

## COMPETITION BETWEEN MAJOR POWERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE US, RUSSIA, CHINA

(A new format for interaction and consequences for Central Asia)

Nematullayeva Komila

3rd Year Student of the Faculty of International Relations

University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED)

E-mail: nematullaevakamila065@gmail.com

Ikhtiandr Uvraimov

The Senior Lecturer of the Political Science Department of the

University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED)

### Abstract

This article analyzes geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East in the context of competition and interaction between the US, China, and Russia, and examines the consequences of these processes for the states of Central Asia. The paper examines the key policy areas of these powers, including their energy, military, and diplomatic activities, as well as their participation in regional organizations such as the SCO and BRICS. Particular attention is paid to the events of 2024–2025, including the expansion of US military agreements with Middle Eastern allies, China's intensified activity within the Belt and Road Initiative, and Russia's strengthening of its position through strategic partnerships with Iran and Arab monarchies. Based on a comparative analysis, the study identifies the distinctive features of each side's approach and assesses their impact on the security, economic development, and political stability of Central Asia. The results of the study show that the region is turning into an arena of complex trilateral rivalry, where Central Asian states are forced to seek a balance between global power centers.

**Keywords:** Middle East, Central Asia, geopolitics, USA, China, Russia, strategic partnership, security, competition.

### Introduction

The Middle East region continues to be a source of intense geopolitical struggle and conflict between the interests of three world powers: the US, China, and Russia. Each of them uses different strategic approaches, stating that their goal is to change the balance of power in the region. Traditionally, these three powers have played a dominant role in the Middle East, and that is the reason to find a “happy medium” between partnership and growing competition for influence.

This work aims to analyze the transformation of political behavior and strategy choices of the US, China, and Russia in the Middle East and to identify the consequences that affect Central Asia in terms of regional security, energy route construction, and the formation of economic and social policies of the countries in the region.



The transformational processes taking place in the Middle East have a significant impact not only on the internal processes of the countries in the region, but also, for example, on Central Asia, which has historically been perceived as a “buffer zone” between the West and the East. In the context of the US administration's active foreign policy, the situation in the region leaves much to be desired. China, in its turn, is exerting its influence through its economic presence, taking the initiative and creating projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and concluding energy deals with the most influential countries in the region (Saudi Arabia, Oman, Iran, etc.), while emphasizing its unwillingness to interfere in the political affairs of its<sup>1</sup>.

As for Russia, it actively employs its instruments of hard power, primarily in Syria, and fosters partnerships with Iran, Turkey, and the countries of Persian Gulf<sup>2</sup>.

At the present stage, the rivalry between the three powers is evolving into a form of hybrid competition. Economic and technological approaches complement traditional means of influence, such as diplomatic leverage and military presence. Central Asia lies between the interests of China, Russia, and the Islamic world, which makes it most vulnerable to external influence, while at the same time providing it with great opportunities to develop its own potential in the format of multilateral interaction.

### US Strategy in the Middle East: Transformation of Presence and Approaches

Recent years have seen a notable decline in US military presence in the Middle East. According to Pentagon data, in 2008 there were over 150,000 military personnel in Iraq, whereas by 2021 this number had decreased to 2,500 (DoD News; CRS/Brookings). Biden's diplomatic reset has shifted focus from military intervention to fostering cooperation with regional countries, particularly in the energy sector. It is important to note that Foreign Military Financing (FMF) remains one of the key means of influence. As part of the US budget proposal for fiscal year 2025 (FY 2025), FMF continues to be a significant instrument of American influence in the region<sup>3</sup>. According to the Foundation for Middle East Peace (2025), the draft budget allocates \$3.3 billion to Israel, \$1.375 billion to Egypt, and \$475 million to Jordan. Simultaneously, the official report U.S. Security Cooperation with Israel highlights that Israel remains the largest recipient of US military aid, although more recent data on Egypt and Jordan are not specified in open sources (U.S. Department of State, 2025)<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, according to Congress.gov (2025), the requested FMF funding for Egypt for 2026 remains at \$1.3 billion, demonstrating the stability of Washington's military commitments to key Arab allies<sup>5</sup>. It is noteworthy that in January 2025, the US administration issued an order to suspend most foreign aid programs, making an exception only for military funding to Israel and Egypt, which underscores their special strategic priority (White House, January 2025)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Fulton Jonathan. China's Changing Role in the Middle East // Atlantic Council. 2019. p. 1-28. URL:

[https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/srv/htdocs/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Chinas\\_Changing\\_Role\\_in\\_the\\_Middle\\_East.pdf?utm\\_](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/srv/htdocs/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Chinas_Changing_Role_in_the_Middle_East.pdf?utm_)

<sup>2</sup>Gatova Maria. What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East? // Carnegie Moscow Center. 2017. URL:

<https://carnegie.ru/2017/11/29/what-is-russia-up-to-in-middle-east-pub-74866>

<sup>3</sup>Foundation for Middle East Peace. 2025. URL:

<https://fmep.org/>

<sup>4</sup>U.S. Security Cooperation with Israel // U.S. Department of State. 2025. URL: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-israel?utmm>

<sup>5</sup>Congress.gov. Congress.gov — official website of legislative information of the U.S. Congress. 2025. URL:

<https://www.congress.gov/>

<sup>6</sup>The White House. Official website of the White House. 2025. URL:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/>



Financial assistance from the US government allows them to maintain their access to airspace, straits, and military bases, which helps to contain the influence of Iran and Russia.

Moreover, the US is actively developing energy diplomacy in the region, establishing a route for gas supplies from Israel to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea, supporting Saudi Arabia in the development of hydrogen energy, and concluding agreements in the field of renewable energy technologies. In addition, growing competition with China in the technological sphere has led to closer cooperation in the field of cybersecurity and the development of 5G infrastructure (Kerr, 2022, p. 110)<sup>7</sup>.

In addition to focusing on technological and energy cooperation, Trump and his administration are implementing a comprehensive approach to strengthen the US position in the Middle East. In addition to reassert its policy of “maximum pressure” on Iran, the White House has expanded sanctions against the banking and oil and gas sectors and restricted third-country companies suspected of helping to circumvent sanctions (U.S. Treasury, 2025)<sup>8</sup>. Washington also initiated new long-term projects in the field of LNG supplies and hydropower, signing memoranda worth more than \$15 billion. The above actions by Trump and his administration gave impetus to increased diplomatic activity and decisions in the region.

Following Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election in January 2025, the escalation of the conflict between Iran and Israel gained new momentum. In the spring of 2025, Israel launched air strikes on IRGC targets in Syria, to which Iran responded with ballistic missiles. For the first time since 2006, military security measures were taken, resulting in hundreds of casualties on both sides (Haaretz, 2025)<sup>9</sup>. Trump then visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, where he holds large-scale strategic talks, resulting in investment and defense cooperation packages worth a total of about \$3.5 trillion, the suspension of airstrikes against the Yemeni Houthis, and the resumption of negotiations with Syria (May 2025 Gulf visit, 2025)<sup>10</sup>. The conflict reaches its peak in mid-June, and on June 13, Trump publicly supports Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, calling them “very successful.” Shortly thereafter, the US launches its own airstrike on the Fordow plant, while insisting on a ceasefire. Then, on June 23, Donald Trump announced a “historic ceasefire” that was reached thanks to mediation by the US and Qatar after Iran hit one of the US military bases in Qatar. Finally, in July 2025, the US president invited the leaders of the Persian Gulf countries to Washington for talks that led to new agreements in which the countries pledged to help promote Arab-Israeli rapprochement. In addition, Donald Trump warned Iran of possible serious consequences if the Iranian government continued its uranium enrichment program<sup>11</sup>

Against the backdrop of ongoing tensions between Israel and Iran, the crisis in the Gaza Strip

<sup>7</sup>Brower M., Niyazi R. Concept Misalignment and Cyberspace Instability: Lessons from Cyber-Enabled Disinformation // *Cyberspace and Instability*. 2023. p. 99–118. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781399512510-006>

<sup>8</sup>Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). Iran Sanctions. 2025. URL:<https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/iran-sanctions?utmm>

<sup>9</sup>Haaretz. 2025 Israel-Iran War. 2025. URL: <https://www.haaretz.com/ty-tag/2025-israel-iran-war-00000197-6daf-da11-a797-edff8ce80000?utmm>

<sup>10</sup>Washington Institute. Unpacking Trump’s 2025 Gulf Investment Tour // *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. 2025. URL:

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unpacking-trumps-2025-gulf-investment-tour?utmm>

<sup>11</sup>Reuters. Israel seeks swift action on Iran, sources say, with a split US administration. June 21, 2025. URL:

<https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/israel-seeks-swift-action-iran-sources-say-with-split-us-administration-2025-06-21/?utm>



escalated again in 2025, causing international concern. After a series of Israeli airstrikes in September, which destroyed infrastructure and killed hundreds of civilians, the region was on the brink of a major humanitarian disaster (UN OCHA, September 2025)<sup>12</sup>. The international community's response was swift: in early October, Egypt proposed holding an international summit to resolve and de-escalate the conflict.

The summit was held on October 13, 2025, in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, and was attended by the leaders of Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, as well as representatives of the US, EU, China, and Russia. The main topic of the meeting was the conclusion of a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Palestinian groups, as well as the coordination of humanitarian supplies to Gaza (Al Jazeera, October 13, 2025)<sup>13</sup>. Donald Trump attended the summit in person and emphasized that “the US is once again becoming the guarantor of peace and security in the Middle East,” declaring the US's readiness to send additional humanitarian resources and support the creation of a temporary international administration in Gaza (White House, October 13, 2025)<sup>14</sup>.

However, despite the positive statements, Iran's reaction was restrained. Tehran criticized Washington for attempting to dominate mediation efforts and stated that resolving the conflict would require Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories (Tehran Times, 2025)<sup>15</sup>. Russia and China supported Egypt's initiative on Gaza, emphasizing the importance of multilateral settlement formats and the rejection of unilateral actions (Xinhua, 2025)<sup>16</sup>.

### China's strategy in the Middle East

China is implementing a strategy in the Middle East that focuses on economic factors, reinforcing it with technological concepts and a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of Middle Eastern countries. China's policy differs significantly from that of the United States, as Beijing avoids military presence in every way possible, shifting its focus to energy, soft power, and infrastructure development in the region.

On May 23, 2025, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Media Forum was held in Urumqi (Xinjiang) with the organization's member countries, including Russia, China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The forum discussed issues related to information security and joint responses to challenges and problems in strengthening communication, symbolizing the expansion of China's initiatives to influence regional agendas (People's Daily, 2025)<sup>17</sup>. Just a month later, on June 23, 2025, the SCO issued an official statement expressing serious concern about the growing tensions in the Middle East and calling for political and diplomatic solutions to avoid further escalation of the conflict (SCO Secretariat, 2025)<sup>18</sup>. These consistent steps demonstrate China's

<sup>12</sup>United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Humanitarian Situation Update #321 – Gaza Strip. September 10, 2025. URL:

<https://www.un.org/unispa/document/humanitarian-situation-update-321-gaza-10sep25/?utm>

<sup>13</sup>Al Jazeera. World leaders gather in Egypt for signing of Gaza ceasefire deal. October 13, 2025. URL:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/13/world-leaders-gather-in-egypt-for-signing-of-gaza-ceasefire-deal?utm>

<sup>14</sup>The White House. The Trump Declaration for Enduring Peace and Prosperity. 2025. URL:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/10/the-trump-declaration-for-enduring-peace-and-prosperity/?utm>

<sup>15</sup>Tehran Times. US and Israel go after Iran's allies, showing no sign of de-escalation. October 10, 2025. URL:

<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/518936/US-and-Israel-go-after-Iran-s-allies-showing-no-sign-of-de-escalation?utm>

<sup>16</sup>Xinhua / 新華社. China to work with Egypt to practice true multilateralism — Chinese premier. July 10, 2025. URL:

<https://english.news.cn/20250710/b5a12ec7d39a475fa8156cb55336693c/c.html?utm>

<sup>17</sup>People's Daily. 2025 Media Cooperation Forum of SCO Countries held in Urumqi. 24 May 2025. URL:

<https://en.people.cn/n3/2025/0524/c90000%E2%80%9120319266.html>

<sup>18</sup>Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Statement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Regarding the Military Strikes on the Territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran. June 2023, 2025. URL: <https://eng.sectsc.org/20250623/1874503.html?utm>





airbase in the Mediterranean (TASS. 2017, January 20)<sup>23</sup>. This step was an important part of Russia's plan to gain the status of a great power capable of competing with the United States and NATO in the region. However, the so-called successes of Russian support for Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government demonstrated the short-term and fragile nature of this approach, which was confirmed by the change in the Syrian leadership and Russia's loss of its former influence on Syrian politics.

The Kremlin is actively developing cooperation with Iran, even though historically, relations between the two countries have been complicated. One factor contributing to their rapprochement has been their opposition to the spread of American influence in the region. The countries also coordinated their actions regarding Syria, holding consultations within the framework of the Astana Forum and strengthening military-technical cooperation in 2015-2020 (Fulton, 2021)<sup>24</sup>. The deepening of economic cooperation with Iran was made possible in part by international sanctions. In 2023, the countries signed an agreement on expanding settlements in national currencies and building international branches within the North-South international transport corridor, in which Iran plays a key role. At the same time, given the current situation, some experts are cautious in their assessments and forecasts regarding the future prospects of the BV region.

#### **Possible consequences of developments in the Middle East for the Central Asian region.**

The actions of the three world powers against the backdrop of their constant competition create both significant risks and significant opportunities for the countries of Central Asia. On the one hand, the choice between major partners, increased defense spending, and dependence on global market fluctuations; on the other hand, diversification of export routes, foreign investment in infrastructure, and the opportunity to minimize the chance of a single center of power emerging. In practice, this affects the multi-vector policy of Central Asian countries, strengthening regional cooperation and forming a more active foreign policy that allows them to maneuver between Moscow, Washington, and Beijing (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024)<sup>25</sup>.

Today, it is becoming clear that it is the actions and strategies of the three great powers that determine the key vectors shaping potentially dangerous trends in relation to the Central Asian region. Experts include among the factors that could have a negative impact on the stability and security of the Central Asian region the possibility of a migration explosion, an uncontrolled influx of refugees, an increase in drug smuggling, destabilization of the socio-political situation in Central Asian countries, etc. (unemployment, economic aspects).

Along with this, experts note a peculiar revival of interest and a return of attention from the American political establishment to the Central Asian region in the context of launching the mechanisms of the so-called "Greater Central Asia" project. This strategy provides for strengthening bilateral relations with Central Asian countries through the creation of security programs and various economic projects. In this way, the US is trying to reduce the region's

<sup>23</sup>TASS. Moscow cements deal with Damascus to keep 49-year presence at Syrian naval and air bases. January 20, 2017. URL: <https://tass.com/defense/926348?utmm>

<sup>24</sup>Fulton Jonathan. China between Iran and the Gulf Monarchies // Middle East Policy. 2021. V. 28, № 3-4, p. 203-216. URL: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/mepo.12589>

<sup>25</sup>Murtazashvili, Jennifer; Umarov, Temur. Nobody's Backyard: A Confident Central Asia // Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2024. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/09/nobodys-backyard-a-confident-central-asia?utmm>



dependence on Russia and China. The US sanctions policy towards Iran and its impact on trade routes is causing Central Asian countries to shift their settlements and transport flows to alternative corridors (the Caspian route, North-South) and increasing these states' interest in cooperating with Washington in the C5+1 format (US State Dept; CBO)<sup>26</sup>.

As for China, its energy and economic influence is directly changing the landscape of Central Asia. Debt instruments, contracts with the Persian Gulf countries and Iran, and investments in infrastructure are encouraging Central Asian countries to integrate into Chinese logistics. By increasing imports of Middle Eastern oil and concluding long-term deals, China is reducing price and logistical predictability for Central Asian countries, which are subsequently forced to adapt to Chinese transit strategies (Brookings Institution, n.d.)<sup>27</sup>.

Moscow, in turn, positions itself as a guarantor of security in the region and seeks to increase the dependence of Central Asian countries on Russian collective security mechanisms through its military-diplomatic activity.

Competition between the three powers is also leading to the formation of new transport alternatives and changes in the investment priorities of Central Asian states at the logistical and transit levels. Tighter sanctions and strikes on sea routes in the Persian Gulf have made it important to develop the Caspian corridors and the Trans-Caspian North-South trade route. China is engaged in the construction of BRI land corridors through Iran and Kazakhstan, while the US supports projects in the South Caucasus that aim to “erode” the Russian and Chinese monopoly on transit (Ministry of Roads & Urban Development of the Islamic Republic of Iran; Carnegie), while Russia, in turn, is offering its own infrastructure projects (INSTC) and transit routes.

Looking at the financial and economic aspect, it can be seen that the volatility of energy prices affects the budgetary stability of Central Asian countries due to the crises in the Middle East (in terms of tax revenues and export earnings). At the same time, Chinese loans and investments increase the debt burden of countries in the region and increase their debt dependence on Beijing (BRI Investment Report)<sup>28</sup>.

Cultural and ideological aspects also influence the maintenance of internal balance. Middle Eastern narratives (including Islamic political ideology), information campaigns by regional players, and the financing of educational projects in the Persian Gulf countries are causing ideological competition within Central Asia. At the same time, Russian media (RT, Sputnik in Arabic, and Russian-language projects) and Chinese soft power through educational scholarships and economic projects are creating alternative ideologies and sources of influence (Yunus Emre Institute; RT/Sputnik observations).

In order to strengthen stability, ensure security, and create conditions for sustainable development in the Central Asian region, the following is proposed:

1. Development of multi-vector diplomacy — Central Asian countries should maintain balanced relations with the US, China, and Russia, avoiding excessive dependence on any one power

<sup>26</sup>U.S. Department of State. C51. 2025. URL:

<https://www.state.gov/c51?utmm>

<sup>27</sup>Trush, Sergey. China's Changing Oil Strategy and Its Foreign Policy Implications // Brookings Institution. 1999. URL:

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-changing-oil-strategy-and-its-foreign-policy-implications/?utmm>

<sup>28</sup>Yue, Mandy; Nedopil Wang, Christophe. Public Debt in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): How COVID-19 Has Accelerated an Ongoing Problem of China's Lending // Green BRI Center. 2020. URL:

<https://green-bri.org/public-debt-in-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-covid-19/?utmm>



center.

2. Diversification of transport routes — developing investment policies and investing in the Trans-Caspian route, the North-South corridor, and alternative logistics routes will reduce vulnerability to blockages on Middle Eastern routes and subsequent damage.
3. Strengthening regional cooperation — creating collective alliances and systems to respond to the consequences of Middle East crises will minimize external risks and reduce negative consequences.
4. Economic adaptation to price volatility — the formation of stable funds and the development of the domestic energy processing sector will reduce dependence on oil and gas price fluctuations caused by Middle East conflicts.
5. Control of cultural and ideological influence — monitoring and regulating external funding of religious and educational projects to prevent radicalization and the spread of negative influences on security and stability in the region.
6. Technological and informational independence — developing Central Asia's own analytical centers and media to create an independent agenda and counter any external propaganda.

### Conclusion

The analysis shows that the influence of China, the US, and Russia on Central Asia through the Middle East region is multi-level and systemic in nature, covering the political, economic, military, and cultural spheres. The Middle East is a key hub for global energy, geopolitical competition, and transit, making it not only a center of rivalry between powers, but also a bridge between the transfer of risks and opportunities to Central Asia. The US uses alliances and sanctions to strengthen its political influence in Central Asia, while Russia increases Central Asia's dependence on its defense and infrastructure projects, consolidating its position in the Middle East through diplomatic alliances and military presence. China is integrating Central Asia into its transport and energy chain, relying on its agreements with Iran and other Arab states. With regard to security, any escalation of conflicts in the Middle East has immediate consequences and risks for Central Asia: refugee flows, growth of cross-border smuggling networks (weapons, drug trafficking). These threats are likely to intensify when a coalition or world power begins to change the rules of the game. For example, the escalation of the conflict between Israel and Iran in 2025 led to a sharp increase in regional mobilization and intensified intelligence activities in the border areas of Afghanistan and southern Kyrgyzstan, which led to an increase in military spending by Central Asian countries and coordination with external partners (ICG; World Bank). In addition, the escalation in the Middle East during the 2025 war between Israel and Iran demonstrated how quickly regional crises can become a factor in undermining stability in Central Asia.

When considering the long-term outlook, it is important to note that the stability and sustainability of Central Asia will, to a certain extent, depend on its ability to integrate and benefit from cooperation with the three powers. This excludes the risks and consequences associated with their competition and rivalry in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that effective mechanisms have been established in the Central Asian region to counter a wide range of external challenges and threats. The stable and sustainable domestic political and economic situation in the Central Asian states provides



guarantees for solid and reliable development. In this regard, experts assess the likelihood of possible destabilization as extremely low. However, according to observers, this does not exclude the need for timely and adequate responses and preventive measures by the countries of the region to possible external challenges.

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