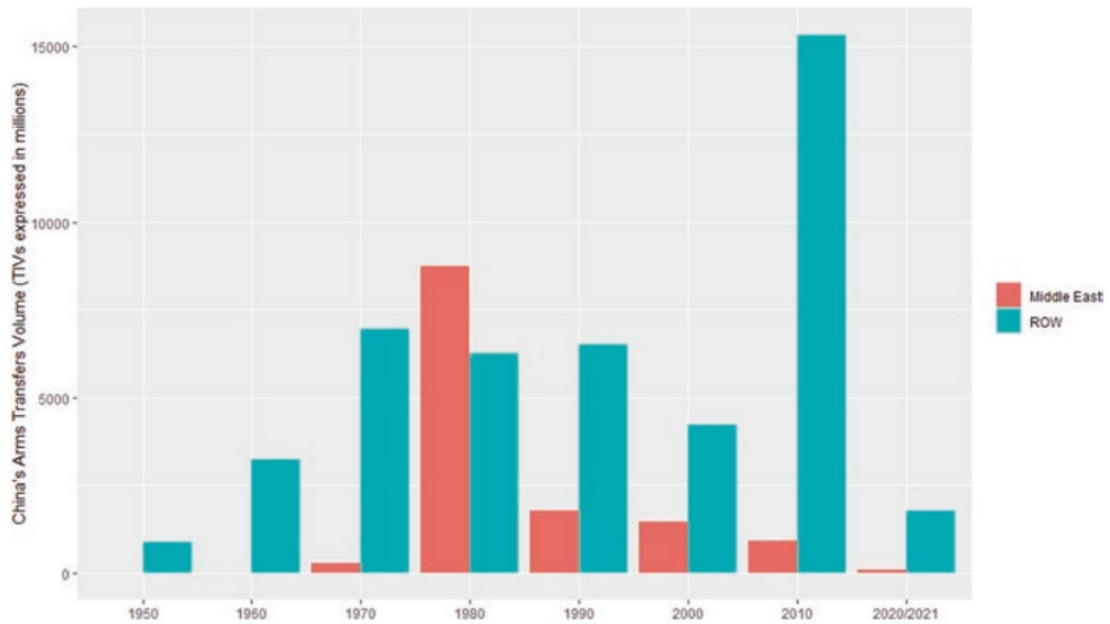
*Source:* Author's compilation with data from SIPRI

Overall, however, Middle East still doesn't account as the top region in China's arms exports as indicated in graph 4. And China exports to the wider Middle East remain in single digits, ranking fourth in the region with a 4.6 percent of all arms exports, with majority going to Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> Regarding the type of military arms exports China is not an MTCR member (although has agreed in principle to apply the original MTCR guidelines), which precludes any sale of such missiles and related technology due to considerations of proliferation in the region.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, China is not part of the Wassenaar Arrangement, a voluntary export control regime that promotes transparency and greater responsibility in the transfers of conventional arms and dual-use goods and technologies in its arms sales with Iran.<sup>27</sup>

Graph 4. China's exports to the ME compared to ROW

<sup>27</sup> Winter, L., Warner, J., & Baar, J. (2023). Instruments of Russian Military Influence in Iran. US Army Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) G2.





Source: Papageorgiou (2023)

Regarding arms sales to Iran, official arms supply from China to Iran ceased after 2015, Chinese designs and technology still influence contemporary arms production in Iran. Despite also their 25 years agreement and the lifting of UN sanctions on Iran, Chinese companies have engaged in talks with Iran regarding potential arms purchases, particularly fighter jets like the Chinese J-10. Of course, many Iranian missile series, including the Oghab, Nazeat, and Shahab 3, draw on Chinese designs and Chinese arms manufacturers Aviation Industry Corporation of China, China Electronics Technology Group Corporation and China South Industries Group Corporation operate manufacturing facilities in Tehran.<sup>28</sup> Given that China, Iran and Russia, have emerged as a strategic triangle, have used several soft balancing mechanisms such as entangling diplomacy, territorial denial, economic strengthening and regional cooperation that excludes the United States, to counter the hegemon's power and unilateral policies employing soft balancing to counterbalance the United States without directly engaging with American military power (Papageorgiou et al., 2023).<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the Chinese brokered Iran-Saudi agreement can boost a wide anti-Americanist and anti-hegemonism in the region that can turn Middle Eastern countries to join forces and seek alternative security arrangements as shown from their willingness to become dialogue members of the SCO and supporting China's Global Security Initiative.

While it is commonly believed that China's primary interests in the Middle East are economic, its arms transfers extend beyond mere financial considerations. China's motivations are multifaceted, including a desire to challenge traditional US influence in the region and establish

<sup>28</sup> Not "business as usual": The Chinese military's visit to Iran | Middle East Institute ([mei.edu](https://mei.edu)) and Winter, L., Warner, J., & Baar, J. (2023). *Instruments of Russian Military Influence in Iran*. US Army Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) G2.

<sup>29</sup> Papageorgiou, M., Eslami, M., & Duarte, P. A. B. (2023). A 'Soft' Balancing Ménage à Trois? China, Iran and Russia Strategic Triangle vis-à-vis US Hegemony. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 10(1), 65–94.

a regional counterbalance to American power (Siddi & Kaczmarski, 2019<sup>30</sup>; Papageorgiou et al., 2023)<sup>31</sup>. Moreover, China leverages asymmetric capabilities by providing weapons unavailable from Western suppliers to Gulf states, fostering distrust in their cooperation with the West and positioning itself as a more credible alternative, disrupting existing partnerships.

Another significant aspect of China's military presence in the region, or its military diplomacy, is its willingness to engage in joint production of weapons. Beijing has actively promoted weapon co-production initiatives with US allies in the region, exemplified by the announcement of a factory in Saudi Arabia for producing CH-3 UAVs (Chan, 2017)<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, in 2022, Saudi Advanced Communications and Electronics Systems Co. signed an agreement with China Electronics Technology Group Corp., with both companies announcing their partnership during the World Defense Show in Riyadh, held from March 6-9.<sup>33</sup> In addition, technology transfer and localized production between the two states is evident in Saudi Arabia's Saqr drone, produced domestically which incorporates Chinese-designed air-launched missiles with the Kingdom also showing interest in the JF-17, a joint Pakistani-Chinese fighter jet, with potential plans for its manufacture in Saudi Arabia.<sup>34</sup>

Military exercises have been conducted with Middle Eastern countries since 2019, with a majority occurring after 2022, a year that marked heightened cooperation between China and the Middle East. Examples are the second edition of China-Saudi Arabia naval exercise Blue Sword-2023 at a camp in Zhanjiang, South China's Guangdong Province.<sup>35</sup> Egypt has also completed joint military drills off Egypt's Mediterranean Coast with China in 2019 testing counterterrorism and anti-piracy activities and inspect suspected vessels.<sup>36</sup>

Table 2. Chinese military exercises with ME states

| Participants               | Name of operation                   | Where                                       | Year                   | Type       |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|------------------------|------------|
| China and Saudi Arabia     | Blue Sword-2023                     | Zhanjiang, South China's Guangdong Province | October 25, 2023       | Naval      |
| China and Saudi Arabia     | Blue Sword 2019                     | King Faisal Naval Base in Jeddah            | November 17, 2019      | Naval      |
| China and UAE              | Falcon Shield 2023                  | Xinjiang                                    | August 9, 2023         | Air forces |
| China in Qatar (3rd visit) | 44th Chinese naval escort taskforce | Hamad Port                                  | October 24 to 28, 2023 | Naval      |
| China in Kuwait            | 44th Chinese naval escort taskforce | Failaka                                     | October 22, 2023       | Naval      |
| China in Oman              | 44th Chinese naval escort taskforce | Muscat                                      | October 14, 2023       | Naval      |

Two other interesting areas is Chinese military presence in the region is also the establishment of China's Overseas Police Service Stations in the Middle East in UAE<sup>37</sup> and its expanding

<sup>30</sup> Siddi, M., & Kaczmarski, M. (2019). Russia and China in the Middle East: Playing their best cards. FIIA Briefing Paper, 275

<sup>31</sup> Papageorgiou, M., Eslami, M., & Duarte, P. A. B. (2023). A 'Soft' Balancing Ménage à Trois? China, Iran and Russia Strategic Triangle vis-à-vis US Hegemony. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 10(1), 65–94.

<sup>32</sup> [Chinese drone factory in Saudi Arabia first in Middle East | South China Morning Post \(scmp.com\)](https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2017/03/02/chinese-drone-factory-in-saudi-arabia-first-in-middle-east)

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2022/03/09/chinese-and-saudi-firms-create-joint-venture-to-make-military-drones-in-the-kingdom/>

<sup>34</sup> [China Seizes Arms Exporting Opportunity in the Middle East – Defense Security Monitor \(forecastinternational.com\)](https://forecastinternational.com/china-seizes-arms-exporting-opportunity-in-the-middle-east/)

<sup>35</sup> [China, Saudi Arabia Launch Joint Naval Special Operations Exercise \(defense-aerospace.com\)](https://www.defense-aerospace.com/news/44th-chinese-naval-escort-taskforce-arrives-in-qatar)

<sup>36</sup> <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/344171/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt,-China-naval-forces-carry-out-joint-military.aspx>

<sup>37</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/chinas-overseas-police-service-stations-in-the-middle-east/>

law enforcement activities and training in MENA mainly Egypt<sup>38</sup>. Lastly, contracting private security companies for guarding duties in MENA including Saudi Arabia of oil and gas state-owned enterprises (SOEs) also indicates an increasing presence along the Belt and Road Initiative showcasing Beijing's desire to nurture a professional private security sector able to operate in complex environments (Arduino, 2021<sup>39</sup>) and able to project power and influencing developments in the region.<sup>40</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

To mitigate the security threats posed by the adoption of 5G networks and significant technological cooperation with China in the Middle East, the United States should implement and expand the Zero-Trust Network Model<sup>41</sup>. This model ensures stringent security checks within the network to safeguard U.S. forces and allies operating in the region from potential risks such as blocked access to wireless networks, insertion of trojan horses and viruses into connected devices, or data harvesting for exploitation. Additionally, the USA should consider offering alternatives within the network infrastructure or promoting multilateral collaboration, including China, to monitor and address such activities.

Engagement with Gulf states on an equal footing is essential, along with providing viable alternatives to Chinese initiatives. This entails increased investments in telecommunications and infrastructure to offer options that align with the region's 2030 vision for modernization and development. Furthermore, inclusion of the Middle East in connectivity projects in the Asia-Pacific region is crucial to assure these countries that the USA remains committed to its security obligations, but also supporting their efforts for strategic autonomy.

Participation in joint exercises with Gulf states, including the use of Chinese drones to assess operability and advancements, is recommended. These exercises should simulate crisis situations involving drone usage, as well as potential reactions from other parties, such as the interception of drones. Moreover, expanding signatories to agreements like the October 2016 Joint Declaration for the Export and Subsequent Use of Armed or Strike-Enabled UAVs can enhance regional security cooperation. Continuous monitoring of indigenous weapons development, such as the collaboration between Emirati conglomerate Edge and Turkish Bayraktar in drone production<sup>42</sup>, while it is also necessary to uphold U.S. military superiority in this domain.

Furthermore, it's crucial to closely monitor Saudi Arabia-Iran relations, especially regarding potential collaboration involving China and Russia. The normalization of ties between these nations poses risks, as highlighted by Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani's readiness to expand military and technical cooperation with Saudi Arabia. During a meeting in

<sup>38</sup> [How China is expanding its law enforcement activities across Africa | South China Morning Post \(scmp.com\)](https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/312321/how-china-is-expanding-its-law-enforcement-activities-across-africa)

<sup>39</sup> Arduino, A. (2021). Chinese private security companies in the Middle East. In *Routledge Handbook on China–Middle East Relations* (pp. 312-321). Routledge.

<sup>40</sup> [A Stealth Industry: The Quiet Expansion of Chinese Private Security Companies \(csis.org\)](https://www.csis.org/analysis/a-stealth-industry-the-quiet-expansion-of-chinese-private-security-companies)

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.nsa.gov/Press-Room/Press-Releases-Statements/Press-Release-View/Article/3695223/nsa-releases-maturity-guidance-for-the-zero-trust-network-and-environment-pillar/>

<sup>42</sup> <sup>42</sup> [UAE's EDGE Group, Turkey's Baykar to put Emirati payloads on Turkish drones - Breaking Defense](https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/News-Release-View/Article/3695223/nsa-releases-maturity-guidance-for-the-zero-trust-network-and-environment-pillar/)

Tehran with Saudi Arabia's Ambassador Abdullah bin Saud al-Anzi, Ashtiani discussed areas of potential cooperation in military, security, intelligence, and technology domains.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, rather than opting for a 'with us' or 'against us' approach, Washington should offer to the Gulf countries in the region a more inclusive role in the region's security architecture and engage in joint military production.

<sup>43</sup> [Iran says ready to expand military cooperation with Saudi Arabia - China.org.cn](http://china.org.cn)