

# Does Anyone Want to Replace the U.S. as the Great Power in the Middle East?

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The United States has been the pre-eminent external actor in the Middle East since Egyptian President Anwar Sadat expelled his Soviet advisers and benefactors and turned to Washington in the 1970s. But America's role is contracting, by design and by default. Russia and China insist they do not want to replace the U.S. in the Middle East, but they are still intent on expanding their regional influence.

The shifting fortunes among the three global greats—the U.S., Russia and China—are playing out in the Middle East today. The U.S. has indisputably dominated the scene, from its military presence in the Gulf and its decades-long diplomatic efforts to improve peace and security for the region. The Iraq War, however, was a turning point, when U.S. attempts to transform the region by force turned into a disastrous disruption that has seared the states and societies of the Arab heartland, eroding trust and goodwill toward America.

Despite some recent good news, with American leadership and military prowess helping oust the so-called Islamic State from its control of major cities in Iraq and Syria, Arab politicians and pundits are torn between hoping for continued American engagement and seeking alternatives. Like elites in other regions, they are mystified by the uncertainties of current American foreign policy and beginning to hedge against them by diversifying external partnerships and developing more self-reliance. Those who still see the West as a desirable model express dismay that Western countries could not figure out how to buttress the Arab Spring but found singular focus in confronting the Islamic State.

The Russians are undeniably on the move, building on their Syrian strategy to deepen cooperation with Iran and move in that direction with Turkey, too. Of course, both of those regional powers have profound historical reasons to beware of the Russian bear, but they have found common cause in the region's current turmoil and the unreliability of Washington. In the Arab world, Egypt's fiercely anti-Islamist leadership may open doors to Moscow again, while across the region, Russia is getting more attention and respect as an outside player and broker than it's had for decades.

When pressed on this, Russian foreign policy experts demur, insisting that Moscow has no ambitions to replace the U.S. by taking on greater responsibilities and military commitments. Moscow has neither the resources nor the desire to be a security guarantor for the region. It prefers to find areas for cooperation with Washington, and, rather than take sides, to be a fair broker among all parties to the various regional conflicts. But Russian experts concede that Russia sees the Middle East as a testing ground to prove its capabilities on the global stage, making it more likely that relations among the region's external players will be competitive.

Which brings us to China, the other contender for a bigger role in the Middle East. Beijing is aiming not to confront or compete with the U.S., but to fill vacuums when needed and to promote Chinese economic and political interests. In terms similar to the mantra of Russian experts, Chinese insiders have long used the formula that their country has no foreign policy ambitions to replace the U.S., and lacks the resources to do so anyway. Yet that may be changing.

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China's economic interests in energy and trade ties are creating bonds of interdependence across the Middle East, including in the states most dependent on the United States. China's increasing confidence at the United Nations and beyond conveys to regional powers that they need to spend more time engaging Beijing. President Xi Jinping's marathon speech last week at the twice-a-decade Communist Party Congress certainly promoted a view of a more ambitious China as a global player, and the Middle East is an essential piece of its vital "[One Belt, One Road](#)" trade and infrastructure strategy.

For decades, one of the pillars of U.S. policy in the region has been to prevent any hostile outside power from dominating the region and threatening the independence of its states. That meant the Soviet Union. More recently, it has loosely been used to refer to Iran's hegemonic goals vis-à-vis its Arab neighbors. Can Washington accommodate these more assertive policies by Moscow and Beijing and still retain its dominant role?

On the security front, the U.S. is likely to remain the Middle East's key player. In bolstering the security capacity of Israel and the Arab states through arms sales and security cooperation, the U.S. is still No. 1. But politically, that role has been tarnished since the Iraq War, with public intellectuals in key Arab countries scolding their own regimes for being too dependent on the superpower that makes grave mistakes and has failed to help the region resolve conflicts and build more open political systems. To be fair, the U.S. can't really win these debates, when conservative Arabs want to see more American firepower and force, and more liberal Arabs see the greatest failure as not supporting democratic reforms, both before and during the Arab Spring.

Economically, the Middle East is wide open for business from all sides. Europe, Russia and China are as important as the U.S. in terms of trade and investment. The question is whether that economic interaction leads to real influence, and Europeans would probably concede that it does not. The scale of China's economic engagement, however, probably does accrue to Beijing's benefit. And when it comes to imposing new sanctions through the U.N. Security Council, for example, China is no longer a passive actor; it now has the clout to affect diplomatic outcomes that protect its interests in the region.

In Syria and Iran, it is clear that Russia and China are already recognized as centers of power when it comes to finding a path out of the civil war. They have favored processes for a political settlement that keeps President Bashar al-Assad in power, while the U.S. has the weaker hand to play. Russia, in particular, must now be seen as a major player in the Middle East's northern tier, making the U.S. role in Iraq even more critical, to counterbalance recent Russian success in Syria, Iran and perhaps even Turkey.

The U.S. still has deeper experience in leading diplomacy on other regional conflicts, from Israel-Palestine to the much more recent Gulf dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In both cases, however, American diplomats have been forced to fall back on the excuse that Washington can only help when the parties themselves are ready to talk. That's what Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said this weekend after meetings in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Maybe China and Russia really mean it when they say they do not aspire to replace the U.S., both because the Middle East has exposed the limits of American power, and because the region's troubles are not conducive to outside solutions.

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