

From Penetrated Region to Global Pivot: Middle East Power Politics and the Making of a Multipolar World Order

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Abstract

Throughout the 20th century, the Middle East was theorised as a “penetrated region”, a subsidiary system that was, to a large extent, influenced by outside great powers' Cold War and post-Cold War hegemonic agendas, in terms of its balance of power, alliances and even domestic politics. This paper suggests that the region has since undergone a transition from periphery, penetrated by the world political system, to a pivot, actively engaged in co-creating the new multipolar world. The paper explores this shift through four interwoven developments: the unipolar U.S. primacy that was undermined after the 2003 Iraq War and the 2011 revolts, the rise of China and the return of Russia as rival poles of attraction, the spread of strategic hedging as the prevailing grand strategy of Gulf, Turkish and Iranian foreign policy, and the disruptive effect of the Gaza war from 2023 to 2025 on normalisation trajectories. The case studies of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran and Israel clearly illustrate that regional actors have been able to establish agendas, to mediate competing great-power interests and to hedge against overdependence on any one great power through the use of multilateral organizations like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In conclusion the paper suggests that the Middle East path provides a key test case of the multiplex world order theory and that it has deep implications for the energy security of the world, the future of trading in dollars, and the strategic calculation of both Washington and Beijing and Moscow as well as Brussels.

Keywords: Penetrated system, Middle East, Multipolarity, Regional security complex, Strategic hedging, World order.

Introduction

Perhaps no other area of international relations today has been as doggedly dominated by foreign influence as the Middle East. The Middle East was the focus of an elaboration of James Rosenau's basic idea of the "penetrated political system": a polity in which non-members of a state engage in direct interaction with the authoritative allocation of the values or resources of that state, other than by conventional diplomacy or full-scale invasion (Rosenau, 1966). Taking this observation as a starting point, Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997) described the Levant and Gulf as a 'penetrated regional system', in which the autonomy of the local 'middle powers'

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like Syria and Iran was maintained but they were structurally dependent on superpower patronage, arms transfers and security guarantees. Over the course of the Cold War between Washington and Moscow, as well as the unipolar period since 1991 and the unilateral coercion of the 2003 war on Iraq, successive waves of scholarship have carried out this diagnosis.

But this inherited framework has been thrown into chaos during the last ten years. The 2011 Arab uprisings highlighted the limits of the security guarantees that the U.S. has offered to the Gulf monarchies; the U.S. "pivot to Asia" and its subsequent retrenchment from security commitments in the region signalled a lack of appetite for policing the region; China's Belt and Road Initiative and its facilitation of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement in 2023 showed that regional outcomes once seen as being exclusively in the domain of Washington could be brokered by a non-Western power; and Gulf monarchies have joined BRICS, courted Moscow and Beijing without abandoning their U.S. security umbrella. This brings to the fore a key question: Is the Middle East no longer a penetrated region and has it turned into a pivot influencing the shape of a new multipolar—or "multiplex"—world order (Acharya et al., 2023)?

This paper addresses this question by exploring the structural re-positioning of this area in three analytical moves. Firstly, it reviews the penetrated-system and regional security complex theory as a baseline, to measure change against (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Ayoob, 1995). Second, it helps to pinpoint the structural factors – namely American retrenchment, Chinese and Russian re-entry, and the spread of hedging – that have reduced external penetration since the early 2000s. Third, it discusses the ways in which Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran and Israel have all used newly won degrees of freedom to expand their influence in agenda setting, and how the Gaza war (2023-2025) has also revealed the extent of their autonomy. The main argument of the paper is not that great-power influence in the Middle East has been removed, but that the countries in the region are no longer merely the object of great power rivalry; some are now great power brokers, which has implications that reach far beyond the region's boundaries and directly addresses questions about what is happening to the post-unipolar international order. The paper goes on in this manner. The Theoretical Framework section builds upon the theories of penetrated systems, regional security complex and polarity/multiplexity scholarship, and the Literature Review attempts to contextualize the contribution of this paper within the current empirical literature and introduces a constructivist qualification. The research design is outlined in the Research Methodology section. The Penetrated Region section brings the penetrated-region condition up to date from the Cold War to the 2011 uprisings, and pinpoints the structural forces that have led to change since around 2003. The Middle Eastern Agency section compares and analyzes five different cases, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran, and Israel, and concludes with a typology of hedging mechanisms. In the Critical Discussion section, the resulting pivot thesis is questioned critically, and the Implications for Global Order section reveals their implications for global power politics, prior to the Conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The starting point for this paper is the concept of the "penetrated political system" presented by Rosenau (1966), which involves "direct participation" by an external actor in the decision-

making process of a target state, and in which the external actor does not necessarily control the process, but instead provides support through aid, basing rights, covert action, or arms transfers. In the Middle East, Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997) demonstrated that even the relatively capable regional powers of the Middle East like Syria and Iran, had their international relations "a hybrid of local agency and external penetration, operating within a structure of superpower patronage. Hinnebusch's (2015) synthesis carried the argument forward to the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf Wars and argued that, unlike other developing regions, the Arab-Israeli conflict rendered the region surprisingly open to foreign intervention due to its fractured state system, weak Westphalian sovereignty and overlapping identities (pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism) (Halliday, 2005).

A complementary perspective is provided by Buzan and Wæver's (2003) regional security complex theory (RSCT), which sees the Middle East as a security complex united by amity and enmity dynamics that are largely, though not completely, independent of but also vulnerable to global powers. Jarzabek (2018) and Seeberg (2016) use RSCT in the post-2011 Middle East and demonstrate that the multiplicity of security dynamics and external penetration points resulted in overlapping subcomplexes—Gulf, Levantine and North African—with distinct but interconnected security dynamics. In parallel, Ayooob's (1995) "subaltern realism" emphasizes that it is not so much anarchy that opens the door for externally penetrated security dynamics as it is state weakness in the Third World, a perspective that can be understood as more broadly applying to the state system's shift to "regional society" described by Ayooob (1999). But Katzenstein's (2005) comparative regionalism also implies that a security complex's permeability to an external power is not a constant; it is, rather, modified by the density of the regional institutional architecture, which this paper's forum-shopping analysis (in the Penetrated Region section below) regards as endogenous rather than imposed upon Middle Eastern agency.

Classical polarity theory conceptualizes systemic structure in terms of the number of great powers (Waltz, 1979) and as a result of the alliance-balancing behaviour that it stimulates (Walt, 1987). Mearsheimer's (2001) theory of offensive realism suggests that unipolarity is inherently unstable and that as the power of rising powers increase, they will eventually balance against the unipole which can be seen in China's and Russia's increased presence in a region long dominated by the United States. From a liberal-institutionalist (Ikenberry 2011) and classical-realist (Kissinger 2014) perspective, respectively, both scholars predicted a shift to a more plural, negotiated order as U.S. relative power fell, but they disagreed vehemently on whether the shift would be orderly. More recently, Acharya (2014) and Acharya et al. (2023) have proposed that the new order might be better described as "multiplex" rather than multipolar, meaning that instead of simply a return to "great power" balancing among a handful of poles, the new order is a denser and more networked one where regional powers, multilateral institutions and non-state actors all play a role, and where "swing powers" which refuse to align strictly with any one pole exercise disproportionate influence (Fontaine & McKinley, 2025). The dense-networked reading of order that is the subject of this paper has intellectual antecedents in Keohane and Nye's (1977) earlier account of complex interdependence, which also suggested that the multiple channels of contact between societies undermine the analytic primacy of pure military-hierarchical polarity.

Literature Review

This phenomenon is well captured in the empirical literature on the process of systemic loosening and the practice of strategic hedging by individual Middle Eastern states, in which they potentially increase their interactions with Washington, Beijing and Moscow at the same time (Alsrour, 2026; Garlick & Havlová, 2020; Wright, 2025). Regional states are not simply penetrated but have become actors of systemic changes as indicated by parallel developments in Turkey's quest for 'strategic autonomy' (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026; Tüysüzoğlu, 2025), Qatar's and Egypt's niche and mediatory diplomacy (Milton et al., 2023; Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025), and the networked regional order revealed by the Gaza war (Krieg, 2024). This paper draws on that literature and combines it with the multiplex order theory in a single explanatory arc: The loosening of penetration is both a cause and a consequence of the region's increasingly pivotal position in a multipolarizing world.

A purely material understanding of this transition will fail to do justice to the role of identity and ideational contestation, as realist and neorealist accounts are structurally not well enough positioned to capture this. (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). As Telhami and Barnett (2002) demonstrate, the legitimacy of Arab regimes has always been assessed by looking at transnational identity referents – pan-Arabism, political Islam and now a more diffuse Gulf-centered version of Arab nationalism – which limit the scope of alignments that a ruling elite can pursue without domestic costs, regardless of material capabilities. The hedging behavior should not be assumed to be simply a material reaction against the structuring incentives; it has been warned already by Wendt (1992) that “anarchy is what states make of it” and Cox (1981) that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose.” This is relevant to the pivot thesis because it suggests that the hedging by the Gulf, Turkey and Iran is not necessarily a rational-materialist reaction to the loosening of systems, but is also mediated by identity politics which can cause a state's external alignment to speed up, or, as we can see in the Saudi-Israeli normalization track that stalled after October 2023, come to a complete halt, regardless of the material logic behind hedging. It therefore seems important to take material-structural theory (RSCT, polarity theory) and ideational-constructivist insight into productive tension, as neither is sufficient by itself, a tension which this paper, in the empirical case analysis that follows, attempts to achieve.

Research Methodology

This paper is a qualitative, historical-comparative research design (most-different case comparison) and structured process-tracing. The unit of analysis is the Middle East states' foreign policy behaviour with three main external poles since 2001: the United States, China and Russia. The sources of evidence include secondary academic literature from cited (Scopus-listed) journals, documents of primary diplomatic sources, summit-declarations (BRICS, SCO, GCC), and evidence in documented policy statements, with at least one independent secondary source to validate the evidence. The paper uncovers the causal chain between structural change (a decrease in U.S. willingness and ability to underwrite regional order) and intervening variables (the emergence of new regional great power patrons and the spread of hedging as a strategic repertoire) to the variable of interest (regional agency increase and pivot behaviour). The selection of cases is based on a most-different design: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab

Emirates, Turkey, Iran and Israel all vary in terms of the type of regime, past alliance networks and material capabilities, and they are all observed to have demonstrated multi-vector diplomacy since around 2015, which increases the confidence that the observed pivot behaviour is a systemic change, and not an idiosyncratic feature of any particular state.

There are three admittedly limitations in the design: qualitative process-tracing cannot determine causal effects as precisely as large-N analysis; the period of 2001-2026 is still underway and the longer-term consequences of the Gaza war are still up for debate (Krieg, 2024); and the design relies on English-language secondary sources, which may undersample Arabic-, Persian-, Turkish-, and Hebrew-language scholarship, a factor partially mitigated by drawing on area-studies journals with Arabic-, Persian-, Turkish-, and Hebrew-language articles (e.g., Sevilla, 2024; Trujillo, 2025). The empirical claims concerning hedging are based on three observable indicators, which are monitored over 2010-2026: direction and value of arms-transfers and basing agreements (hard-security alignment); accession to or dialogue-partner status with competing multilateral institutions, including BRICS, the SCO, and the GCC (diplomatic-institutional alignment); and denomination and destination of large energy-export contracts (economic alignment). As long as there are indicators that diverge from one another (e.g. a state keeping hard-security partners with Washington and diversifying economic partners with Beijing), the divergence is the analytically interesting finding, not the apparent diversification.

The Penetrated Region: Historical Trajectory and Structural Drivers of Change

Both superpowers were trying to win over Middle Eastern countries, arm them and sometimes force them to do things as pawns in a world-wide struggle – during the Cold War. In its purest form, the penetrated system was manifested by Egypt's foreign policy shift from the USA to the USSR in 1956 after the Suez crisis and then back to the USA after 1973 to ensure the survival of the regime and its regional position (Fawcett, 2016). The Ba'athist regimes of Syria and Iraq, the Shah's Iran and Israel each relied on superpower military transfers and diplomatic protection to maintain their positions, and the superpowers played with regional clients to further their own goals with only limited military involvement (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 1997). As in Barnett's (1998) broader discussion on Arab regional order being negotiated as much with words than it is with power, external and domestic politics interpenetrated along the axis of identity politics and political Islam, as well. More broadly, Kamrava's (2011) political history of the modern Middle East shows the same pattern in the region starting from 1945 and the process of state formation.

One pole of competition was eliminated with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and a UN-sanctioned coalition, forward U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, and a Gulf Oil order denominated in dollars and backed by U.S. security guarantees was evident in the 1991 Gulf War (Gause, 2010). U.S. primacy had reached an all-time high with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but it was also a turning point since it was a regime change war that was not multilateral, but rather a unilateral war justified in terms of U.S. primacy. In sum, the long insurgency, the empowerment of Iran as a result of the fall of a rival Ba'athist regime and the loss of U.S. domestic and international legitimacy that ensued all undermined Washington's ability to function as an unchallenged regional hegemon (Hinnebusch, 2015).

Add to this the Arab uprisings of 2011, which were responsible for further disturbing the penetrated-system equilibrium. The external patronage policies that had been maintained with Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen for decades failed to ensure the survival of these regimes, and outside actors were rather responding to the dynamics on the ground. Outreach was becoming multipolar, even before local rulers in the region started actively seeking other poles, and civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen were new battlegrounds for a renewed but more contentious U.S. presence alongside a resurgent Russia, an assertive Turkey and rival Gulf patrons (Lynch, 2016). Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 was widely interpreted as Russia's first sustained power projection efforts in the Middle East since the collapse of the Soviet Union, both reasserted external great-power competition and suggested that Washington's veto power over outcomes in the Middle East was not absolute (Trujillo, 2025).

Starting with the Obama administration's 2011 strategy to 'pivot to Asia', successive administrations in the U.S. have, at times inconsistently, looked to de-emphasize their direct military and diplomatic responsibilities in the Middle East while focusing more on strategic competition with China in the Indo-Pacific (Wright, 2025). The 2021 Afghanistan pullout, smaller U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria and Washington's reluctance to take a strong stance on the Yemen war all indicated a diminished appetite for open-ended policing in the region, typical of the unipolar era. The retrenchment was not complete — the U.S. Fifth Fleet is still headquartered in Bahrain, and Washington was able to mediate the Abraham Accords — but it left some room to be filled by regional and extra-regional players.

This was economic diplomacy not against but with Saudi-Iranian rivalry, as Garlick and Havlová (2020) put it: this is Nye's (1990) 'soft power' diplomacy, using infrastructure and investment, not coercive measures, to reorient Gulf and Levantine infrastructure, energy and technology partnerships toward Beijing without discarding existing U.S. security partnerships. For the first time since the unipolar moment started, a major regional realignment was brokered with the assistance of a power other than the United States, as China did in March 2023 with the Saudi-Iranian negotiations (Sevilla, 2024). China's mediation, while not as prominent as it could have been — the Beijing-negotiated deal had been a result of years of Omani- and Iraqi-brokered back channels — nevertheless, it did indicate that the Gulf states were no longer considering Washington as their sole option to talk with Tehran.

Although its international profile declined following 2022, Russia did manage to regain its relevance in the region through its Syria campaign and its arms and diplomatic ties with the Gulf countries, Turkey and Israel (Trujillo, 2025). The Ukraine war paradoxically strengthened the economic coordination of the Gulf with Russia, via OPEC+ oil-production diplomacy, even while it complicated the relations of the Gulf with the West over compliance with the sanctions, as a bipolar great power conflict in another part of the international system can lead to an increase in a penetrated region's bargaining power.

Strategic hedging — that is, having significant ties with multiple, potential competitor, great powers at once — has become the region's predominant grand-strategic toolbox (Alsrour, 2026; Wright, 2025). This forum-shopping – as Papa and Han (2025) describe it for BRICS more broadly, and Legrenzi (2011) describes it for the GCC specifically – is illustrated by the

accession of the UAE and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to BRICS (from January 2024; Saudi Arabia was also invited to join from January 2024, but by 2025 had still not gone through the formal process, and remained officially non-committal). Alshareef (2023) recounts a similar process in the geoeconomic orientation of the Gulf, where the expansion of energy trade with China in yuan is an incremental rather than wholesale sign of a structural shift away from the petrodollar system and a move towards multipolarizing economic relations, while security ties with the United States remain unchanged.

There are two additional pressures for structural diversification that are not reducible to it. First, Gulf states' own long-range economic planning, such as Saudi Vision 2030 and the UAE's post-oil diversification strategy, views the global energy transition as reducing their reliance on the rentier dynamic to which they are traditionally tied with the oil-importing Western world, thus providing ruling elites with a domestic-economic as well as geopolitical motivation for the shift toward alternative revenue and investment ties with China and other non-Western markets before the transition. Second, the 2020 Abraham Accords briefly suggested that U.S.-brokered normalisation was still capable of unilaterally reshaping regional alignments, which is why the disruption to them by the Gaza war (discussed in the Middle Eastern Agency section below) is potentially significant: it indicates that the U.S. agenda-setting power has peaked even in an area where they felt it was closest to being uncontested — Arab-Israeli diplomacy.

Middle Eastern Agency in a Multipolar Moment: Comparative Case Analysis

The change from dependent client to active hedger is most apparent in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy since 2015, under the reign of the country's new Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman. The economic diversification agenda of Vision 2030 has been accompanied by a conscious diplomatic diversification – ongoing partnership with the United States in the field of military cooperation and arms sales, deepening economic ties with China and signing of a trade and investment agreement in March 2023, and even a rapprochement with Iran that was facilitated by Beijing in March 2023 but has so far not been finalized by Riyadh (Alsrour, 2026; Sevilla, 2024). The application of regional security complex theory to Saudi behaviour between 2010 and 2025 by Alsrour (2026) suggests that, far from being an exclusively American tool, relations with the U.S., China, and the region have all served as complementary elements to Saudi risk management, as Riyadh has shifted from threat-balancing with Iran alongside Washington to a more independent posture.

The UAE has also taken a similar but independent approach, with niche diplomacy (mediation, humanitarian logistics, and technology investment) alongside a similarly broad diversification of great-power partnerships (Milton et al., 2023, on the overall mediatory pattern found in the Gulf; El-Dessouki & Mansour, 2023, on Emirati hedging in particular w.r.t Iran). Instead of viewing the accession as a commitment to a Chinese or Russian-led bloc, it is important to see the decision as a move towards institutional hedging – that is, both countries gain more options for financing, trade-settlements and diplomacy by joining BRICS, rather than sacrificing their existing ties with the west (Alshareef, 2023). This fits with the 'art of hedging' noted in recent scholarship on Gulf manoeuvring in the context of the competition between the United States and China, in which the Gulf states' extent of engagement with each pole varies according to

the issue, such as security, where it is by far the most U.S.-centric, or economic and technological diversification, which is increasingly China-centric (Wright 2025).

This is important because the hedging behavior does not come free of charge. Riyadh's hope to pursue both agendas - a closer relationship with Beijing and a continuing U.S. defence partnership - has sometimes prompted friction with Washington, notably when it has made adjustments to OPEC+ oil production during the Ukraine conflict and over the tempo of any potential U.S.-led Saudi-Israeli normalisation process, interrupted by the Gaza war in October 2023. These Gulf cases, then, illustrate the limited nature of agency despite ongoing material entanglements – the very gradual fractures of penetration that this paper's argument predicts.

Turkey is a unique example in the region where it is a NATO country with a policy of "strategic autonomy" in an emerging multipolar world (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026). At the same time, Ankara has kept its NATO membership, air-defence systems at Incirlik that are part of the U.S. nuclear-sharing program, conducted Russia-Ukraine talks on grain exports, and expanded its trade with China – all of which Tüysüzöğlu (2025) describes as “middle-power hedging” and a new “Eurasianist” vein in the strategic thinking of the Turkish state. Despite the multi-vector posture, Turkey has never been kicked out of Western security institutions, and even U.S. sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act have been ineffective in this regard, as Turkey is not a country with limited options of hedging and great powers have little leverage to prevent it.

A case in contrast but complement is Iran, whose quest for autonomy is heavily influenced by all-encompassing U.S.-led sanctions since 2018, after the withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Tehran has been trying to develop strategic relations with China, with a 25-year cooperation agreement signed in 2021, although the implementation of this agreement has been partial and controversial (Figueroa, 2026), and with Russia as well, including cooperation with the non-state “axis of resistance” network of allied and aligned actors in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. The network, however, took serious knocks during and after the 2023-2025 Gaza war, including from Hezbollah being weakened, and the Assad government's demise in Syria in December 2024, which reshaped regional alignments and continues to be contested by Turkish-, Gulf-, and Iranian-backed players (AlHamid, 2026), and showed that resistance-axis strategy—while able to spread Iranian influence at relatively low direct cost over a decade—was susceptible to concerted Israeli military pressure upon escalation. Iran's pursuit of the Saudi mediated Chinese-brokered normalization of its relations with Saudi Arabia in 2023 also suggests that a path to regional de-escalation must go hand in hand with an autonomy-seeking (Sevilla, 2024) limited by sanctions.

The September 2020 Abraham Accords, which saw Israel normalise relations with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (soon followed by Sudan and Morocco), were an effort to rearrange the regional order in the Middle East in an explicitly U.S.-mediated, anti-Iran axis of Israeli-Gulf security and economic cooperation. The liberalisation of the regional alignment logic was considered a notable shift, in this particular normalisation track read widely as a sign of a new and more flexible regional alignment logic, where shared threat perception of Iran superseded historic solidarity with the Palestinian cause (Guzansky & Marshall, 2020; Mueller & Kontos, 2026). Saudi-Israeli normalisation, a crowning achievement being actively worked on by the

Biden administration, also seemed to be in the cards by 2023, marking the most significant realignment of Middle East alliances since the Camp David Accords.

This trend was broken by the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and ensuing Gaza war. Krieg (2024) suggests that the war demonstrated not only the limits of U.S. regional leadership—evident in Washington's inability to prevent, to swiftly end, or to fully control the regional spillover associated with the war in Lebanon, the Red Sea, and the direct clash between Iran and Israel in 2024—but also the emergence of a more "networked" regional order, where non-state and sub-state actors such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iranian-aligned Iraqi militias were able to play disruptive roles without being directly controlled by a single external patron. Despite the fact that several signatories to the Abraham Accords continued their current relationships with Israel, the Saudi-Israeli normalisation negotiations have come to a standstill because of the inability for ruling elites to manage Gulf publics' sympathy for Palestinians.

The Gaza war is therefore a good example of how far the region's trajectory toward autonomous pivot has gone, and what it can't yet do. On the other hand, no one outside could determine the course of the war, which, in a sense, was multipolar as neither the United States, China, or Russia could dominate it. Conversely, the war has proven that more regional autonomy does not automatically mean more regional stability: multipolarity within the Middle East in this case is not necessarily going to lead to a more peaceful and multilaterally-managed order. (Krieg, 2024).

The cases that precede it suggest three interrelated arguments concerning shifts in the Middle East's role in world politics. Firstly, the states in the region have clearly diversified their external partnerships since the early 2000s, turnaround of the U.S. unipolar penetration into substantive multi-vector relations with China and Russia in security, economic and diplomatic fields (Alsrour, 2026; Garlick & Havlová, 2020; Tüysüzoğlu, 2025). First, this is not a defensive move to prevent abandonment, but a more proactive measure of the regional actors setting their agenda, such as the Gulf-brokered ceasefire negotiations, Qatari and Egyptian mediation in the Gaza war, and the Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iranian normalisation (Milton et al., 2023; Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025; Sevilla, 2024).

Second, this agency is not forum shopping outside of the multilateral and institutional fora, but rather forum shopping through them. That BRICS expansion, SCO dialogue-partner status, and continued presence in Western-led security architectures are all multiplex behaviour: they are part of a practice of “disaggregated participation” in multiple, overlapping institutional orders, as opposed to “bandwagoning” with a single hegemonic order (Acharya et al., 2023). Middle East countries have turned into key protagonists of, not just passive victims of, this multiplex architecture, as they control the key maritime chokepoints (the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal), hold major stakes in global energy markets and have plenty of money to invest outbound.

Third, and more carefully, this transition from penetrated region to pivot is not one in which external penetration is abolished nor the region has become a stabilizing force in the global order. Instead, the Middle East is more and more becoming the "swing" space that Fontaine and McKinley (2025) refer to: a collection of consequential middle and small powers whose

choices of alignment are not determined by the major poles of the international system but are actively sought after. The existence of U.S. basing, security guarantees, the continued dollar pricing of most Gulf exports despite the uptick in yuan settlement (Alshareef, 2023), and the ongoing susceptibility of regional order to Great Power adjacent shocks (the impacts of the Ukraine war on OPEC+ diplomacy, the Gaza war on normalisation) all suggest this is a transition region, not one that has fully escaped its penetrated-system past. Today's Middle East isn't quite a sovereign pole in its own right, but rather a stage, and an ever more important co-author, of the making of the new multipolar order.

The four cases outlined above are not adaptations of a single template for 'hedging' but rather are different causal processes in relation to systemic loosening and state action. Saudi Arabia and the UAE engage in material hedging, where their agency is based on fungible financial and energy resources which enable them to buy optionality on both poles at the same time, which is only possible for capital-rich rentier states (Alshareef, 2023; Alsrouf, 2026). Turkey's strategic autonomy is closer to being called 'positional hedging,' as Ankara, which doesn't possess the kind of financial leverage that the Gulf countries provide with their petrodollar hedger, takes the advantage of its position in the middle of Europe, Russia, and the Middle East, along with its significant conventional military power (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2026; Tüysüzöğlu, 2025). Iran's stance can be seen as constrained-network hedging: its ability to conduct multilateral forum-shopping, even to a degree, is curtailed by sanctions, and so the network that it has constructed is a non-state one with a comparative advantage in deniability, which is far less robust than either the Gulf or Turkish model is if Tehran is subject to direct military threat. For Israel, the situation is different: the value of its agency in the Abraham Accords era was based on the provision of security and technology to Gulf states in exchange for their "diplomatic normalisation" – and Gaza war has disrupted that value precisely because it was dependent on the suppression of the Palestinian question, rather than its resolution. This typology (material, positional, constrained-network, and transactional-integration hedging) implies that "the Middle East's pivot role" is a family of related strategies, each of which has a different level of durability depending on the kind of resource base that the state possesses that it can transform into bargaining leverage, a distinction the extant hedging literature has not always been explicit about.

Critical Discussion: Limits of the Pivot Thesis

The argument presented above is not to be regarded as unchallenged, and there simply has to be a serious scholarly treatment of this question that takes all the arguments into account and not just parrots them.

Wright (2025) himself warns that diversification in the Gulf has been overwhelmingly asymmetric, with security purchases, military exercises, and intelligence-sharing continuing to be mostly U.S.-dominated, even as economic and other diplomatic relationships diversify; what might appear to be multipolar hedging in trade and diplomatic rhetoric may well be, in the hard currency of military security, closer to dependence on one pole – as Wohlforth (1999) argues most contemporary reactions to U.S. primacy are actually closer to low-cost "soft balancing" than to military-based balancing classical polarity theory would predict. From this perspective, the benefits of BRICS accession and SCO dialogue-partner status are minimal, and largely

symbolic, and can be pursued precisely because they do not involve costly, hard-power commitments, as Mearsheimer (2001) had predicted would be necessary for multipolar balancing to be a genuine force. In fact this paper admits as much in the evidence presented in the Middle Eastern Agency case-study section, which gives the exact opposite spin to the title of this paper: Saudi and Emirati hedging is limited because military reliance on Washington remains. The key question here is whether “hedging” is an intermediate step toward multipolarity or a stable equilibrium, to which Gulf states may have strong incentives not to stray, since it maximises bargaining power vis-à-vis all suitors at once without having to make a costly choice.

A second methodological challenge is whether this is actually regional agency or it is a kind of 'gift' of great-power disengagement and not a shift in relative capability. Ikenberry (2011) would be skeptical, however, that U.S. retrenchment is an irreversible structural decline in American capability (the "pivot" identified in this paper is a temporary widening of the bargaining space that penetrated-system dynamics has historically afforded middle powers during periods of superpower distraction, see the Penetrated Region section on Egypt for example). The China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal is telling in this regard: as Sevilla (2024) observes, Beijing's mediation was a “mediation of convenience” and did not involve the security guarantees that the United States, since 1945, has offered to the Gulf; this mediation was undertaken on the basis of years of prior Omani- and Iraqi-facilitated backchannel Saudi-Iran diplomacy.

The best empirical counter-argument to the pivot thesis is the Gaza war. The war, by no means an indication of the ability of regional actors to handle crises without the involvement of external powers, actually served as an affirmation of U.S. centrality: Washington was the only outside force to be able to provide Israel's military campaign with mass, to exert (imperfectly, but still) restraining influence on Israel, and to deter escalation in the region through direct naval deployments in the eastern Mediterranean and Red Sea. Krieg (2024) himself dubs the result 'networked' rather than truly multipolar because neither new poles, China nor Russia, had comparable crisis-management capabilities; Beijing did little more than rhetorically position itself, while Moscow's regional ranking was arguably not enhanced but at best only neutralized by the war (Trujillo, 2025). On this important read, the Gaza war isn't a multipolar Middle East, but rather a unipolar security order with multipolar economic and diplomatic hedging – this is more modest and more defensible than the pivot thesis as it is most commonly understood.

Collectively, these criticisms do not disconfirm the main thesis of the paper, but do fine-tune it. The evidence suggests that multipolarity in the Middle East is most developed in economic and diplomatic fields, much less in hard-security fields and is not structurally irreversible. This is a more analytically defensible conception of multipolarity that is differentiated and/or domain-specific, and it is not inconsistent with the multiplex conception of Acharya et al. (2023), which explicitly expects uneven multipolar distributions of influence, i.e. issue-specific multipolarity, rather than a multipolar convergence of all domain-specific distributions at once.

The fourth challenge, not a major one in the international relations literature but one that is consistent with the constructivist qualification offered in the Literature Review section, is that

regional hedging is often as much an issue of legitimacy and elites as it is of strategy. Gulf rulers' drive to join the BRICS and attract Chinese investments, can be interpreted as a legitimization effort, aimed at assuring the domestic populace, which is increasingly young and digitally connected, of its economic vitality and diversification, rather than any reassessment of the external threat. Likewise, the Eurasianist discourse of the Erdoğan administration towards Turkey's foreign policy is geared towards Turkey's domestic nationalist audiences as well as for a coherent foreign policy adjustment (Tüysüzöğlu, 2025). If the causes of hedging behaviour are found largely in domestic political economy and legitimization needs, and not in systemic multipolarisation, there is a danger that the pivot thesis is over-attributing to structural change what is in part a domestic level 'legitimation for home' process of authoritarian and competitive-authoritarian regimes — a danger that can only be mitigated by state-level, system-oriented evidence of which this paper can marshal only a part, and which must be complemented by domestic level process-tracing. This critique dovetails with a larger discussion within Global IR scholarship on the extent to which middle-power and/or Global South agency can be understood as genuine strategic decision-making or as a more performative act that responds at least in part to normative and legitimacy challenges posed by 2011 revolutions faced by small Gulf monarchies (Efsthopoulos, 2023; Artner & Yin, 2023), as is the case with the paradigmatically agentic example of Qatar's mediation diplomacy, which Ulrichsen (2016) demonstrates was actually deeply a response to the legitimacy and normative pressures imposed by the 2011 revolutions on small Gulf monarchies.

Implications for Global Order

Gulf states' diversified great-power relationships have direct implications for global energy security, as they are the world's most important swing producers of oil and a large supplier of liquefied natural gas. OPEC+ (Saudi Arabia and Russia), energy cooperation between the Gulf and China, and Beijing's investment in energy production in the region, also make the Western sanctions approach more complicated from time to time, as a growing number of outside players have a vested interest in, but not necessarily a full responsibility for, regional order (Garlick & Havlová, 2020).

Financial architecture and De-dollarization. The increase in yuan denominated energy trade and the involvement of the Gulf in the BRICS financial mechanisms constitute small steps towards a move away from a purely dollar international monetary order (Alshareef, 2023). Even if full de-dollarization of Gulf oil trade is far down the road due to the strength of the dollar-dominated financial infrastructure, there is outsized signalling value in any measure in the direction of de-dollarization for discussion of multipolarity more broadly: perceptions that the post-1971 petrodollar settlement is no longer guaranteed.

The pivot behaviour of the region, however, undermines the retrenchment logic; that is, that a decreased U.S. military presence has resulted in a more stable, self-managing regional order, one that China and Russia have filled in part without shouldering commensurate security responsibilities. In Beijing's view, the economic tie-up is a way of reducing China's vulnerability to regional turmoil, but also a means of limiting its power to influence it—an example being China's limited influence on the Gaza war. Re-engagement in the Middle East has been a way for Moscow to gain diplomatic and economic rewards far greater than it can

boast in terms of its overall relative material strength, and again, determined middle-tier powers can achieve regional influence despite the overall relative decline. A Middle East with fewer exogenous strongmen will make it harder for the European Union to come up with a coordinated transatlantic policy on migration, energy, counterterrorism, and other issues, as regional actors have fewer reasons to comply with EU-specific preferences.

The Middle East example provides qualified support for the multiplex (not multipolar) theorisations of the new order (Acharya et al., 2023). The region is not an instance of one hegemony replacing another, and it is not a neat tripolar configuration of Washington, Beijing and Moscow, but a highly issue-specific, overlapping and multiplex configuration of engagements. Meanwhile, the ongoing failure to find a solution to the conflict — most obviously the Gaza war and its regional reverberations — reminds people not to be complacent about the idea of multipolarity leading to a more peaceful or managed multipolar conflict than to the unipolar conflict of unipolarity.

Conclusion

This paper has contended that the penetrated-system paradigm, which has prevailed in the study of the Middle East's international relations since the Cold War and unipolar era, has been insufficient to explain the region's international relations. Based on the theory of a penetrated system, the theory of regional security complexes, and the theory of multiplex world order, and by examining traces in the region of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran and Israel, the paper has demonstrated how Middle Eastern states have transformed the fading of U.S. unipolarism into substantive strategic hedging, institutional forum-shopping, and even, in the case of Qatari and Chinese-brokered mediation, direct agenda-setting for regional and even global diplomacy.

The pivot of the region from its periphery to the world's pivot is not finished and not uncontroversial. But the need for material dependence on U.S. security guarantees remains, as do diversified economic and diplomatic relationships; the energy order is dollar based, but has only been called into question at the edges; and the Gaza war has shown that more regional autonomy can coexist with, but not resolve, entrenched conflict. But the overall case is that, as the paper argues, the Middle East is not only a plaything of external actors today, but rather an active co-author of a new multipolar – or, more accurately, multiplex – world order.

The typology of material, positional, constrained-network, and transactional integration hedging (which was developed in the Middle Eastern Agency section) provides a vocabulary of hedging that is more fine-grained than the undifferentiated language of "hedging" found in the literature, while the finding that multipolarity is domain-specific, is more advanced in economic and diplomatic engagement, and is more constrained at hard security, and more bound up with domestic legitimation needs, is provided as a corrective to both triumphalist and dismissive readings of Middle Eastern agency in the current period.

This reconceptualization has implications which go well beyond area studies. It implies that the notion of international relations theory should focus more on the agency of the "penetrated" areas as variables that can influence the transition of the system rather than only as dependent variables of the great power competition. Future research could investigate whether similar

processes are happening in other historically-penetrated areas (Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America) and could create more granular, quantifiable metrics of hedging intensity to facilitate cross-regional and longitudinal comparison. The Middle East will continue to be a key test case for twenty-first-century multipolarism as the aftershocks of the Gaza war and the nature of Gulf-BRICS relations and Saudi-Israeli normalisation play out.

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