



CHINA'S SECURITY DIPLOMACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A GLOBAL POWER POLITICS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis diplomasi keamanan Tiongkok di Timur Tengah dalam perspektif politik kekuatan global. Studi ini bertujuan menjelaskan bagaimana keterlibatan diplomatik Beijing, khususnya dalam mediasi konflik dan stabilisasi kawasan, berfungsi sebagai strategi ekspansi pengaruh di tengah redistribusi kekuatan internasional. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain deskriptif analitis berbasis studi pustaka, memanfaatkan literatur akademik, dokumen kebijakan, dan laporan internasional. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa diplomasi keamanan Tiongkok tidak mengandalkan intervensi militer, melainkan pendekatan non-intervensi, legitimasi multilateral, dan interdependensi ekonomi. Mediasi normalisasi Arab Saudi-Iran pada 2023 mencerminkan strategi ganda: menjaga stabilitas energi sekaligus memperluas posisi strategis Tiongkok dalam kontestasi global. Namun, peningkatan peran tersebut masih bersifat gradual dan belum sepenuhnya menggantikan dominasi keamanan Amerika Serikat. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa diplomasi keamanan Tiongkok merepresentasikan bentuk baru politik kekuatan di era geoekonomi, di mana diplomasi dan pembangunan menjadi instrumen utama dalam membentuk tatanan keamanan yang semakin multipolar.

Kata kunci: Diplomasi Keamanan, Tiongkok, Politik Kekuatan, Timur Tengah, Multipolaritas

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes China's security diplomacy in the Middle East from the perspective of global power politics. The study aims to explain how Beijing's diplomatic engagement, particularly in conflict mediation and regional stabilization, serves as a strategy for expanding influence amid the redistribution of international power. The study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design based on a literature review, drawing on academic literature, policy documents, and international reports. The findings indicate that China's security diplomacy does not rely on military intervention, but rather on a non-interventionist approach, multilateral legitimacy, and economic interdependence. The mediation of Saudi-Iranian normalization in 2023 reflects a dual strategy: maintaining energy stability while expanding China's strategic position in the global contest. However, this increased role remains gradual and has not yet fully replaced the United States security dominance. This study concludes that China's security diplomacy represents a new form of power politics in the geoeconomic era, in which diplomacy and development serve as the primary instruments in shaping an increasingly multipolar security order.

Keywords: Security Diplomacy, China, Power Politics, Middle East, Multipolarity

BACKGROUND

For decades, the Middle East has remained a strategic arena in global international relations due to its geopolitical significance and natural resources, particularly oil and natural gas, as well as the complexity of its ongoing internal conflicts (Fitriyanti, 2025). Within the framework of traditional international relations, the involvement of major powers such as the United States and the Soviet Union (now Russia) has been a dominant factor in the region's dynamics of stability, alliances, and conflict. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, these dynamics underwent a paradigm shift with the emergence of new actors such as China, which has pursued an increasingly active foreign policy and diplomacy in the Middle East through a combination of economic and diplomatic strategies. China is no longer merely a trading partner but has also emerged as a key player in regional security diplomacy. This phenomenon is becoming increasingly relevant amid global power competition.

Since the early 2000s, China has regarded the Middle East as a strategic region in its foreign policy. For China, this region is not only politically important but also crucial for energy security. China is one of the world's largest oil importers, and most of its energy needs are met by Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. China's dependence on Middle Eastern oil has prompted Beijing to expand its involvement in regional security and stability in the interest of its economy and the sustainability of its domestic development (Hanjing & Shiru, 2025).

In a geopolitical context, Beijing's diplomatic approach in the Middle East is often understood as being grounded in the principles of non-intervention and respect for the sovereignty of other nations. This strategy differs from the approaches of previous major powers, which frequently relied on military force or direct political pressure. Beijing emphasizes peaceful diplomacy based on dialogue, consensus-building, and economic cooperation. Examples of this can be seen in several of China's

diplomatic initiatives, including its mediation of the Saudi-Iranian bilateral conflict, as well as its engagement on the Palestinian issue through various multilateral fora (Xinhua, 2025).

A significant diplomatic achievement, often cited as a case study of China's security diplomacy in the Middle East, was the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, facilitated by Beijing in March 2023. Fluctuating dynamics have characterized relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. However, from the 1990s through the early 2000s, the two countries experienced a relatively stable phase of *détente*. During this period, bilateral relations improved through security cooperation and diplomacy, culminating in the 2001 security agreement to manage tensions and build trust. This stability was also supported by Iran's moderate approach under the leadership of Mohammad Khatami, which promoted regional dialogue and cooperative relations with Gulf states, making this period the most conducive phase before relations deteriorated again after 2003 (Cerioli, 2023).

The United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003 marked a significant turning point that shifted the regional balance of power, as Iran's influence in Iraq grew, prompting Saudi Arabia to view Iran as its primary strategic rival. Consequently, relations between the two countries shifted from cooperative to competitive and eventually to conflictual, as reflected in proxy conflicts in the region such as those in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. In this context, the 2023 normalization process mediated by China can be understood as a revival of the reconciliation pattern that emerged in the 1990s through the early 2000s, but with the fundamental difference of the presence of a non-Western mediator, and as part of a longer diplomatic process, including indirect dialogue since 2019, facilitated by Iraq and Oman (Garver, 2023).

China's role is to accelerate and formalize the final agreement, not to start the process from scratch. This agreement represents a major diplomatic breakthrough

following years of rivalry and proxy conflicts between the two countries. It not only improves bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran but is also seen as a key indicator that China is capable of playing a significant role as a mediator in serious international conflicts outside the Asian region. The agreement can be seen as a concrete example of how Beijing uses bilateral diplomacy and diplomatic networks as tools for projecting global power, not merely to maintain peace, but also to expand its political influence in an increasingly multipolar international system (Hakim, 2023).

Nevertheless, China's involvement is not limited to conflict mediation. Beijing has a broader and more complex approach, encompassing a combination of security diplomacy, economic growth, infrastructure investment, and multilateral diplomacy that strengthens its position globally. One strategic example is the Global Security Initiative (GSI), which was launched by the Chinese government to offer a different narrative on security from the traditional Western security model. Through these initiatives, China promotes the concept of the indivisibility of security, that the security of one country cannot be achieved at the expense of another's, which implicitly challenges the dominance of the Western security approach (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022).

China's role has also become increasingly prominent in international fora such as the United Nations (UN), where Beijing has consistently called for ceasefires in various regional conflicts, including in Gaza, and has strengthened its position as a moral authority in advocating for regional peace and stability (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, 2023). From a power politics perspective, this diplomatic approach not only establishes Beijing's reputation as a neutral mediator but also opens up greater scope for Beijing to shape the global diplomatic agenda. In this way, China expands its sphere of influence through a combination of security diplomacy and political legitimacy in global fora.

However, academic and policy debates have arisen regarding whether China's role in the Middle East constitutes a genuine form of neutral conflict mediation aimed solely at resolving regional disputes, or whether it is, in fact, a mechanism for China to project its global geopolitical power. Some analysts have criticized the effectiveness of China's diplomacy in bolstering regional stability, pointing to the limits of Beijing's influence in more complex conflicts such as the one between Israel and Iran in 2025. Although Beijing called for a ceasefire, China's role in de-escalating the conflict was seen as limited compared to the international community's initial expectations. This highlights the dilemma of China's role. On the one hand, Beijing wants to maintain its narrative as a peacemaker, but on the other hand, its influence in major conflicts remains insufficient to replace the role of traditional great powers such as the United States (Suteja, 2025).

Furthermore, although China espouses the principle of non-intervention, Beijing's involvement in mediation efforts, such as in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, actually reflects a diplomatic approach that pragmatically takes China's own strategic interests into account. In other words, although China formally claims neutrality, its diplomatic role is often linked to efforts to strengthen China's position within the competitive global political order, particularly in terms of its influence over key actors in the Middle East. This has implications for the global discourse on how new powers are challenging the dominance of traditional powers in the multipolar era (Hale, 2025).

Evidence on the ground shows that China's involvement has had a multidimensional political impact, with economic, diplomatic, and security dimensions strategically intertwined. China's investments in the infrastructure and energy sectors in many Middle Eastern countries through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have helped strengthen bilateral relations with countries in the region, which in turn has opened up broader diplomatic opportunities. The BRI is not merely an economic tool but also a diplomatic instrument that enhances China's political

legitimacy in its foreign policy. In many cases, Middle Eastern countries view China's approach as an alternative to the conditions often attached by Western powers to their aid or cooperation, such as the political or democratization requirements frequently imposed (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2024).

All of these developments reflect a profound strategic shift in the global power dynamics of the Middle East. China's emergence as a key player in security diplomacy reflects not only its geopolitical ambitions but also its involvement in the transformation of a more complex and multipolar global order. This shift opens up an important analytical space for international relations to understand the interactions between emerging major powers and traditional global security structures, particularly how major powers such as China are reshaping their diplomatic roles from mere economic actors to shapers of the strategic security agenda in a conflict-ridden region (The European Institute for International Relations, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic studies on China's role in Middle Eastern security dynamics indicate that Beijing's involvement is no longer limited to mere economic ties, but has evolved into strategic diplomatic actions with implications for the global power structure. In the literature on international relations, the involvement of major powers in security issues tends to be analyzed through the lens of great power competition and efforts to legitimize a broader global role. Evron (2018) notes that since the post-Arab Spring era, China has expanded the scope of its diplomacy to include political and security issues in the Middle East while maintaining its characteristic non-confrontational approach, despite its growing geopolitical influence. In this study, China is positioned as an actor pursuing active engagement in regional issues without intensive military resource investment, but rather through diplomacy and its economic influence (Evron, 2018).

A study on China's security governance in the Middle East highlights three key mechanisms of Beijing's engagement: the role of special envoys, peace mechanisms and trade relations, and inclusive development assistance within the framework of multilateral diplomacy. Sun (2017) demonstrates that this structure reflects China's incremental approach to regional conflicts and security, in contrast to the Western governance style, which more explicitly involves military force. In the context of intense geopolitical conflict, some scholarly works highlight China's role as a mediator. A more recent journal article assesses China's mediation in the normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations in 2023 as an indicator of a shift in Beijing's diplomatic strategy. This approach expands on the idea that China is attempting to play a soft-balancing role against the United States dominance by offering an alternative mediation channel based on the principles of non-intervention and development stability (Abbaszada & Liu, 2025).

Furthermore, Yuliantoro (2025) situates China's mediation of the bilateral conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran within the framework of shifts in the global power structure that challenge Western hegemony through diplomatic conflict and peaceful resolution. This research indicates that China's strategy encompasses security through diplomatic dialogue, soft power, and a focus on the economy as a means to expand its influence (Yuliantoro, 2025).

Overall, these studies indicate that China's security diplomacy in the Middle East is driven by strategic foreign policy developments, relying on a combination of soft power, economic diplomacy, and participation in multilateral security mechanisms. These changes reflect Beijing's broader strategy of challenging Western hegemonic dominance without confrontation, thereby strengthening its position as an influential global actor in a complex regional arena. However, in this article, the authors will focus more on how major powers such as China are reshaping their diplomatic roles from mere economic actors to shapers of the strategic security agenda

in a conflict-ridden region, particularly China's security diplomacy in the Middle East, from a global power politics perspective.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design to analyze China's security diplomacy in the Middle East from a global power politics perspective. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning, strategies, and implications of China's foreign policy, particularly in the context of its involvement in complex regional security issues laden with geopolitical interests. In the field of international relations, the qualitative approach is considered the most appropriate for examining the political dynamics of power, state behavior, and policy-making, phenomena that cannot be reduced to quantitative variables alone but require contextual and theoretical interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study focuses on China's security diplomacy policies and practices in the Middle East in the contemporary period, particularly since China's increased involvement in regional security issues and the mediation of regional conflicts. The United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 marked a turning point that shifted the regional balance of power, characterized by Iran's growing influence and Saudi Arabia's shifting perception of Iran as its primary strategic rival (Cerioli, 2023). This shift has driven relations between the two countries from a cooperative dynamic toward competition and conflict, which has subsequently manifested in various proxy conflicts in the region. In this context, the 2023 normalization process mediated by China can be seen as an effort to revive the previous pattern of reconciliation (Garver, 2023).

The primary unit of analysis in this study is China as a foreign policy actor, with the Middle East serving as the strategic arena in which this security diplomacy

takes place. The analysis covers China's initiatives and policies, such as mediating the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, an area where no other country has yet been able to play a role in reaching an agreement between the two nations, particularly given that China is a non-Western country. Diplomatic statements regarding regional conflicts, as well as global initiatives with implications for regional security. This narrow focus is essential to maintain the depth of analysis and avoid overly broad generalizations in discussions of global power politics (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Data collection for this study was conducted through library research, utilizing secondary data sourced from academic books, international scientific journals, and relevant policy publications. Books on international relations theory were used to establish a conceptual and theoretical framework, while contemporary journals and reports were utilized to capture the latest empirical developments regarding China's role in the Middle East. In addition, international news sources are used as supplementary sources to track current developments in China's security diplomacy, while prioritizing the validity and credibility of the sources. The use of secondary data in this qualitative study aligns with the tradition of international relations research, which emphasizes the analysis of documents and policy texts as primary data sources (George & Bennett, 2005).

Data analysis was conducted through an interpretive process involving data reduction, thematic grouping, and critical interpretation of empirical findings. The collected data was classified into themes and issues regarding China in the Middle East, then analyzed by relating it to the power politics framework to assess whether China's security diplomacy is more dominant as an effort to stabilize conflicts or as a strategy for projecting global influence. This analytical process enables researchers to draw conclusions that are analytical and theoretical in nature, rather than merely

descriptive, thereby making a conceptual contribution to the study of international relations (Yin, 2018).

DISCUSSION

China's Security Diplomacy as a Strategy of Non-Military Power Politics

In this article, security diplomacy is presented as the primary analytical framework for understanding China's foreign policy in the Middle East. Security diplomacy is defined as the use of non-military instruments, including diplomacy, multilateral institutions, norms, and economic interdependence, to achieve security objectives and expand strategic influence without direct military involvement (Cottey & Forster, 2004). Based on this definition, this study integrates several international relations perspectives. Realism is used to explain China's strategic motives and interests, neoliberalism to understand the role of institutions and economic interdependence, and constructivism to analyze normative dimensions and legitimacy. Thus, these various theoretical approaches do not stand alone, but rather serve as analytical tools that enrich our understanding of security diplomacy as a political strategy of non-military power.

In light of this framework, China's security diplomacy in the Middle East depicts an evolution in great power strategy, shifting away from the classic pattern of military intervention toward an approach grounded in normative legitimacy, multilateral institutionalism, and geoeconomics. Within the framework of global power politics, these changes cannot be separated from the transformation of the international system, which is gradually shifting from post-Cold War unipolarity toward a more fluid multipolar configuration. Waltz (2010) emphasizes that changes in the distribution of material capabilities within the international system will trigger strategic adjustments by major powers. In this context, China's rise as a major economic and military power has prompted Beijing to develop a strategy for

expanding its influence that does not directly provoke open confrontation with dominant powers such as the United States (Waltz, 2010).

Rather than relying on hard power, as seen in the United States' military interventions in Iraq or Afghanistan, China projects its power through a non-interventionist approach and respect for national sovereignty, principles that have long been the cornerstones of Beijing's foreign policy (Foot, 2014). This principle is not merely normative rhetoric, but a strategic tool for building trust in a region that is highly sensitive to external interference. From a constructivist perspective, this kind of normative legitimacy serves as a source of power capable of shaping the perceptions and preferences of other actors (Johnston, 2008). By avoiding direct military involvement, China has cultivated an image as a "non-threatening" partner, in contrast to the historical experiences of Middle Eastern countries with Western intervention.

Furthermore, this strategy can be comprehended as a form of soft balancing against the United States dominance in the Middle East security architecture. Pape (2005) defines soft balancing as the use of international institutions, diplomacy, and economic instruments to limit or counterbalance hegemonic power without direct military confrontation. Through active participation in the UN Security Council, support for political resolutions to regional conflicts, and the strengthening of fora such as the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), Beijing is expanding its diplomatic reach while building institutional networks that reinforce its influence. This strategy aligns with Ikenberry's (2011) argument that, in the modern international order, institutional legitimacy and economic integration can be sources of power just as important as military capabilities.

China's security diplomacy is also closely linked to its geoeconomic expansion through the BRI, which serves as the material foundation for Beijing's non-military power projection. Norris (2016) explains that the BRI is not merely an infrastructure

project, but a strategic instrument that expands economic connectivity and mutual interdependence between China and its partner countries. The use of the word “initiative” in the BRI also highlights China’s willingness to accept ideas from its partner countries (Anggraini et al., 2023). In the Middle East, investments in the energy, port, and logistics sectors not only strengthen China’s economic position but also create diplomatic leverage on security issues. Thus, China’s security diplomacy does not stand alone but is integrated into a global economic strategy that expands Beijing’s structural influence (Norris, 2016).

From an offensive realist perspective, Mearsheimer (2014) argues that great powers are inherently driven to maximize their relative power to ensure their survival in an anarchic international system. Although China has not exhibited a pattern of direct military expansionism in the Middle East, its approach to security diplomacy can be interpreted as an alternative strategy to enhance its relative influence without provoking acute security dilemmas. In other words, Beijing continues to operate within the logic of power politics, but using instruments that differ from traditional hegemonic patterns. This strategy reflects what Schweller (2016) refers to as a form of power competition in an era of global uncertainty, in which states do not always resort to military force, but instead exploit gaps in the international structure to expand their strategic position.

Furthermore, the launch of the GSI demonstrates China’s ambition to offer an alternative paradigm to the Western concept of security, which is often associated with military alliances and intervention. According to Zhao (2022), the GSI represents China’s normative effort to reframe the global security discourse through the principles of the indivisibility of security and shared development. In the Middle East, this narrative resonates because many countries in the region tend to seek stability without the political pressure that often accompanies Western aid or intervention. Thus, China’s security diplomacy serves not only as a foreign policy tool but also as

an ideological project aimed at shaping global security norms that better align with its interests (Zhao, 2022).

Nevertheless, this non-military strategy is not entirely free from criticism. Some analysts argue that China's non-interventionist approach is selective and pragmatic, particularly when its economic or energy security interests are threatened. However, this is precisely where the nature of China's power lies: not in the absence of strategic interests, but in the use of more subtle and institutional instruments to achieve them. Within the context of the regional security complex, China's penetration through diplomatic and economic means has the potential to reshape the configuration of regional interactions without necessarily replacing the United States' military presence directly (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Thus, China's security diplomacy in the Middle East can be comprehended as a non-military power strategy that combines normative legitimacy, multilateral institutionalism, and geoeconomic leverage. This approach demonstrates that in a multipolar era, great power competition is not always manifested through direct military dominance, but rather through the ability to build institutional networks, create economic interdependence, and shape global security norms. China, in this case, has not abandoned the logic of power politics but has reformulated it in a form that is better adapted to contemporary global dynamics.

Conflict Mediation and Energy Stability as Instruments for Projecting Influence

The mediation of the normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations in March 2023 marked a significant milestone in the evolution of China's security diplomacy in the Middle East, while also demonstrating how Beijing integrates its energy stability interests with its strategy for projecting global influence. This success is not merely an isolated diplomatic event, but rather part of a broader geopolitical calculation within the context of global power politics. As the world's largest oil importer, China relies

heavily on the Gulf region to ensure the sustainability of its economic growth. More than 40 percent of China's oil imports come from the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia and Iran serving as the primary suppliers (Fulton, 2019). This structural dependence makes the region's stability a direct strategic interest for Beijing.

From an offensive realist perspective, great powers seek to maximize their influence to ensure relative security in the anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2014). Thus, Beijing's mediation in the Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry can be understood as an effort to strengthen China's strategic position by stabilizing the external environment, which is crucial to its energy interests. However, unlike traditional patterns of military expansion, China has chosen diplomacy as its primary instrument. This strategy reflects a form of geoeconomic statecraft, namely the use of economic and diplomatic tools to achieve geopolitical objectives (Blackwill & Harris, 2016). China's investments in port infrastructure, logistics networks, and energy projects in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates through the BRI strengthen Beijing's capacity to act as a mediator with a direct stake in regional stability (Norris, 2016).

The success of the Saudi Arabia-Iran mediation also demonstrates how economic ties create diplomatic leverage. China maintains deep economic ties with both countries: a comprehensive strategic partnership with Iran, as well as energy cooperation and high-tech investment with Saudi Arabia. This relationship allows Beijing to establish itself as a party that is relatively trusted by both sides, a position that is difficult for the United States to achieve, given that it has historically been perceived as having certain biases in the region (Scobell & Nader, 2016). In the context of the theory of complex interdependence, cross-border economic ties can reduce the incentives for conflict and create opportunities for cooperative diplomacy (Keohane & Nye, 2012). China leverages this interdependence as the basis for the legitimacy of its mediation efforts, while simultaneously expanding its structural influence regionally.

Furthermore, this mediation can be interpreted as a soft balancing against the United States dominance in the Middle East's security architecture (Pape, 2005). Without deploying military force, Beijing has succeeded in entering the diplomatic arena, which has long been Washington's primary domain. Within the framework of the regional security complex, the penetration of external powers through diplomacy and economic means has the potential to reconfigure the patterns of regional security interactions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). China's mediation does not directly replace the role of the United States, but it expands strategic options for regional actors and reduces exclusive reliance on a single major power. Thus, Beijing's actions contribute to the diversification of a more multipolar regional power structure.

The energy dimension is key to understanding the rationale behind this policy. Stability in Saudi-Iranian relations has direct implications for the security of shipping lanes in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, vital arteries for the global energy supply. Disruptions in the region would have a significant impact on China's economy. Therefore, diplomatic mediation is not merely a normative contribution to peace but a preventive measure to protect long-term geoeconomic interests. Within the framework of energy security, the country will integrate its foreign policy and diplomatic strategy to ensure stable and affordable access to energy resources (Yergin, 2011). China demonstrates this pattern of integration by linking security diplomacy, energy investment, and infrastructure development into a single strategic framework.

Furthermore, the launch of the GSI reinforces the normative dimension of this projection of influence. Through the GSI, Beijing promotes the concept of the indivisibility of security and rejects the logic of exclusive military alliances, which it views as a source of security dilemmas (Zhao, 2022). In the context of Saudi-Iranian mediation, this principle is embodied through an approach based on dialogue and respect for sovereignty, without any additional political conditions. In this way, China not only safeguards its energy interests but also constructs an alternative narrative

regarding global security governance that differs from the West's more interventionist approach.

However, the success of this mediation does not mean that China has completely replaced the United States as the primary determinant of regional security. United States military involvement and its alliance network remain dominant factors in regional strategic calculations. Nevertheless, from the perspective of global power politics, Beijing's move demonstrates that influence expansion is not always achieved through direct military dominance. Schweller (2016) emphasizes that in an era of global uncertainty, states can expand their influence by exploiting power vacuums through non-military strategies. Conflict mediation related to energy interests and economic networks is a concrete example of such a strategy.

Thus, conflict mediation and energy stability in China's diplomacy serve a dual purpose. *First*, they function as a mechanism for maintaining regional stability, which is vital to domestic economic security. *Second*, they serve as a means to expand Beijing's strategic position in the global power contest. This approach demonstrates that in the geoeconomic era, the projection of power is no longer synonymous with military expansion, but rather with the ability to foster economic interdependence, diplomatic legitimacy, and alternative security narratives that strengthen a state's position within an increasingly multipolar international system.

China's Security Diplomacy and the Redistribution of Global Power

At the systemic level, China's security diplomacy in the Middle East cannot be separated from the dynamics of power redistribution within the post-Cold War international system. The neorealist perspective asserts that changes in the distribution of material capabilities among states will lead to changes in the structure of the international system (Waltz, 2010). China's economic and military rise over the past two decades has significantly enhanced its relative capabilities. This has enabled

Beijing to expand its diplomatic engagement in strategic regions previously dominated by the United States, including the Middle East. In this context, China's security diplomacy can be understood as an external manifestation of the shifting global balance of power toward a more multipolar configuration (Ikenberry, 2011; Layne, 2012).

However, this process of power redistribution is not revolutionary in nature, but rather gradual and institutional. China does not challenge the United States hegemony through direct military confrontation in the Middle East, but rather through diplomatic, economic, and normative penetration. This strategy aligns with the argument regarding "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development," which has served as Beijing's official foreign policy narrative since the early 2000s (Zheng, 2005). Rather than forming formal military alliances or establishing large-scale military bases in the region, Beijing is expanding its influence through multilateral diplomacy, comprehensive strategic partnerships, and global initiatives such as the BRI and GSI. This approach demonstrates that the redistribution of power in the contemporary international system is increasingly mediated by geoeconomic and institutional instruments, rather than solely by military expansion (Blackwill & Harris, 2016).

Within the framework of power transition theory, the rise of a new power often increases the risk of conflict with the dominant power. However, the patterns observed in China's security diplomacy in the Middle East reveal a more complex form of adaptation. China is not directly seeking to replace the United States as the primary security provider in the region. Instead, Beijing is offering an alternative role as a security mediator and development partner. This creates a differentiation of roles within the regional security architecture: the United States remains dominant in military and security alliance matters, while China expands its influence through diplomatic stabilization and economic interdependence. Thus, a redistribution of power does not necessarily mean a complete replacement of the hegemon, but can take

the form of a fragmentation of authority and a diversification of centers of influence (Acharya, 2014).

From the framework of the regional security complex, the penetration of external powers into a region can alter patterns of security interaction without eliminating the role of previously dominant actors (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The Middle East has historically been a region subject to a high degree of external intervention, particularly by the United States and, previously, the Soviet Union. China's involvement through conflict mediation and energy diplomacy has introduced a new variable into the region's dynamics. However, as seen in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the security dynamics in the Gulf, Beijing still has limited leverage compared to Washington, which possesses a network of military alliances and long-term security commitments. This indicates that the redistribution of power remains partial and has not yet reached the stage of full structural transformation.

In addition, the normative dimension of China's security diplomacy also plays a significant role in the process of global power redistribution. The international order is shaped not only by the material capabilities distribution but also by the institutional legitimacy and norms that underpin it. In the context of the Middle East, this approach appeals to many countries that are sensitive to issues of sovereignty and external intervention. Thus, China's security diplomacy reflects not only a redistribution of material power but also a normative contest over the principles of global security governance.

Furthermore, this phenomenon can be analyzed through the concepts of soft balancing and institutional balancing. Pape (2005) argues that states can counter dominant powers through the use of international institutions and diplomatic cooperation without direct military confrontation. China's security diplomacy in the Middle East exemplifies this pattern: Beijing expands its influence through multilateral fora such as the UN and CASC while simultaneously strengthening strategic bilateral

partnerships. This strategy allows China to strengthen its bargaining position in the international system without triggering a direct escalation with the United States (Pape, 2005).

However, it is important to note that the redistribution of global power does not always follow a linear path. Schweller (2016) emphasizes that the contemporary international system is characterized by uncertainty and fragmentation, in which major powers often face limitations in their capacity and political will to comprehensively manage the global order. In this context, China's involvement in the Middle East is also constrained by its own principle of non-intervention, which limits its room for maneuver in complex armed conflicts. In other words, China's security diplomacy strategy presents a paradox: the greater its influence, the greater the expectations for a more active security role, which in turn may challenge the non-intervention doctrine that forms the foundation of its legitimacy (Schweller, 2016).

Overall, China's security diplomacy in the Middle East depicts a new form of power politics in the geoeconomic era. Whereas in the 19th and early 20th centuries the projection of power was synonymous with colonial expansion and military dominance, in the 21st century, the expansion of influence increasingly depends on the capacity to build economic networks, diplomatic legitimacy, and institutional alternatives (Nye, 2011). The redistribution of global power reflected in China's involvement in the Middle East is not a revolutionary process that suddenly replaces the old hegemon, but rather a gradual process that creates a plurality of centers of influence within the international system. Thus, China's security diplomacy can be understood as a strategy for expanding influence through institutional, normative, and geoeconomic means, a form of adaptation to a global structure that is transitioning toward a complex multipolar order.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that China's security diplomacy in the Middle East is part of a non-military, institutional, and geoeconomic power strategy in the global redistribution of power. Unlike the traditional model of great powers, which relies on military intervention and formal security alliances, China has developed an approach based on political dialogue, respect for sovereignty, principles of non-intervention, and the strengthening of economic cooperation as the foundation of its diplomatic legitimacy. This strategy reflects an adaptation to an international system that remains influenced by the United States dominance but is gradually shifting toward a multipolar configuration.

Concrete initiatives such as mediating the normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations in 2023 demonstrate that China's security diplomacy serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it contributes to regional stability, which is crucial for China's energy security and the sustainability of its domestic economic growth. On the other hand, this mediation expands Beijing's strategic position in a geopolitical arena that has historically been within the United States' sphere of influence. Thus, regional stability is not merely a normative goal but also an instrument for projecting influence in the contestation of global power.

However, this study also found that the redistribution of global power, as reflected in China's growing diplomatic role, remains partial and gradual. Beijing's involvement has not yet fully replaced the United States' role as the primary provider of security in the Middle East, particularly in complex, long-standing conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This indicates that the global power structure has not yet undergone a revolutionary transformation, but is currently in a transitional phase characterized by the fragmentation of authority and the diversification of centers of influence.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of power politics by demonstrating that, in the geoeconomic era, the expansion of influence is no longer synonymous with direct military dominance. Diplomacy, economic interdependence, and normative legitimacy have become the primary instruments in shaping regional and global security orders. Thus, China's security diplomacy in the Middle East can be comprehended as a new form of power politics, a strategy of influence expansion that is gradual, institutional, and legitimacy-based, reflecting the dynamics of contemporary multipolarity.

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