

SEPTEMBER 2024

The Middle East's View of the “China Model”

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A Report of the CSIS Middle East Program

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES



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Executive Summary

China's Middle East strategy is focused on the United States, but China is not engaged in straightforward competition. China's strategy does not seek to replace the United States in the Middle East, push it out, or outcompete it. Instead, China is working to untie the Middle East from the United States and to make the region and the world more receptive to China.

Dating back to the early Cold War and continuing since, the United States has worked to encourage the growth of free and open societies in the Middle East and around the world. An important part of China's Middle East strategy is encouraging appreciation that China's decades of remarkable economic growth, as well as its global rise, occurred under the firm guidance of the Chinese Communist Party. Whereas the United States explicitly encourages imitation among allies—and, in the eyes of many countries, social and political instability—China seeks to legitimize the idea that there are myriad pathways to prosperity and security. China's Middle East outreach efforts proclaim its noninterference in domestic affairs and a focus on mutually beneficial economic partnerships.

Middle Eastern states seeking leverage with the United States have seized on the idea of a China model. In part, this is to legitimize their own resistance to U.S. calls for domestic liberalization. But equally importantly, expressing openness to engagement with China on looser Chinese terms puts them “in play” and allows them to demand more from the United States. Even close partners of the United States, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, have expressed interest in drawing closer to China. Their interest is in part due to China's rising global influence, but it also reflects a desire to blunt what they see as U.S. hegemony.

For the United States, increased Middle Eastern interest in a China model specifically, and closer ties to China more generally, calls for a three-pronged effort. The first prong is largely internal and requires clarifying U.S. priorities in the Middle East and the role the United States seeks to play. As part of this, the United States should consolidate its 20-year effort to transition from security provider to security partner. The second prong is gaining a better understanding of regional governments' concerns and motivations. The United States needs to tailor U.S. engagement more closely to regional governments' needs, and it needs to untangle slow bureaucratic processes that make sense to Americans but not to those they seek to help. The third prong is to get better at imposing consequences for bad behavior and incentivizing good behavior, for allies and adversaries alike. Doing so would inject dynamism into U.S. regional diplomacy.

As the Middle East looks forward, the region's urgent strategic need is to grow its human capital. This is necessitated both by the rising number of young people seeking employment and the implications of the energy transition. The U.S. ability to contribute to regional governments' efforts to address this need—in terms of education, training, and a business climate that helps build capacity—is unparalleled.

China will continue to seek to increase its role in the Middle East. The United States should not fear China's presence. Rather, the United States needs to sharpen regional understandings of the value of U.S. partnerships, lower the costs of maintaining them, and clarify the consequences of undermining them.

Introduction

Fifteen Saudi horsemen bearing Chinese and Saudi flags surrounded Chinese president Xi Jinping's limousine as it entered the lush gardens of Riyadh's Yamama Palace in December 2022. The disparity between the honor guard in brilliant white robes astride stallions and the sleek black limousine gliding on a spotless stone pavement was striking, but this is the image the Saudis seek to project to the world: simultaneously traditional and modern, powerful, hospitable, and very much in control. Cameras captured Xi's arrival from the side, the front, and overhead, ensuring full appreciation of the majesty of the moment.

Xi's visit was a marked contrast to President Joe Biden's visit to Jiddah the previous July. Biden's arrival was captured in a carefully scripted fist bump with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. A single official Saudi photographer captured the moment, and a single image was released. Although the crown prince normally beams when photographed greeting guests, his expression in this photo was almost blank, perhaps through prearrangement. The fist bump, ostensibly a Covid-19 precaution, became the shorthand for the visit. One could say it was warm, one could say it was contrived, but there was one thing it clearly was not: normal. The White House had such an aversion to the idea that Biden would be photographed shaking the beaming crown prince's hand that it seems to have carefully negotiated an alternative. In doing so, the U.S. government created an indelible image of the strained and shifting U.S.-Saudi relationship and paved the way for a sharply contrasting visit by a Chinese head of state six months later.

Americans are accustomed to occupying a position of primacy in the world, and particularly in the Middle East. This is derived partly from a conviction that the whole world wants to be like the

United States. Centuries of immigration to North America from every corner of the globe have persuaded many Americans of the enduring attractiveness of U.S. society, as well as its universal adaptability to peoples and cultures. Spreading what many Americans saw as the blessings of freedom and prosperity across the North American continent was a key U.S. government priority until the end of the nineteenth century; for much of the twentieth century, countless U.S. officials maintained an equally sharp focus on sharing what they saw as the gifts of the American way of life with the rest of the world.

Yet, many foreign governments, and especially those in the Middle East, have deep reservations about becoming too much like the United States. They see the U.S. path as one that threatens their culture and history, risks wrapping them in chaos and failure, and jeopardizes their power at home and abroad. For some of them, China represents an exemplar of a society that has remained true to its roots, nurtured a vibrant economy, managed social change, and maintained tight political control, all by following a path very different from the U.S. one.

Four decades of the Cold War conditioned the United States to treat admiration as a zero-sum game, and capturing the imagination of governments and societies as they think about their future has been an important aspect of U.S. soft power for much of the last hundred years. As Joseph Nye wrote in his seminal essay on the topic in 1990:

A state may achieve the outcomes it prefers in world politics because other states want to follow it. . . . This second aspect of power—which occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants—might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of *ordering* others to do what it wants.¹

Recently, China has increased its own soft-power efforts, intended at least in part to dent what Chinese officials see as U.S. hegemony. While China has generally not promoted a discrete “China model” for other states to emulate, there has been a substantial, albeit superficial conversation in Middle Eastern states about what lessons China’s experience holds for their development. While China is not necessarily provoking this conversation, it is nurturing it. This conversation has geopolitical implications.

How do countries such as China and the United States use the power of example to engage in competition and advance their interests in the Middle East? How do Arab governments view U.S. and Chinese attempts at influence and models of development, and why is there a greater affinity toward a China model in the region? Given the above, and China’s increasing influence in the region, what are the policy implications for the U.S. position and for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East?

In addressing these questions, this paper explores the popular discussion of a China model in the Middle East, as well as how Arab governments and the Chinese government use the idea of a China model to push back on what each sees as the excesses of the U.S. government. These countries’ interests are not identical, but they are congruent. Arab states are seeking to maximize the value they derive from the sum of their varied diplomatic relationships, increasingly pursuing cooperation in parallel with global powers rather than joining one discrete bloc or another. They

also seek to maintain control over their domestic environments, blocking social trends and political movements that they believe will undermine their stability. Deeper engagement with the Chinese government, and the Chinese example itself, advances their goals.

China's interests are more complicated. The country's economic growth depends on imported energy. About half of that imported energy comes from the Middle East, where the United States is the predominant power. Beijing is wary of conflict with the United States in the Middle East, and it seeks neither to compete head-to-head nor to displace Washington. Instead, China seeks to make inroads into the region without either getting bogged down or tipping the Middle East into instability. Doing so means enticing countries currently aligned with the United States to adopt a more unaligned posture, and it often uses state-directed economic engagement as its calling card. The Chinese government explicitly contrasts itself with the U.S. government, noting that it can move more quickly and predictably, that it neither second-guesses nor lectures its partners, and that its goal is not to remake them in China's own image.

The vehicle for much of this is the impression—probably stronger in the Middle East than in China itself—that there is a tangible China model that can guide radical economic transformation without accompanying social and political disruption. The “China experience,” as some Chinese prefer to call it, is an impressive one: decades of double-digit growth accompanied by huge investments in industrialization and massive internal migration. Even so, most Arab understandings of China remain remarkably superficial. Arab states impressed with China's remarkable rise often seem more interested in China's outcomes than the path China took to achieve them.

To understand what this means for U.S. interests, this paper analyzes how the Chinese and Arab governments each use the inchoate idea of a China model as a key tool through which they advance their own interests vis-à-vis the U.S. government. This study is especially salient now. Middle Eastern states are uniquely focused on how the energy transition will force a profound change in the region's political economy in the next three decades. With so many Middle Eastern economies tied to hydrocarbons—either producing them or relying on worker remittances, investment, and government assistance from energy-producing countries—regional governments are especially open to exploring alternative models of development. The Arab uprisings of 2010-11 gave governments an experience of political discontent boiling over. China is still largely able to project an image of strong economic growth and political stability. Many Arab states are urgently seeking to diversify their economies while sustaining the prevailing political and social order. For them, China's example suggests an enticing set of possibilities.

For the United States, which has been the preponderant global power in the Middle East for more than a half-century, the Middle East's rising fascination with the China model is an important phenomenon. In part, this is because the United States retains a vital strategic interest in the Middle East deriving from the region's roles in global energy markets, in the global economy more broadly, and in global nonproliferation efforts. Middle Eastern states' use of the idea of a China model to develop leverage against—and potentially undermine—U.S. policies toward the region creates a need for a thoughtful U.S. policy response. In addition, because China-U.S. competition has become the overwhelming strategic focus in the United States, China's instrumentalization of Middle Eastern

states' admiration to advance its own policy interests at the expense of the United States becomes an issue of strategic concern with bearing on U.S. interests in Africa, Latin America, and beyond.

Overall, this paper demonstrates how Arab governments and China converge on the idea that there are ways to achieve U.S.-style economic performance without embracing liberal societies. It does not seek to evaluate whether such approaches are viable or if the plans that governments carry out hew more closely to U.S. or Chinese development models, in part because China itself seems not to care. But it is also because Middle Eastern governments themselves are seeking to strike a balance between multiple imperatives rather than make a binary decision.

The remainder of this paper will proceed as follows. First, it begins by reviewing how states that have seen themselves on the brink of change think of different models of development. It further explores how the U.S. and Chinese governments have thought about their own development experiences, what parts of that they believe are relevant to other countries, and how they have sought to share their lessons. Second, this paper examines the broader context of U.S.-Chinese competition, and how that competition has manifested in the Middle East, paying close attention to both countries' perceived stakes in the patterns of governance in Middle Eastern states. In particular, this section carefully explores China's efforts to engage broadly with three states: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. These countries are of varying size, have different political economies, and have had different trajectories. All of them are important to both the United States and China. The section analyzes how these major Arab states perceive both China's actions and China's lessons for their own societies. Finally, the essay concludes with the implications of its findings and recommendations for U.S. policy.

Competing and Contested Development Models

The inspirational power of the American experiment has been a thread running through much of U.S. history, but it is only in the last three-quarters of a century that Americans have drawn a clear and consistent connection between spreading that model and advancing U.S. national interests. China has had a relatively more complicated task in the last 35 years. It has sought to navigate between advancing its interests in the globalized world that the United States and its partners constructed while ensuring that its engagement in that world does not advantage the United States at China's expense. China's breathtaking economic growth in the 1990s and 2000s involved its partial adoption of Western mores. At the same time, it involved an assertion of China's distinctiveness. China's success in doing both simultaneously has had more benefits for China than one might initially suspect. It has both helped boost international interest in China and encouraged other states to assert their own distinctiveness and reject U.S. hegemony.

Both the United States and China are seeking to tap into an enduring trend in the Middle East and around the world. While all governments seek agency over their futures, sometimes governments undergoing especially profound transitions have sought inspiration from external models to help them guide changes more purposively. Faced with innumerable challenges and decisions, foreign expertise has often helped to inform their choices and model their trajectories.

In broad historical terms, both countries are newcomers to foreign admiration. For governments considering their options in the nineteenth century, neither the United States nor China was of much interest. The United States was too different, inhaling immigrants from much of Europe and conquering its own vast continent. Its proud pioneer culture and robust individualism had

no equivalent, and no bearing, on much of the world. China was in the midst of its “century of humiliation,” as the depredations of foreign powers ate away at the withering Qing Dynasty.

Of course, there was a European model of development, manifested in Africa, Asia, and Latin America by colonial administrations that sought to impose modernity and order on societies while extending investment opportunities for European private capital. They passed laws and created capital markets, and they advanced notions of citizenship that gave rights to local inhabitants even as they often gave superior rights to citizens of the metropole. European colonial powers fostered coteries of elite clients in their colonies, but for ambitious local governments, it seemed perilous to get too close to the colonial enterprise. The danger of being swallowed up in the European imperial maw always lurked.

For some, Prussia seemed much more relevant, and it seemed to be a power on the march. For example, as Meiji Japan watched Western countries capitalize on China’s relative weakness, Japanese officials sought to replicate the Prussian experiment with great urgency. More than 50 years ago, Barrington Moore argued that similarities between imperial Germany and Meiji Japan were, in the words of Mark R. Thompson, “the product of political learning. Meiji Japanese reformers, after carefully examining several Western countries’ political systems, chose the German model because of its illiberal but modern politics.”² In this reading, Japan’s leaders explicitly chose a German development model, with economic, political, and military implications for Japan and for the world in the century to follow.

In the twentieth century, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s modernization project also cast a wary eye on development models that sought to engender liberal systems. Many recall Atatürk’s zeal for Westernization—he famously adopted the Latin alphabet, banned the fez, emancipated women, and put secularism at the center of politics. Yet despite adopting superficial aspects of Western style, it was the Soviet experiment in state-driven industrialization that seemed genuinely enticing to him and his circle. The Soviet model not only promised rapid results while reinforcing state power, but it also presented an opportunity to “overturn Western economic and political dominance,” which had been an Ottoman sore spot for more than a century.³ Turkish nationalists did not seek to align with the Western bourgeoisie that had helped dismantle the Ottoman empire; they sought to develop the state so as to give Turkey the strength to be an independent power. The noncommunist aspects of the Soviet model, with its modernization agendas, five-year plans, and skepticism of Western intentions, aligned closely with the new Turkish leadership’s instincts.

The rise of fascism in the interwar period represented a wholesale rejection of the Western liberal development model. Fascists offered the European public a clearly formulated and comprehensive solution to a status quo that was, to some, economically, politically, and socio-culturally unsatisfactory. In the words of Michael Mann, a prominent chronicler, “All of these regimes worshipped order and protected private property; all embraced authoritarian statism, rejecting federalism, democracy, and their supposed ‘vices’: disorderly class conflict, political corruption, and moral decline.”⁴

In each case noted above—Meiji Japan, Atatürk’s Turkey, and fascist Germany and Italy—states sought what they believed to be scientific efficiency, in stark contrast to what they saw as the weak and disorderly approach of liberal democracies. Meiji Japan adopted illiberal Westernization, Turkey sought to adopt more liberal social policies while embracing more authoritarian economic policies, and fascism was largely a rejection of liberalism more broadly. In all cases, ruling elites were unwilling to leave the fate of the nation in the hands of an unruly and self-interested cosmopolitan business class. All of these movements called for a firm hand from the top and limited engagement from below. It is an instinct that is in stark contrast with the U.S. model, and more consonant with a Chinese model.

The U.S. Example of Social and Economic Development

The U.S. government’s Cold War efforts to win hearts and minds throughout the world were an innovation. While priorities shifted from administration to administration, underlying all U.S. efforts was a deep belief in both the desirability and replicability of American patterns of life. Inspired by mostly European philosophers such as John Locke, few Americans have ever doubted the universal relevance of American truths. What was in question, instead, was the level of effort Americans should put into spreading them.

For much of the world in the nineteenth century, the United States did not have much inspirational power. This is in part because the U.S. government’s tasks were unique: populating a continent, exploiting seemingly endless natural resources, and capitalizing on the country’s almost complete isolation from potentially hostile powers. But Americans often took their country’s inspirational potential for granted. It is not a coincidence that much of the U.S. engagement with the rest of the world in the nineteenth century was through missionaries and traders, not through diplomats and soldiers. Their “Good News” was only partly religious. Echoing the themes stressed by the French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, many were guided by a broad belief that uniquely American values stressing the importance of individualism, industriousness, property rights, and political expression provided a universal key to both prosperity and progress.⁵

While the United States began to play a more active role in global affairs immediately after World War I, the post-war isolationist current ran strong. The Wilsonian impulse to “make the world safe for democracy” soon ebbed, and U.S. politicians expressed fear that internationalism would merely benefit profiteers at home and draw the United States into endless European conflicts.

Yet, after World War II, U.S. officials were convinced that securing the country required blocking Marxist inroads in the developing world and expanding the circle of freedom to reach the billions who lived there. They took their missionary heritage and set out to replicate U.S. conditions abroad, using the U.S. historical experience as their template to use economic and political development to prosecute the Cold War. Drawing on Louis Hartz’s notion of an American liberal tradition, Robert Packenham suggests in his 1973 study that four propositions long guided U.S. policymakers working in the developing world: “1) Change and development are easy 2) All good things go together 3) Radicalism and revolution are bad 4) Distributing power is more important than accumulating power.”⁶

As the anti-colonial sentiments of the Roosevelt administration converged with the anti-communism of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, many believed that the United States was well positioned not only to win the Cold War, but also to eliminate much of the world's poverty.⁷ Commonsense U.S. efforts such as those of the Tennessee Valley Authority and cooperative extension programs were the salve the world needed.⁸ Such programs would provide enabling environments for private enterprise rather than an enduring role for repressive governments. Spreading prosperity to long-immiserated populations would do more than merely improve their quality of life. It would also inoculate these populations from the appeal of Soviet communism.

Of course, this U.S. strategy included a heavy dose of self-interest. If foreign elites were enveloped in a warm embrace of shared goals and common interests, they could help lead their states to carry out policies that advance those goals and interests, creating a world more favorable to U.S. priorities. While the U.S. model seeks to be competitive, it does not seek to bolster U.S. dominance to ensure that the United States wins every economic competition. Instead, it seeks to incentivize counterparts to participate in the system compatible with U.S. interests, enable them to compete successfully, and dissuade them from swinging into opposition. It was the manifestation of Nye's soft power, whereby the United States would encourage other countries to "want what it wants."

To this end, after World War II the United States led the construction of a global system of institutions to regulate and arbitrate between economic interests. The United States broadly advanced a policy that emphasized private enterprise, free markets, open trade, and the integration of national economies into the world economy by emphasizing the comparative advantage of exports. The International Monetary Fund, World Bank, multinational corporations, and U.S. government all worked to advance these policies. Embedded in these international institutions was attention to the rights of the individual and adherence to the rule of law. Land reform and community development played a significant role in postwar development efforts, seeking to develop communities of freeholders who could shape their own societies and destinies.

The not-so-implicit adversary in this was the Soviet Union, which linked the collapse of colonialism with the end of capitalism. The Soviet model retained a strong Leninist strain, requiring a party to assert a dictatorship of the proletariat to help guide society toward communism and avoiding the rights-driven approach of the United States and its allies. The Soviet Union saw a need to win supporters, though. Seeing similar stakes to the United States, the Soviet Union invested in major international development projects, sometimes at the expense of Moscow's direct interests.⁹ The Soviet Union's construction of Egypt's Aswan High Dam was a part of this effort. Picking up a project that the World Bank had abandoned under U.S. pressure, Soviet engineers partnered with Gamal Abdel Nasser in a project to reshape Egyptian agriculture and the whole Egyptian economy. Abdel Nasser's embrace of "Arab socialism" was not a condition of the dam's construction, but his increasing alignment with the Soviet Union and increasingly strained relations with the United States represented a victory for Soviet policy.

The U.S. Record in Middle East Development

For much of its history, the U.S. government treated the Middle East as an afterthought. The United States mostly forsook the European scramble for influence in the region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, until the rise of the petroleum age coincided with the decline of European regional power and the rise of Soviet communism. Fearing a vacuum, Americans perceived heightened stakes of projecting U.S. influence into the Middle East.

Even so, the Middle East was not the principal focus of U.S. efforts, nor was the U.S. government's focus in the Middle East independent from its approach elsewhere in the world. The United States established security relationships with a wide array of regional governments, and it stepped up those efforts when Great Britain pulled back from the region after 1970. The United States also engaged in economic development efforts, limited in most places but significant in some, and especially significantly with Israel and the Arab states that made peace with it. It built educational and cultural ties, as elite Arabs in the 1970s and 1980s eschewed Cairo and sought university educations for their children in Princeton, Cambridge, and Washington, D.C.

For all that the United States embraced a Cold War commitment to helping Middle Eastern states develop along U.S. lines, U.S. efforts to promote economic development overseas have yielded mixed results. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has invested more than \$30 billion in Egypt since 1978. According to the USAID website, its "Economic Growth" program has sought to "improve the policy and business regulatory environment, stimulate entrepreneurship, strengthen enterprises, improve the workforce, and enhance trade."¹⁰ As part of its efforts, USAID has also maintained a democracy and governance program in Egypt to promote values of democracy, human rights, and inclusion alongside improvements in economic performance. USAID has sought to increase the accountability and efficiency of public institutions and remove barriers to economic and social participation for marginalized communities.

And yet, after four decades of continuous economic assistance that have made Egypt one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid in the world, the World Bank continues to classify Egypt as a lower-middle-income country. Successive Egyptian governments have regularly rebuffed U.S. efforts to engender a more vibrant private sector and spread democratic values, or they have frustrated them. Egyptian officials have long complained that U.S. aid represents unacceptable meddling in the country's internal affairs and that economic aid funds ultimately end up lining the pockets of U.S. firms rather than benefitting Egyptians.¹¹ Democracy and governance programs have been a special sore point. In an extreme instance, an AMIDEAST employee contracted to work on the Administration of Justice Project said that the U.S. and Egyptian governments took a decade merely to agree on a scope of work.¹² In part because of tensions over priorities and implementation, U.S. economic assistance has been diminishing since 1998, from a high of over \$800 million annually to current levels of just over \$100 million.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have not been targets of U.S. development assistance in anything like the same way, although the U.S. government provided technical assistance to both countries as their governments sought to create modern institutions for what had until recently

been tribal sheikhdoms. The strong involvement of U.S.-based oil companies in the development of the petroleum industry, before and after the nationalization of oil production, helped ensure that both countries' national economies developed along lines compatible with U.S. interests. U.S. government efforts to promote democracy and governance were often more subtle, in part because of fewer opportunities in the absence of aid vehicles, and in part because both countries are ruled by royal families that consider the prospect of participatory politics with alarm but are keen to pursue a strategic alignment with the United States.

The Chinese Proposition

China's history differs starkly from that of the United States. Over three millennia the country experienced great power and wealth. The so-called "century of humiliation" that preceded the country's communist revolution was a reminder of the constant threats that Chinese governments feared looming beyond their borders. The richness of Chinese culture spoke for itself, but China never saw that culture as a universal proposition with much relevance outside of China. China extracted tribute from surrounding states and expanded its continental reach into Central Asia, but as European imperialism spread in the nineteenth century, China saw itself as the victim of global powers rather than their peer.

The victory of Mao Zedong's revolutionaries in 1949 put China in an unaccustomed place, ideologically committed to a political project with global ambitions and presumed universal relevance. China's actual efforts in that regard were modest, however, and Deng Xiaoping's effective renunciation of the Marxist-Leninist global project removed an area of conflict with the West. Even more strikingly, Deng's "four modernizations"—the urgent need for advances in agriculture, industry, national defense, and science—pushed China to open to the outside world while relying on the communist party to insulate the country from the depredations of foreign powers.¹³

In the decades since, China's history has combined with the legacy of Deng's instincts to prompt the country to be modest in its claims and defensive in its posture. While Chinese "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" under Xi Jinping has been more assertive, in part because it presumes a broader decline in Western power, it generally has been less interested in asserting the wisdom of its model to foreign audiences than in protecting its own legitimacy.

As China has engaged increasingly in the Middle East in the last 25 years, it has backed away from Soviet concepts of a zero-sum ideological competition with the United States. Instead, China often has gone out of its way to appear nonthreatening to Middle Eastern states and Western powers alike, advertising its modesty and trumpeting an interest in "win-win solutions."

China has also avoided being doctrinaire about its approach. In contrast to the Marxist-Leninist tracts of Soviet authors, there is a lively debate within and outside of China about what constitutes a China model for development, or if one exists at all. Western analysts have tended to treat it as an argument for authoritarian-led economic development that is exemplary in its ability to "make large, complex decisions quickly, and to make them relatively well, at least in economic policy."¹⁴ Although some argue that authoritarian development already had a strong history in Southeast

Asia by the time China adopted it after Mao's death and that Chinese expatriate communities in adjacent countries may have been involved in triggering its execution in China, China's size and its dramatic pace of growth in the two decades between 1990 and 2010 made it a very different kind of example.¹⁵

Arguably, when the Chinese economy was growing most strongly, some of the greatest successes occurred in cities that took very different approaches from each other to economic development. Chongqing's charismatic communist party secretary pushed an approach that some scholars described as populist and "Maoist-revivalist," Guangdong pursued a policy that seemed largely neoliberal and capitalist, and the Shanghai government seemed largely technocratic and technologically focused. The experimentation that Deng opened in the late 1970s continued to expand for decades in China. Yuen Yuen Ang argues persuasively that the Chinese have pursued varying strategies at different times and places, and she argues that Chinese government policy is best characterized as "directed improvisation." Whereas Mao pursued ruinous top-down strategies, his successors set dynamic parameters for local officials to follow. They set boundaries, defined criteria for success, and encouraged the flow of industry and capital to less-developed regions.¹⁶ The "China model," then, can be seen less as a set of processes than as a set of philosophies that produced strong outcomes.

China's interest, arguably, is less about winning over imitators than it is about gaining legitimacy for its efforts. While Chinese leaders speak openly and repeatedly about a "China solution" (alternately translated as a "China proposal"), Chinese leaders take pains to limit its reach. Xi Jinping told a group of leaders of political parties in 2017, "We do not want to 'import' models from other countries, nor do we want to 'export' the Chinese model, still less will we ask other countries to copy the Chinese practice." Noting that China itself adopted communism from overseas, he continued, "As a Chinese saying goes, a stone taken from another mountain may serve as a tool to polish the local jade. The CPC will embrace and approach the achievements of other cultures with an open mind and a broad perspective. We stay committed to engaging in dialogue, exchanges and cooperation with the people and political parties of other countries."¹⁷ Just as Xi asserted, "We are eager to draw on the achievements of other cultures and apply them in the Chinese context," implicit in his statement is an invitation to draw on Chinese achievements and apply them in diverse local contexts.¹⁸

Also in 2017, at a Belt and Road conference, Xi put great emphasis on China's fundamental belief in mutual benefit. Suggesting that the ancient Silk Road was all about reciprocity, Xi noted that:

Chinese silk, porcelain, lacquerwork and ironware were shipped to the West, while pepper, flax, spices, grape and pomegranate entered China. Through these routes, Buddhism, Islam and Arab astronomy, calendar and medicine found their way to China, while China's four great inventions [papermaking, printing, gunpowder, and the compass] and silkworm breeding spread to other parts of the world. More importantly, the exchange of goods and know-how spurred new ideas. For example, Buddhism originated in India, blossomed in China and was enriched in Southeast Asia.¹⁹

He added, for good measure, “We are ready to share practices of development with other countries, but we have no intention to interfere in other countries’ internal affairs, export our own social system and model of development, or impose our own will on others.”²⁰

Overall, the Chinese leadership’s rhetorical approach has been that it merely seeks to inculcate respect for difference. For example, Xi noted in his September 2020 speech to the UN General Assembly, “We should respect a country’s independent choice of development path and model. The world is diverse in nature, and we should turn this diversity into a constant source of inspiration driving human advancement.”²¹ Yet, Elizabeth Economy suggests that appeals to tolerate diversity soon yielded to a more pointed strategy. In the period after 2017, she argues, “both in rhetoric and reality, China has become increasingly comfortable in its efforts to export its state-centered political and economic model globally.” Noting that China’s efforts have both defensive and offensive motivations, she argues that China is committed to “supporting the creation of laws and regulations that enhance state control, limit individual freedoms, and favor state-led economic development.”²² It remains unclear “whether China is acting offensively to forge a more illiberal world or defensively to make the world safe for China’s brand of autocracy.”²³ From the perspective of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, the difference is not especially relevant. The Chinese approach legitimizes their resistance to calls for democratization and human rights, providing living proof that there are multiple paths to combining economic growth with social peace.

Middle Eastern assessments of China’s approach have been overwhelmingly positive. Writing in the widely circulated, Saudi-owned *Asharq al-Awsat*, a Lebanese professor lamented, “It is our misfortune that we know nothing of China except its products.” She made clear that China has experienced many of the same “declines and failures” as the Arab world, yet Arabs are disinterested in how it has triumphed.²⁴ After a visit to China, one Arab journalist was smitten: “May God help us for our lack of planning and our inability to see the future, which is either the scourge that hinders the progress of nations, as in our case, or the reason for advancement and progress, which is the Chinese case.”²⁵

The Chinese government’s recent soft-power efforts that build on the idea of a China model are distinct from its soft-power efforts in the past. China has maintained bilateral ties with developing countries—and especially with former revolutionary states such as Algeria—for decades. China was the first non-Arab state to recognize Algeria’s National Liberation Front government in 1958 when it was fighting for independence from France, and after independence was won in 1962, China provided a range of material support: wheat, steel, school equipment, a 13,000-ton freighter, and four transport aircraft. China also dispatched a medical team and supplies and extended a low-interest loan.²⁶ China began sending medical teams to Algeria in 1963 and has sent more than 2,000 in total. China has also sent more than 2,000 medical personnel to Yemen, and 60 Chinese workers lost their lives between 1959 and 1962 building a mountainous road from what is now the Yemeni capital of Sanaa to the port of Hodeidah.²⁷ All of those efforts were very much on the government-to-government level, reflecting a sensitivity in China—shared in much of the Arab world—toward foreign governments that seek to go over the heads of local governments to speak with their people. Throughout the twentieth century, China was seeking diplomatic recognition and bilateral partnerships.

But as the twenty-first century dawned and China grew more self-confident, its efforts to seduce foreign governments were accompanied by increasingly active efforts to seduce foreign publics. Joseph Fewsmith has argued that Pan Wei at Beijing University sought to popularize the idea of a China model in the early 2000s. Nobel Prize-winning author Naguib Mahfouz argued in 2002 that Arab societies should diversify what they borrow from abroad to include lessons from China, as China's historical and social traditions more closely resemble the Middle East than the West.²⁸ An Emirati scholar of China wrote in 2008 that the China model proves "there is another pathway for governments of the world to follow in order to successfully pursue economic growth."²⁹ While 500 articles with the phrase China model in the title could be found on the internet in 2007, there were 750 in 2008 and fully 3,000 in 2009.³⁰

One proximate cause for the popularization of the idea was the 2007-09 Global Financial Crisis, which Chinese officials saw as an opportunity to stress Chinese resilience. Another was a multi-billion-dollar soft-power push by the Chinese government that followed the Beijing Olympics. As Willy Lam noted, "the Hu leadership is convinced that the sorry state of the American model has thrown into sharp relief the superiority of the Chinese way of doing things."³¹

A recent study of China's soft-power efforts succinctly summarizes the "China brand" in the Middle East as resting on three principles: "1) The nation's impressive economic rise, 2) China's interest in becoming an economic rather than security partner to the region, and 3) China's continued and evolving status as a developing nation, as a peer—rather than a superior—to Middle Eastern nations."³² The authors suggest that the goal is not to inspire imitation, but rather to "promote local acceptance of the growing Chinese commercial, diplomatic, and expatriate presence in the region."³³

Arguably, Africa has been on the front line of Chinese efforts to revise their global engagement strategy. Africa is the source of key natural resources necessary for Chinese (and global) economic development, making it a logical focus for Chinese attention. Equally important, Africa has not been a major focus of other great powers' efforts, giving China a relatively unencumbered path to continental influence.

Many African elites have been receptive to China, not entirely because of Chinese efforts, but also out of frustration with a Western focus on human rights, democratization, and governance. For instance, the former president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, started questioning the sincerity of the West and its democracy promotion when the European Union and the United States imposed sanctions on the country because of his regime's human rights abuses. It is only then that he launched the Look East Policy and cultivated stronger diplomatic relations with China. The driving force for Mugabe was the need for an alternative development partner and source for diplomatic support, foreign direct investment, and development financing.³⁴

A 2017 McKinsey report noted that Africa-China trade had grown approximately 20 percent per year since 2000 and was almost four times U.S.-Africa trade. Yet, despite the fact that Chinese investment was growing 40 percent year-on-year in the mid-2010s, China's foreign direct investment in Africa remained less than half that of the United States.³⁵ Where China excelled was in the financing of African infrastructure. There, China's 2015 commitments were \$21 billion, exceeding

the combined total of the African Development Bank, European Commission, European Investment Bank, International Finance Corporation, World Bank, and G8 countries.³⁶

China's approach to Africa was broadly consistent with its approach to Asia, which took off after the 2013 announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative. The initiative, which stresses the importance of infrastructure construction and trade, is centered around a wide array of loans to finance work by Chinese companies. Completely enwrapped in Chinese promises of "win-win solutions," and accompanied by a conviction that Chinese attention would grow, Asian governments—including West Asian governments—were intrigued by the prospects of deep partnership with a rising power. Yet, some of those governments came to decide that the terms of Chinese partnership were badly skewed in China's favor, requiring the "surrender to Chinese management the entire strategic infrastructure of the country."³⁷

In addition, the loans plummeted after 2017, both in size and number. According to a project at Boston University, the average Chinese loan commitment between 2018 and 2021 was 70 percent of the average loan between 2013 and 2017, and the average size of area-based projects was just 18 percent of the size of projects from the earlier period.³⁸ While some ascribed the change to a decline in China's diminishing current account surplus, the diminishing emphasis on Belt and Road projects may more clearly reflect a conclusion that they are more problematic than anticipated and that success is harder to accomplish.³⁹

What is emerging, then, is a pattern of both U.S. and Chinese behavior that is broadly similar throughout the world. While not always expressed in stark terms, the struggle to inspire imitation—or at least to blunt the inspirational power of an adversary—has grown increasingly important as the U.S. and Chinese governments have approached the Middle East. The United States has long sought to spread a model of development that encourages the proliferation of liberal systems (in the classical sense), with free market economies and civil liberties. China has increasingly seen such efforts as a self-interested U.S. effort to constrain competitors and adversaries and to delegitimize their accomplishments. As a consequence, Chinese officials increasingly portray their own successes as disproving the premises of the U.S. model, not merely for China, but for other countries that seek to inspire similarly sharp increases in economic performance.

U.S.-China Competition

China's rise, and what many Chinese scholars describe as U.S. decline, has spurred a global Sino-American competition for power and influence. Third countries' perspectives are often left out of U.S. discussions of this competition. Many Middle Eastern officials are quick to tell U.S. audiences that they fear becoming collateral damage in superpower conflict. A senior Gulf minister visiting Washington in 2021 viewed the rising great power competition and cited the proverb, "When the elephants fight, it is the ants who get killed."⁴⁰ Yet, at the same time, many of those same countries welcome the mere idea of competition. They do so partly because they see it helping them accrue leverage to deploy against the United States and China, and partly because they see it curtailing what they believe to be the excesses of U.S. hegemony.

Efforts to define China's global ambitions, as well as to discern how its actions advance them, are increasingly fraught. In the last five years, Western analysis has sharply diverged. For some longtime analysts of China, there is nothing especially unique about Chinese behavior. As a former U.S. national intelligence officer for East Asia put it,

China is making a bid for strategic influence, economic and technological advantage, international respect, freedom of action, and accommodation of its interests—all in areas where the United States has long enjoyed preeminent power and influence, and is not inclined to concede it. But China is making this bid on the basis of reasonable great power aspirations, some valid historical grievances, considerable resources, growing confidence, a readiness to compete globally—and, it should be noted, a genuine interest in constructive and cooperative relations.⁴¹

The proper response to China's rise, in this account, is a certain degree of empathy and understanding, and a fair amount of compromise.

Others take the opposite tack. In some of the harsher articulations, "We are now in an existential struggle with China," and "Beijing's goal is a world without America."⁴² In this view, the United States and China are not merely competing, but locked in a zero-sum conflict. China's victory would not only be devastating for U.S. interests—China's victory actually requires devastating U.S. interests. By these lights, the only responsible strategy to pursue is to seek China's defeat.

The debate about Chinese intentions does not occur in a vacuum. It is accompanied by an increasingly robust domestic U.S. debate over the country's proper role in the world and the breadth of its international ambitions. Amid a sharp rise in policy circles' talk about "restraint" and questions about both the wisdom and capacity of the country to advance maximalist goals overseas in the wake of long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, some argue that the United States must be more mindful of its limits as it constructs its China policy. At one side of that spectrum, some analysts suggest that any U.S. effort to pressure China must necessarily be "accompanied by an equally robust path for mutual adjustment, cooperation, and shared achievement."⁴³ At the other side of the spectrum, analysts stress a need for "a steady state of clear-eyed coexistence on terms favorable to U.S. interests and values."⁴⁴

Despite differences, it is clear that U.S. views on China are hardening across the U.S. political spectrum. Chinese actions at home and abroad alarm Americans for a host of reasons, and Congress's focus on the need to meet threats from China enjoys deep bipartisan consensus. Even so, there is rising alarm in some parts of the China expert community in the United States that the way the United States is approaching challenges from China is self-defeating. Describing the first meeting of the congressional Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, Jude Blanchette complained, "If you were an alien and you tuned into this, you would think the United States is a pathetic, weak, scared nation, which is being beset by an omniscient, omnipresent enemy of just galactic proportions in terms of its capabilities. . . . If we continue to follow the playbook outlined at that committee, it will lead to . . . tragedy and devastation and extraordinary amounts of waste."⁴⁵ Former State Department policy planning staff member Jessica Chen Weiss worried that a U.S. determination to compete with China at all costs pushes the United States to be reactive, to operate without any sense of priorities, and to drive conflict.⁴⁶ And former Bush administration official Evan Feigenbaum cautioned five years ago that a U.S. approach premised on the idea that China was seeking to subvert the U.S.-led order misses the much subtler but important threat that China was seeking to infiltrate that order to bend it to be more responsive to Chinese preferences.⁴⁷

Liberalism vs. Authoritarianism

What is abundantly clear is that China and the United States have been pursuing radically different agendas in the Middle East for three-quarters of a century and achieving different results. Referring principally to the Middle East, Indian minister of external affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar observed in 2020, "For two decades, China has been winning without fighting, while the US was

fighting without winning.”⁴⁸ The United States maintains a robust military footprint and asserts itself as the protector of partners against external aggression, while China has pursued efforts to be a commercial partner to all.

Of course, Jaishankar’s analysis downplays the interaction of those two trends. That is to say, China benefitted for decades from the U.S. Navy’s efforts to secure freedom of navigation for Gulf energy, as well as from U.S. actions that undermined terrorist networks’ efforts to attack infrastructure, topple governments, and undermine trade. China benefitted, too, from the efforts of U.S.-backed international financial institutions to grow the economies of Middle Eastern states, and from the efforts of generations of Western energy executives to identify and develop the Middle East’s energy infrastructure. A half-century of U.S. efforts to create a Middle Eastern bulwark against Soviet aggression in the Cold War helped ensure that the region had strong national governments with which China could seek bilateral relations. Ironically, it was a half-century of the United States pressing regional governments on governance issues that helped prime regional governments to be open to Chinese engagement.

Especially after the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, Middle Eastern authoritarians came to appreciate China’s resolute noninterference in the domestic affairs of its partners, which stood in stark contrast to the U.S. approach. As the United States used force to seek political change in the region, and as U.S. diplomats worked to more tightly intertwine U.S. engagement, economic partnerships, and political liberalization, China promised a radically different path.

For many in the U.S. foreign policy community, the U.S. insistence on pushing for better governance is a key instrument of national power. As Hal Brands wrote in *Survival*, “The chief defender of the existing international order is a liberal democracy that has traditionally sought to shape the global environment in accordance with its ideological values as well as its strategic interests. The leading revisionists are autocracies that practice a distinctly authoritarian version of capitalism and see the advance of liberal ideals as an existential threat to their legitimacy and power.”⁴⁹ This is different from the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, in which each side competed to spread its ideology. In the current ideological contest, China is not seeking to promote its own ideology or any other. Instead, it simply seeks to undermine an opposing one. Brands sees authoritarians’ fundamental goal to be an effort to vest authority in a “small elite headed by a paramount leader.” Repression and coercion provide a semblance of legitimacy. These tools replace the elections, accountability, and rule of law that secure liberal democracies.

Seen this way, authoritarianism broadly challenges a liberal world order, but liberalism is a much more acute threat to authoritarian rule. Liberal states were born amid authoritarian peers, and it is relatively rare that liberal states slide into authoritarianism. Authoritarianism, after all, is not a model that appeals widely in most democracies. Yet a democratic wave would pose a profound challenge to governance models in authoritarian states. The fundamental question for authoritarian leaders is whether liberal democracies are an attractive model to their own populations.

For most of the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, the United States and many of its allies considered the answer to that question to be obvious. Francis Fukuyama’s seminal 1989 article in

the National Interest, “The End of History?,” marked Americans’ rising enthusiasm for the universal attractiveness of the liberal model.⁵⁰ U.S. policymakers took the almost immediate crumbling of Soviet client states in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the relatively rapid rise of more liberal and democratic governments on the ashes of four decades of communism, as confirmation that liberal ideals were both attractive and viable even in distant regions of the world. Central to the U.S. strategic approach to Iraq after 2001 was confidence that once the country was stripped of its Ba’athist authoritarian veneer, Iraqis would embrace liberalism and democracy just as Poles, Czechs, and Albanians had done in the 1990s. Central to the U.S. approach to the 2011 Arab Spring was a quiet confidence not only that positive outcomes were likely, but that the end of authoritarian regimes was to be celebrated.

The obvious extension of this issue is whether the U.S. government’s almost evangelical approach to promoting global liberalism is intended principally as a way to advance its own interests through promoting global stability, or rather to undermine China’s interests by constraining and inhibiting the country’s global ties. Seen another way, and perhaps from a Chinese perspective, the question is whether the United States is a fundamentally conservative or revisionist power.

For one of China’s leading strategic thinkers, Wang Jisi, the official view is clear: “In Chinese eyes, the most significant threat to China’s sovereignty and national security has long been U.S. interference in its internal affairs aimed at changing the country’s political system and undermining the CCP.”⁵¹ He adds that:

Beijing believes that Washington was the driving force behind the “color revolutions” that took place in the first decade of this century in former Soviet states and that the U.S. government has ginned up protest movements against authoritarian regimes around the world, including the Arab revolts of 2010–11. The CCP believes that those alleged U.S. interventions will supply a blueprint for Washington to undermine and eventually topple the party.⁵²

China’s response, then, is to portray the United States as a power that is both hegemonic and homogenizing, imposing not only its own political model, but also social and cultural mores premised on the American experience and beliefs. Seen this way, the United States sweeps away local existing power structures to empower U.S. agents who will contort societies to grow U.S. wealth and power at the expense of local interests. China’s growing focus on “South-South” relations seeks to sharpen attacks on the U.S. approach and build solidarity broadly with countries in the developing world.

China’s Modesty

China crafts a very different self-image. It portrays itself as approaching difference with respect and humility. China’s five principles for peaceful coexistence—mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence—were first promulgated in 1954, but they have been playing an increasingly prominent role in Chinese rhetoric because they serve so effectively to

contrast with the U.S. approach. One could argue, for example, that U.S. policy in the Middle East for the last two decades has been a refutation of each and every one of those five principles. In the face of the quite mixed, and often negative, consequences of U.S. actions, China's strategy is to embolden objections to the U.S. approach rather than to promulgate discrete alternatives.

China is scrupulous not to criticize any of its non-Western partners publicly, and it pushes its non-Western partners to reciprocate (which they do with a startling and almost uniform silence on the conditions of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang). This, too, appeals to Middle Eastern governments because it enhances their domestic legitimacy. Their apparent embrace by what is not merely a global superpower, but also a rising force in the Middle East with an impressive record of its own economic growth, creates a halo of competence and effectiveness around Middle Eastern rulers. As Middle Eastern governments weather criticisms, conditionality, and condemnation from Western governments, China provides a reputational refuge, not to mention significant opportunities for bilateral cooperation.

APPLICABILITY

The genuine applicability of any sort of China model to modern Middle Eastern states is unclear. Regional states are starting from a different place than China did, and they are likely headed for a different place as well. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, for example, have relatively few people but rich mineral resources. Their economies thrive on imported labor, and industrialization is scarce (and industrial work by nationals, or even any private sector employment by nationals, is scarcer still). Their economies are profoundly cyclical, tied to the price of hydrocarbons. For example, Saudi GDP grew 11.2 percent in 2003, contracted 2.1 percent in 2009, and grew 11.0 percent in 2011.⁵³ Saudi Arabia's economic volatility is even greater if one goes further back in time: the country's GDP grew 58.6 percent in 1970 and fell 20.7 percent in 1982.⁵⁴ Although all of the GCC economies are eager to diversify from energy exports, those exports remain the engine of the economy, and they will remain so for years into the energy transition.

Employment for Gulf nationals skews heavily toward government jobs, where productivity is hard to measure, unlike the factories employing rural migrants that were the engine of China's economic miracle. Foreigners continue to provide most of the services in the Gulf's service-oriented economies, and while some of their earnings stay in the country to pay for things such as housing, much of it is repatriated to their countries of origin.

Other countries, such as Egypt, have more similar economies. While Egypt's 100 million people have been urbanizing for more than a century, agriculture remains a key component of employment. The World Bank estimates that 21 percent of Egyptians worked in agriculture in 2019, versus 25 percent of Chinese, and identical percentages (27 percent) in the two countries were engaged in industrial employment.⁵⁵ As with China, state-owned enterprises constitute an important part of the industrial base. Also similar to China, Egypt has a sprawling military-industrial complex, although in the Egyptian case, the military's economic interests dip deeply into normally civilian activities such as bottled water, gas station convenience stores, and cement manufacture.

The Egyptian military's role in the economy, combined with what many political economists describe as a system of crony capitalism in Egypt, may be partly responsible for major differences in economic outcomes. Egypt's economic liberalization has provided outsized benefits to individuals and families close to the government, and those advantages have often spanned generations.⁵⁶ While that may be considered analogous to the benefits accruing to members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), there is less evidence that Egypt's political insider communities were nearly as meritocratic as their Chinese counterparts, or that the rotation of elites has been nearly as frequent. The current Egyptian government is the descendant of secret political cliques within the Egyptian military that overthrew the monarchy in 1952. The pervasiveness of military networks, and the taboo against discussing the Egyptian military's economic activities in public, undermines scrutiny and accountability. When Hisham Geneina, the head of Egypt's Central Auditing Organization, charged in 2016 that corruption was rife in several of Egypt's government institutions, especially related to real estate development, he was fired. Convicted of "insulting the army" for threatening to reveal clear evidence of malfeasance, he was imprisoned by a military court for five years, only to be released and charged in civilian court for "joining a terrorist group and spreading false news."⁵⁷ The new charge makes the former auditor subject to immediate arrest at any time. While China has had its share of corruption scandals—not least the rise and precipitous fall in 2012 of Bo Xilai, who was the CCP party secretary in Chongqing—China after Deng Xiaoping has avoided fashioning ossified economic elites who remain in power for decades and generations.

Yet, the lessons that China might offer to Middle Eastern governments are less important than a vague idea that it has lessons. China's remarkable economic growth, begun under Deng and continuing for more than four decades, remade the global economy. Although China's record of double-digit GDP growth, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, will not return, bringing 800 million people out of poverty remains an enduring accomplishment.⁵⁸ Similarly, China has managed a tremendous amount of economic and social change with relatively little political disruption. China shifted from a country where fewer than one in five Chinese were urban in 1979 to two in three today, accompanied by the creation of a massive, literate, and consumption-oriented middle class that is the country's economic driver. Throughout, the CCP has maintained control over public life and sustained its coherence and solidarity. The ability to do so in the face of such extraordinary material, social, and demographic change is not an obvious outcome.

China's Courtship of the Global South

China has used its twentieth-century experiences to deepen its ties with billions of people around the world. The country tells billions that it shares their grievances and feels a strong sense of solidarity with them. Since the 1970s, China has emphasized the need to create a "just and equitable new political and economic order" by addressing "economic and political inequalities between the developing world and the developed world, between the Global South and the Global North."⁵⁹ Despite a sharp rise in income, especially in the last two decades, China has resolutely defended its developing country status.

In this, China continues a version of Mao's 1950s strategy to support revolutionary movements against imperial powers. As European empires fell, local leaders arose who harbored a sense of grievance, injustice, and disempowerment. After more than a half-century, these countries' leaderships continue to highlight legacies of exploitation and submission to explain their contemporary problems, and the Chinese leadership—drawing on China's history—asserts its strong identification with the oppressed.

China promotes the idea that there is a coherent entity of disenfranchised states that can be termed the Global South and strives to be perceived as a leader of it. Doing so boosts China through building solidarity with governments and populations that feel persistently marginalized in terms of power, influence, money, and respect. China has artfully positioned itself as both a status quo power that supports the self-determination and sovereignty of local governments and a revisionist power that seeks to reform international relations to enhance the role of countries that aspire to a greater voice in global affairs. China portrays this in explicit contrast to the United States, arguing that the United States seeks to force its ideas of domestic reform on sovereign governments while maintaining unjust influence for itself and its allies, who continue to benefit from the power they enjoyed 75 years ago when the UN system was established.

China approaches Arab states with avowed humility and modesty. The tone is well articulated in its 2016 "Arab Policy Paper," the first six paragraphs of which celebrate two millennia of consistently aligned objectives between China and Arab states, from "sovereignty and territorial integrity" to "the establishment of the friendly and cooperative relationship oriented toward the 21st century."⁶⁰ An early paragraph contains the sentence, "China will continue to uphold the banner of peace, development and *win-win* cooperation, be committed to peaceful development, pursue a *win-win* strategy of opening up and promote the formation of a new type of international relations featuring *win-win* cooperation."⁶¹ In fact, the phrase "win-win" appears 11 times in the document.

Embedded in more than 4,800 words are a slew of Chinese commitments: to expand official and unofficial exchanges, to boost trade and investment, to strengthen civilian nuclear cooperation, and to deepen military and counterterrorism cooperation, health care exchanges, and many other efforts.

Meanwhile, the single obligation imposed on the Arab side is an oblique one. The document observes that the Taiwan question "concerns the core interests of China" and that Arab states and organizations have "refrained from having any official relations or official exchanges with Taiwan." For this, China expresses its appreciation.⁶²

Case Studies

Like many countries, China’s approach to foreign policy emphasizes bilateral relations between states rather than with multilateral regional organizations. The Middle East has at least two relatively robust multilateral groupings—the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council—but China has put its Middle East emphasis on five states: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, and Algeria. With each of these, China in the last decade has proclaimed a “comprehensive strategic relationship,” although regional foreign ministers sometimes chuckle and say they do not quite understand what that actually means.⁶³ Yet, by setting a public set of priority countries, China has helped to signal to these countries and to the world where it seeks to focus its energies.

Egypt

In many ways, the country that feels most in need of a Chinese embrace is Egypt, which has been casting about vigorously for a strategic reset for most of the last 150 years. Egypt’s first brush with ambitious economic and social development nearly bankrupted the country in the mid-nineteenth century. Under Khedive Ismail Pasha, the government borrowed tens of millions of pounds, mostly from Great Britain and France, to construct the Suez Canal, build out transportation and irrigation, and grow the industrial base. When European lenders grew concerned at what they saw as the khedive’s profligacy, they seized control of Egypt’s finances, and when army officers revolted over the Europeans’ control, the Europeans pressed the Ottomans (who had nominal control of Egypt and were facing their own profound problems) to install a khedive who would be more accommodating of Great Britain’s efforts to secure its debts.

Egypt gained greater independence from Britain after World War II, and especially after Gamal Abdel Nasser led a 1952 coup that overthrew the Egyptian monarchy. Abdel Nasser initially seemed inclined to explore a range of economic development models, pursuing aggressive land reform on the backs of the nobility and seeking to drive industrialization by making land speculation less attractive. Ultimately, however, Abdel Nasser's was a military regime that favored a command economy and state-led industrialization over invigorating the private sector. A tentative U.S. effort at land reclamation and resettlement in Egypt in the mid-1950s sought to promote freehold farmers, cooperative extension, and local self-rule in a project called the Egyptian American Rural Improvement Service. The military's preferred option was "Liberation Province," a regimented land reclamation effort that brought peasants into labor on collective plots in work shirts color coded according to their area of specialization.⁶⁴

After the Suez Canal crisis in 1956, Egypt turned more sharply toward the Eastern Bloc and embraced what it called "Arab socialism." The country's economic strategy was more statist than Marxist, and it seemed guided more by a desire to eviscerate the wealth of the regime's potential political challengers than an effort to empower the proletariat. The project to construct the High Dam at Aswan brought hundreds of Soviet engineers and construction workers to Egypt, but Soviet economists and theoreticians did not follow. In fact, Egypt's minister of industry from the mid-1950s, and later deputy prime minister for industry and mineral resources (and prime minister from 1972 to 1973), was Aziz Sidky, whose 1951 Harvard doctoral dissertation was a study of Egypt's iron and steel industry. While Egypt was broadly committed to import substitution industrialization, Egypt's industrialization strategy was, in fact, subordinated to its political strategy. The political strategy, in turn, was the product of army officers with long experience in secret organizations. It may, in fact, have owed as much to thousands of Nazis who fled to Cairo after World War II and helped organize the domestic security services as it did to the economic models Egypt was seeking to emulate.⁶⁵

After Abdel Nasser's death, Egypt swerved away from Arab socialism, but not completely. Anwar Sadat's *Infitah*, or "open door," created opportunities for the private sector after the 1973 war and the abandonment of Soviet ties in favor of an alignment with the United States. Yet, while the United States poured billions of dollars into Egypt in economic assistance after the Camp David Treaty, and international financial institutions began to engage more deeply with Egypt, the Egyptian system remained a patchwork. The military continued to maintain a privileged position in the economy, and the state maintained a robust system of subsidies and state-owned industries. A pattern of five-year plans begun in the 1960s persisted, as did the focus on import substitution. Public sector employment remained robust. In 1998, after two decades of large-scale U.S. economic assistance to Egypt, 39 percent of the Egyptian workers were either government employees or worked for public enterprises.⁶⁶ Egypt was not so much pursuing a development model as it was resisting one. The government consistently sought international support while simultaneously seeking to preserve the status quo to the greatest degree possible.

While scholars can disagree on the precise cause, and it is an open question whether a clearer development model would have delivered different results, Egypt fared far poorer than many Asian economies that were in similar conditions in the 1950s and 1960s. Egypt's per capita GDP in 1965

was \$161, Thailand's was \$142, and South Korea's was \$109. In 2021, the respective numbers were \$3,699, \$7,066, and \$34,998.⁶⁷

Egypt pivoted away from the Soviet Union in 1970 and aligned with the United States in the wake of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. The Camp David agreement of 1979 established the promise of \$2.1 billion per year in U.S. foreign assistance, partly intended to replace Gulf Arab assistance that all parties believed would be cut after an Egyptian-Israeli agreement. The U.S. assistance—\$1.3 billion in military aid and another \$800 million in economic help—was significant in 1979. But the Egyptian economy grew, the population grew, and inflation ate away at the value of the assistance. Starting in 1998, and in parallel with a change in U.S. aid to Israel, the United States agreed to reduce economic assistance to Egypt significantly. While the number has fluctuated, in part due to congressional concern about Egyptian human rights conditions, U.S. economic aid to Egypt now stands at approximately \$100 million per year for a population of more than 100 million Egyptians.

From a bilateral perspective, Egyptians came to regard U.S. economic assistance as an entitlement, and it bred Egyptian resentment. In the early 2000s, an Egyptian diplomat at an informal gathering in Washington bristled at proposed legislation that would condition a portion of U.S. assistance on Egyptian human rights performance. "If you want to condition additional assistance on what we do, that's your money and you can do what you wish. But this is *our* money," he complained.⁶⁸

USAID has proudly trumpeted its achievements in Egypt over 40 years. U.S. government efforts have helped eliminate polio, lower infant and maternal mortality, improve early literacy, expand telecommunications networks, reduce lead in the air in Cairo, and improve water and wastewater supplies for 25 million Egyptians.⁶⁹ Included in the assistance was \$1.4 billion to support Egyptian agriculture, including helping farmers buy land, liberalizing markets for fertilizers and seeds, and matching Egyptian farmers with local and international buyers.⁷⁰ And yet, Egyptians have long complained that their partnership with the United States has been a disappointment.

For years, Egyptians seeing persistent poverty around them have argued that a true partnership with a superpower such as the United States would have lifted them to prosperity (as many say the United States has done with Israel, and as others argue the United States has done with South Korea and Japan). They have objected that USAID contracts are designed to support U.S. contractors and not Egyptians. Additionally, Americans have worried that international support for Egyptian projects has actually inhibited Egypt's development of indigenous capacity to address its development issues. For example, international aid programs have used robust salaries to lure the most capable Egyptian experts out of the Egyptian bureaucracy to implement projects. While that has helped ensure that the projects are successful, it has weakened the Egyptian government's capacity to carry out other work independently.⁷¹ For these reasons and others, it is not entirely coincidental that Egypt shares a distinction with a number of other long-term recipients of U.S. foreign assistance: rather than creating strong popular support for the United States, the bilateral aid relationship seems to have contributed to strained ties. In 2010, the Pew Research Center polled countries around the world about favorable attitudes toward the United States. Of the 21 countries polled, the lowest ratings (hovering close to 20 percent) were in Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, and Turkey, all significant recipients of U.S. assistance over decades. While U.S. wars in Iraq and

Afghanistan may have played a role in dragging numbers downward, one might have thought that decades of partnership might have mitigated some of the frustration. It is also worth noting that U.S. favorability ratings in Lebanon were above 50 percent. Remarkably in light of the current round of great power competition, U.S. favorability ratings in Russia and China were 57 and 58 percent, respectively.⁷²

The Egyptian-Chinese relationship is newer and, at least superficially, more robust. Since first going to China in 2014, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi visited six times in six years and signed at least 25 bilateral agreements.⁷³ A former Egyptian ambassador to China, now the vice chairman of the Egyptian-Chinese Friendship Association, gushed to the Chinese-published *Global Times*:

Egypt and China enjoy a lot of similarities, that has been so obvious since their two leaders took over as president. They have both almost identical and profound appreciation of world politics. Their mutual understanding got deeper and deeper over the past few years. They met many times and developed mutual understanding, in particular with regard to the priority that should be given to sustainable development in their nations, to the building up of their economies, to striving to aim at raising the standards of living of their people and to the preservation of our two nations' national security, peace and stability, because any country, if it's stable and strong from within, no other country could threaten its peace and stability.⁷⁴

He went on to add:

The two presidents have the political will to work together to develop further and further their two nations' bilateral relations, this is beneficial for the two nations and the two peoples. The presidents are willing to work together to further develop Arab-China relations, Africa-China relations, and our mutual relations with other developing nations. Both countries are focused on the idea of creating a joint future because we have a common destiny.⁷⁵

One businessperson who has dealt extensively with China raved about implicit comparisons between China and the United States. "There is no conditionality on financing, and they finance on comfortable terms," she said. "They provide financing and know-how . . . and they provide long installments with a grace period. It is a less arrogant model, and they are not interfering in politics."⁷⁶ Another businessperson with extensive investments in Egypt's new capital city complex in the desert east of Cairo also highlighted the financing issue: "The Germans, French, and Chinese are investing with financing on easy terms. The U.S. is letting go and blaming Egypt."⁷⁷

In fact, China's engagement with Egypt has been measured, and China has pulled back when it has judged Egypt to be overreaching. On the New Administrative Capital, for example, Chinese firms originally were slated to play a major role in constructing the government administrative district, but as one senior Egyptian official put it, "It didn't work for economic and political reasons."⁷⁸ A Chinese colleague commented privately that the dispute was over commercial terms and that "the Egyptians thought they were the only ones who were supposed to make money." The Chinese focus shifted to building towers only in the central business district, a smaller area for which they

have specific technical expertise, some of which the Egyptians hope will be transferred during the construction process. The commonly accepted figure for Chinese investment in the central business district is \$3 billion, although the terms of the investment are hard to discern.⁷⁹

The Suez Canal Zone has become an area of special focus for China. It is one of the few sites in Egypt where the Chinese have made investments, and those investments have yielded returns. A 2002 effort to establish a free zone had weak results, but parliament amended the law in 2015, and the Tianjin Economic-Technological Development Area (TEDA) expanded its facilities there significantly. Presidents Xi and Sisi inaugurated an expansion of the so-called TEDA-Suez project during Xi's 2016 state visit to Egypt. The project now occupies an area of more than 7 square kilometers, with a long-term planning area almost three times as large. According to the organization's website, "It is an industrial project mainly covering processing and manufacturing, logistics, bonded [sic], technology development, commerce and modern services and other major industries, housing, commerce, finance, and other functions."⁸⁰ The area has gymnasiums, libraries, Chinese restaurants, and even a "dinosaur paradise" for recreation.⁸¹

The most significant economic enterprise in the TEDA-Suez zone is a Jushi fiberglass plant, which produces 200,000 tons of fiberglass annually.⁸² The plant reportedly employs 2,200 Egyptians, and according to a former Egyptian diplomat, only 14 Chinese workers.⁸³ Most of the work, however, is done by robots. A 2015 master plan projected for the TEDA-Suez zone to create a million jobs for Egyptians by 2030, but so far, only about 50,000 Egyptian jobs have been created.⁸⁴

There often seems to be a gap between the perception of Chinese investment in Egypt, Chinese partnership with Egypt, and the reality. Agreements are struck and heralded, but sometimes projects are quietly shelved without clear explanations of when or why. For example, the Egyptian press widely reported in January 2016 that the Ministry of Transportation had signed a memorandum of understanding with China Railway Construction Corporation for a \$3.5 billion project to design, plan, and build Cairo's sixth metro line, noting that financing was still being negotiated.⁸⁵ Eighteen months later, the press reported that Egypt's National Authority of Tunnels had signed a nonbinding agreement with Quebec-based Bombardier to develop a plan for the sixth metro line and made no reference at all to the prior Chinese agreement.⁸⁶ There is no public record of what went wrong with the earlier project or when it foundered.

By contrast, sustained attention has been paid to the Chinese role in constructing the electrified light rail between Cairo, 10th of Ramadan City, and the New Administrative Capital. The \$1.25 billion project, whose first phase is a 66 kilometer line with 11 stations, opened in July 2022, approximately five years after being agreed to. The construction of the railway is an example of China's ability to build infrastructure more quickly and affordably than Western firms, drawing from China's extensive domestic experience building railways and helping to drive Egypt's economic development. Because Egyptians see China as a fellow developing country, there is a tendency to see the railway more as a partnership of equals, with an implicit hope that some of China's economic magic rubs off on Egypt.

Some Egyptians argue that what attracts them is not so much a Chinese model specifically, but an Asian model more generally. One former diplomat argued, in part, that Asian countries are often willing to embrace “strategic latency” and allow diplomatic processes to unfold over time, without forcing rapid and explicit decisions that can be destabilizing. The explicit example he cited was China’s decision not to take either Hong Kong or Macao by force, but surely the evolution of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as an instrument of consensus building was an element of his thinking. Contrarily, he also admired that “In circles of government, Asia is fascinated by performance, speed, and growth rate.” To accomplish that, he said, “Sometimes you need an iron fist, especially after three to four years of revolution.”⁸⁷

One might interpret this seeming contradiction—a simultaneous admiration of Chinese patience and impatience—as an embrace of realism, practicality, and outcomes over rigid ideology. Many Egyptians complain that Western efforts to improve systems and transparency are self-interested diktats cloaked in supposedly principled altruism. China makes no such demands and no such pretense, and as with the construction of the light rail line, it gets the job done.

There is a line of argument in Egypt that the turn toward a Chinese option is a practical one that has been forced on them. As one businessperson said, “The U.S.-Egypt relationship is in the DNA of Egypt. Egyptian officials hate dealing with the Chinese.”⁸⁸ Another said, “We have no hostility to China, but it is not like the American dream.”⁸⁹ But however much they might prefer dealing with the United States, Egyptians assess that China is interested in Egypt, and that the United States is not. “The U.S. is letting go and blaming Egypt,” one businessperson said.⁹⁰

Saudi Arabia

The Gulf has a very different attitude toward both the United States and China, in part because the fundamental problem Gulf governments have had for the last half-century or more has been how to spend money rather than how to acquire it. In Saudi Arabia, the discovery of oil in 1938 meant money flowed to lands that had not had a major capital injection for most of human history. Spending only became deliberate when Prince Faisal established control in the early 1960s. When Faisal became king, Saudi Arabia became a more conventional developmental state, adopting a pattern of five-year plans starting in 1970 and quickly becoming more ambitious as energy revenues exploded. Foreign consultants helped some. For example, the California-based Stanford Research Institute helped staff the Central Planning Organization. Even so, as oil revenues grew sharply on a relatively low economic base, there was never much opportunity to develop a robust private sector. This was in part because the state was such an outsized economic actor, and in part because plentiful government employment opportunities made Saudi labor expensive, especially in comparison to expatriates. Saudi Arabia evolved into a system in which a low-wage, high-productivity foreign workforce supported a high-wage, low-productivity native workforce. The private sector, with mostly Saudi owners and foreign workers, focused mostly on traditional sectors such as services, light manufacturing, agriculture, and, importantly, construction for state-funded projects. The Saudi state led the major industrialization efforts, the growth of a petrochemicals industry, and, of course, the upstream oil sector.⁹¹ A sympathetic journal article asserted that

Saudi development plans had combined “capitalist and Islamic values” and eschewed the socialist instincts of most five-year plans in the developing world. Yet, although the 1980 five-year plan explicitly endorsed private capital, the state was overwhelmingly the country’s largest employer, and citizens enjoyed a series of social subsidies and benefits that were the envy of any socialist state.⁹² From 1980 on, each five-year plan called for reducing the number of expatriate workers and boosting Saudi employment. Each plan failed to deliver.⁹³

One challenge that has bedeviled Saudi development plans is wild swings in oil revenues. When Saudi Arabia established its first five-year plan, revenues blew past predictions, and expenditures could not keep up. That happened with the second five-year plan as well. By the time the third five-year plan was implemented, prices fell well short of expectations, and they remained relatively low until climbing steadily in 2002 and afterward.

Saudi Arabia has had persistent difficulty shifting gears to take advantage of oil windfalls. One management consultant told then Saudi minister of labor Ghazi al-Ghosaibi in the early 2000s that economically, Saudi Arabia was “on a path to Mexico, not the U.S.” By 2010, McKinsey published a short paper arguing that Saudi Arabia was “on a path to Pakistan.”⁹⁴

The Saudi Vision 2030 plan, announced in April 2016, is an ambitious effort to completely reframe the Saudi development debate. Designed quickly by leading U.S. strategic consultancies, most prominently McKinsey and the Boston Consulting Group, the plan was an effort to simultaneously recast the kingdom’s future trajectory and legitimate the leadership of Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who was elevated to crown prince just over a year after the plan’s introduction. The vision encompasses 13 “vision realization programs,” each of which has its own set of objectives, commitments, and key performance indicators (KPIs). A National Transformation Plan was put in place to address 37 strategic objectives across eight different themes, measured through 92 main KPIs and 224 sub-KPIs implemented through 433 initiatives and projects.⁹⁵ As the plan has been implemented, the number of KPIs and sub-KPIs has increased.

In the 1980s, many Western observers openly wondered how Saudi Arabia could manage economic development without encouraging social and political liberalization. As a reviewer of an account of Saudi economic planning wondered, “How can a population whose majority is conservative and still living in a Medieval time frame accommodate and absorb the technology of the Western world, which is mainly based on a liberal and material background?”⁹⁶ In the four decades since, Saudi Arabia has provided an answer to that question. For several decades, it aggressively coopted most potential domestic opposition and paid particular attention to pursuing a symbiotic relationship with the clerical establishment, which legitimated the ruling family’s patrimony. Under the Vision 2030 plan, the country has pursued an aggressive plan of social liberalization (or, perhaps more accurately, a strategy to “coerce tolerance”) that promotes many forms of social and economic liberalization while becoming even more sensitive to expressions of political liberalization.

The UAE

The UAE is a more heterogeneous state than either Saudi Arabia or Egypt, and its development spurt happened relatively later. Not only was oil not discovered until the 1960s (and the state itself was not formed until 1971), but emirates such as Dubai and Sharjah had histories of trade and commerce long before Abu Dhabi became a global oil giant and the country's economic driver. Baked into the agreement forming the UAE was a relatively weak federal government and significant local autonomy. A symbiotic relationship developed between Abu Dhabi and Dubai in particular, where Abu Dhabi acted as a frequent financier for Dubai, and many of the oil operators found an entrepot such as Dubai a more hospitable base than the relatively underdeveloped and relatively more parochial Abu Dhabi.

Before statehood, the emirates that became the UAE formed Trucial Oman under British protection. By most accounts, local rulers lamented Britain's 1971 departure. This may be in part because a pattern of British payments to local rulers throughout the early twentieth century gave the rulers dominion over local commercial families, creating a pattern of patrimonialism in the UAE that persists to the present.⁹⁷ Regardless, British technical advisers were present throughout the emirates, and a British consulting firm helped guide the plan to dredge Dubai Creek that began in 1959, which laid the groundwork for Dubai's spectacular economic growth in the decades since.

Because the British left reluctantly, and because the Emiratis were, for the most part, sorry to see them go, the UAE economy grew amid a robust pattern of partnership with Western development experts. Such experts helped advise on the creation of a currency board in 1973 and on the creation of a central bank in 1980. Revenues quickly outstripped the federal government's ability to spend them, but the government sought to develop infrastructure rapidly.

As one author wrote, it is clear why the UAE had no overall development strategy in the early years of statehood: the Emirates "were in need of practically every amenity, and therefore, everything had to be done very quickly."⁹⁸ Yet, individual emirates were each pursuing development independently of each other, often replicating each other's efforts. Each emirate built its own cement plant, and four different emirates raced to build their own international airports. The Ministry of Planning conceived of a five-year plan to begin in 1981, but it lacked the authority to enforce its will nationwide, and it proved ineffective even in communicating with local development planners, let alone coordinating with them.⁹⁹

Despite the lack of central control, or perhaps because of it, the UAE developed robustly by its own lights. Arguably, this diversity of approach and hunger for results resembled the multiple strategies China pursued in the 1990s. Dubai in particular developed a reputation for urgency and ambition, which in recent decades Abu Dhabi has sought to match.¹⁰⁰ The state—in this case meaning both the federal government and the governments of individual emirates—remains the key driver of economic decisionmaking, which it maintains through state-owned conglomerates such as Dubai World, Dubai Holdings, and a government-controlled property development firm named Emaar. Dubai has an "Executive Office" (and Abu Dhabi has an Executive Affairs Authority) that allows rulers to mesh their governmental and economic roles.

Singapore has been a particular Emirati inspiration for almost 30 years. One of the most prominent developers in the UAE, Mohammed al-Abbar, was posted in Singapore from 1987 to 1992 as the representative of Khaleej Capital. When he returned to Dubai, he spent five years creating the Department of Economic Development. Based in part on his Singapore experience, al-Abbar wrote Dubai's first 10-year strategic plan as the emirate began to diversify into transport, real estate, logistics, and tourism.¹⁰¹ The first Singaporean ambassador resident in the UAE judged that Emiratis were attracted by Singapore's "stability, one-party rule, and economic dynamism," and while Dubai was the first emirate to send delegations to understand what made Singapore tick, Abu Dhabi was not far behind.¹⁰²

Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE maintains a deeply patrimonial system with an antipathy to anything that reeks of political opposition. The UAE has a nod to political participation with a partially elected Federal National Council, although the rulers of each emirate select electors. For all of its embrace of change and swiftness, the UAE has been on its current development path for decades, explicitly welcoming foreigners' deep engagement in the Emirati economy and embracing an internally heterogeneous approach that seems to reward experimentation. By contrast, Saudi Arabia's current approach represents a much more sudden break from the past. Until recently, the country had a strong emphasis on homogeneity, presumably as a mechanism to manage social and economic change. If the UAE sought inspiration from Singapore, Saudi Arabia seems belatedly to have found inspiration—and rivalry—in the neighboring UAE. That rivalry is not always friendly, and its stakes are clear.

Gulf Attitudes toward the United States and China

The Gulf's economic growth has been intimately tied to the price of oil. Much of the region was deeply impoverished in the interwar years, and it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that oil production made a meaningful difference in the lives of most Gulf Arabs. During that period, teachers, lawyers, physicians, and professionals from Egypt and the Levant were the bridge between Gulf governments and the world's developed economies. An even more fundamental change occurred after oil prices shot up after 1973. Massive infrastructure projects, a flood of workers from South and Southeast Asia, and large teams of Western professionals rendered most of the region's cities unrecognizable, and a spike in Gulf Arab students training in Western universities laid the foundation for a much different future.

As a consequence of the oil boom, the whole notion of economic development in the Gulf took on a different coloration than for a country such as Egypt. The region was not ideologically attracted to socialism—indeed, the Gulf monarchies had a strong aversion to Gamal Abdel Nasser and his Arab socialism project—but it essentially set up socialist systems funded by oil revenues. Almost all citizens were quickly brought out of poverty, often on the backs of nonnational workers who labored in poverty. Guaranteed government jobs, free education and health care, and subsidized utilities were all part of the ruling bargain for citizens, and still, there was plenty of money to spare.

The resultant economic systems blended capitalism and socialism in ways that had few antecedents in either the United States or China. Politically and socially, the tribal, clan, and family systems of

the Gulf increasingly had to cope with the cosmopolitan demands of fast-growing cities, mobility, and generational change. Here, too, there was not an obvious direction in which they might adapt.

For some, economic development called for more democratic, or at least more liberal, systems. To these people, the dynamism of the modern world was synonymous with greater individualism, which in turn would encourage excellence and intellectual independence. The so-called “Red Prince” of Saudi Arabia, Talal bin Abdulaziz, went into exile for several years in the early 1960s for his embrace of such reforms, and he was merely one example of the region’s liberalizing current. Kuwait first established a legislature in 1938 as a way for merchants to ensure that the ruler was sharing oil revenues with the population.¹⁰³ Although it was soon dissolved, it has proven mostly durable since its reestablishment in 1963.

Even so, more democratic systems have not always correlated with liberalization. The advent of democratic politics in Kuwait, for example, has had the paradoxical effect of nurturing tribal politics. Tribes organize to ensure their representation in parliament, and then they use that representation to maximize their share of state benefits. Rather than push individualism, Kuwaiti elections have spurred collective consciousness.

From the perspective of Gulf rulers, collective consciousness is not a bad thing as long as the leaders of the collectivities respect the leadership’s rule. Indeed, it is easier to manage individuals when that management can be delegated to a small number of subnational authorities who can both reward compliance and punish deviance. Gulf governments have not embraced systems of large domestic security forces with widely placed informants, as countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq pursued in the 1960s and beyond. Rather, the networks of affiliation that pervade Gulf societies serve to reinforce loyalty and obedience.

The United States has quietly pushed for greater democratization in the Gulf. It worked to ensure that Kuwait reinstated its parliament after the U.S. liberation in 1991, and it encouraged Saudi efforts to strengthen its advisory legislature, the Shura Council, and sought to bolster municipality elections in 2015. For the most part, U.S. diplomats have recognized that their ability to push Gulf partners to adopt open election systems is limited.

Rather, U.S. officials have relied on a more indirect tool. For more than three-quarters of a century, the United States (and to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom) has been the aspirational educational target for Gulf elites. As a destination for students, the trickle turned into a flood as oil wealth spilled into the Gulf in the 1970s. Numbers shot up again after 9/11, when the King Abdullah Scholarship Program sent more than 100,000 Saudis to the United States to study. In the last two decades, U.S. universities have arisen throughout the Gulf, in some cases as branches of U.S. campuses and in others as independent institutions.

The political and social impact of U.S.-style education—obtained both at home and abroad—is debated in the region. To some, the exposure to cosmopolitanism imbued by the 600,000 Saudis that have studied abroad necessarily has seeped back into the country.¹⁰⁴ Whether it is encountering unfamiliar ideas, being pushed toward independent thought, or being exposed to women who live

unencumbered by the desires of their male relatives, education forces Saudis to navigate profoundly different cultural environments for extended periods. In addition, Gulf students have built their English language skills as part of their education, not only to attend international schools, but increasingly to attend national universities in places such as the UAE and Qatar. With the expansion of the internet and social media in the last two decades, intimate awareness of Western societies has increased markedly.

Many in the Gulf consider this to be a mixed blessing. While they find much to admire in the West, they also find a great deal that is unattractive. They are quick to raise not only the problems in the West such as poverty, crime, and drug abuse, but also a social code that seeks to make room for protecting blasphemy, disrespecting parents, and condoning homosexuality.

For governments in the region that seek to rule through what they say is a benign authoritarianism, they argue that liberalism would open the door not only to what they see as the social ills of the West, but also a conservative reaction by extremists that would undermine necessary progress. That is to say, they insist that governments must play a central role in managing contestation in society, and more open politics would only drive polarization and hostility.

It is here that the Chinese model of government management of the confluence of economic, social, and political change becomes attractive. As a former U.S. diplomat with extensive Middle East experience said of the current president of the UAE, Mohammed bin Zayed, “he wanted to develop a benevolent autocracy. He thought that vision plus resources plus grip would equal success.”¹⁰⁵ One Kuwaiti investor said, “Our experience with democracy is not so constructive. Many people think, stupidly, it is what is holding the country back, rather than incompetent government.”¹⁰⁶

As one UAE-based think tank scholar put it, “The UAE is asked to be apologetic for lots of stuff, especially its political system. . . . The China model achieved success. They are doing more than any Third World democratic country. They created a parallel model. We don’t need to apologize anymore.”¹⁰⁷ This scholar continued, “We have an Islamic background, so family is first. But in civilization we are closer to the West because Islam is an Abrahamic religion. Even so, the radical individualism of the West is sometimes offensive. For example, the right to decide gender doesn’t resonate with our sense of the boundaries of individualism.”¹⁰⁸ Another UAE-based scholar asked, “Who comes first, the individual or society?” He suggested that democracy was one way of improving governance, but that improved governance without democracy also represents an attractive path forward. As he put it, “China is making people think we have another choice.”¹⁰⁹

A senior Arab League official made a similar point. He argued that there is a sense of revelation that comes from Chinese success: “They did a miracle. The West said it wasn’t possible. If you want economic progress, there is one way forward, and that requires liberalization and democratization.”¹¹⁰ China refutes that premise, and from an economic point of view, China can represent a more conservative bet. The Arab League official argued that “the China model has continuity. The democratic model has disruptions all the time.”¹¹¹

Still, Gulf understandings of the Chinese political economy are almost entirely impressionistic. There is no literature in Arabic on China's economic and political development, aside from a few newspaper columns. Academic articles about China's role in the region rely almost entirely on secondary English-language sources rather than Arabic or Chinese material or primary documents.¹¹² There is no community of elite Gulf businesspeople who have lived in China and can act as a bridge. Similarly, there is no community of Chinese living in the Gulf who mix easily with their Arab counterparts. On the popular level, Chinese goods are widely thought to be of inferior quality, and Chinese construction is below the standard of Western or Northeast Asian firms.¹¹³

The Chinese Parallel

Nevertheless, there remains a cultural fascination with China among Gulf rulers that manifests itself in intriguing ways. In Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Culture sponsored the first Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale from December 2021 to March 2022. The town is especially significant among the country's current leadership. It was the birthplace of the Saudi state in the eighteenth century, and it is now the target of a \$63 billion development mega-project funded by the Public Investment Fund, which is closely associated with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.¹¹⁴

The show's curator, Philip Tinari, curates China's leading contemporary art museum and is based in Beijing.¹¹⁵ The show's title was "Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones." A display at the exhibit explained that the expression became common in the 1980s in China to refer "to strategies for implementing and adapting to the massive economic and cultural transformations that were then taking place. Saudi Arabia finds itself today in a similar moment of optimistic energy, willingness to ask questions, and openness to new futures."¹¹⁶ A further display panel explained, "Moments of rupture, such as we have experienced recently around the world, are those most likely to unleash new waves of retroactive understanding and codification, as well as of reassessment of earlier orthodoxies. The past might be best understood not as a source of immutable tradition, but as an unstable function of the present."¹¹⁷

It is hard to imagine a clearer invocation of the applicability of China's modernization experience in the 1980s to what Saudi Arabia is experiencing now. China went through a wrenching social and economic transformation as brutal experiments in collective farming were abandoned, cities exploded in size and complexity, and room was made for private enterprise. Political elites were purged, many of whom had purged their predecessors not so long before. Iron-clad ideological principles were abandoned, and new ones were adopted. It led to world-beating growth in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The Vision 2030 process in Saudi Arabia envisions a similarly dramatic shift. For many decades, prayer times shaped the rhythm of daily life in Saudi Arabia. The government dominated the economy in every way and employed most Saudi citizens in the workforce. Saudi women were almost entirely absent from most sectors of the workforce despite high levels of education. Saudis reveled in the country's uniqueness, in the formal alliance between the rulers and the religious establishment, and in the rules and roles that provided lifetime employment and protected Saudis from economic downturns. While the country changed dramatically over the twentieth century, it

proudly charted its own course while seeming to pick and choose the aspects of Western modernity it would accept.

In the last five years, the government has worked actively to reduce the influence of religious institutions on daily life and, in particular, to liberate younger people to socialize and celebrate in diverse ways. While the government still plays a commanding role in the economy, it is seeking to become more of a strategic investor than a regular employer. The private sector is growing, much as it did in China in the 1980s and 1990s, and the rigid ideologies of the past are visibly yielding. Another parallel is rapidly shifting dress patterns. In China, the monochromatic Mao suits of the 1950s and 1960s yielded to patterned Western-style clothing in many places; in Saudi Arabia, the uniform of white thobes for men and black abayas for women is breaking down quickly. Men increasingly wear jeans and t-shirts, while women's abayas are in a riot of colors and are increasingly worn open with only the lightest hair covering.

What is similar, too, is an understanding that the newfound freedom has clear limits. In China, the CCP still has complete control over politics, and the government closely monitors public expression for political content. The same is true in Saudi Arabia. While the economy is increasingly unbound and social options are increasing, there is little tolerance for unsanctioned political expression. Saudi officials have privately admired the efficiency of China's internal transformation. As the metaphor of "feeling the stones" suggests, Saudis see China as having experimented on small matters while ensuring that the country was making deliberate progress, all in the context of a centralized decisionmaking structure with a clear destination in mind. Saudis have also admired the results: a society that was profoundly transformed into an economic powerhouse without an accompanying political transformation.

A prominent retired Arab diplomat spoke with deep admiration for China's feat. Comparing Russia and China, he argued that China superseded Russia because the leadership showed flexibility and innovation. Dismissing Mikhail Gorbachev as an idealist who "played games through perestroika and glasnost," he argued that China succeeded in part because it focused entirely on the economic task at hand without delving into deep political reform. "The industrial base in Russia should have allowed success," he said, but because of the Chinese leadership, China came out ahead.¹¹⁸

The area of contemporary art captures Saudi ambition especially well. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been at the forefront of encouraging creativity among young people in Saudi Arabia, itself a revolutionary concept in a religious tradition that was consistently interpreted to frown on innovation (*bid'ah*). Not only had the government formerly frowned upon art and music when not intended for religious purposes, but the clerical establishment sought to constrain it. Artists were barred from depicting human forms, and the religious police confiscated and sometimes destroyed musical instruments.¹¹⁹

The explosion of the contemporary art scene in China suggests that even creative artistic expression can be encouraged while it is simultaneously closely monitored for political content. Indeed, one can see China's efforts to nurture a creative class removed from political or social consciousness as a model for Saudi ambitions. China's implementation of this practice also models how the

institutionalization of political censorship in the art world can help regularize the role of censorship in society more broadly by simultaneously highlighting the power of censors and the narrowness of the censors' ambit.¹²⁰ Because both China and Saudi Arabia have long histories of strict censorship in the past, they are able to cast current patterns of censorship as part of a pattern of liberalization. They place emphasis on a flowering of artistic freedom rather than the guardrails that are strictly maintained.

China's reluctance to push adherence to a unitary China model makes tracing Chinese assistance on issues such as censorship difficult, and neither China nor authoritarian governments feel any obligation to publicize cooperation on security-related issues. At the same time, evidence from the Arab side suggests that the Chinese role in this and similar endeavors is more inspirational than practical. The apparent distance serves both sides well. China's interest is less in advancing Chinese-style solutions than in undermining a belief that Western-style solutions are the only option; from the perspective of Arab governments, if the Chinese experience does not exactly undermine Western calls for liberalization, it helps boost the resolve of liberalization's critics.

Paradoxically, from the point of view of Arab governments, articles in Western publications that describe Chinese government strategies toward censorship are more than adequate to demonstrate both what the Chinese government does and what its effects are. They helpfully boil down Chinese government action into brief and salient points, and they avoid the formal and sometimes formulaic cadences of official Chinese government documents. Of course, many Arab government elites speak and read English, and few speak or read Chinese. For countries that already have well-developed censorship functions, the specific details are less important than the principles, anyway, and Western journalists and academics have covered the principles extensively.

China's Soft Power

One might ask what broader Arab publics make of the China model, and in what situations these perceptions matter. Recent polling by the Arab Barometer Project found that, in eight of the nine countries where they were able to poll, the publics have a more favorable attitude toward China than the United States. Notably, in each of the nine countries polled, respondents were more likely to view the development of U.S. economic power as a “critical threat” than the development of China’s economic power, and in eight of the nine countries surveyed, at least a third of respondents viewed U.S. economic power through this critical lens.¹²¹ It is important to note, however, that the Arab Barometer’s polls do not touch many of the countries most important to the United States and China, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt.

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy has commissioned polls that ask a different set of questions. One poll released in December 2022 (but fielded before Xi’s trip to Riyadh that month) found that 57 percent of Saudis surveyed believed that the Saudi-China relationship was either very important or somewhat important, while only 41 percent said the same was true of the United States. Meanwhile, 61 percent of Saudis agree at least somewhat with the proposition, “We cannot count on the United States these days, so we should look more to other countries like China or Russia as partners.”¹²² A similar Washington Institute poll in the UAE fielded in November 2022 found similar numbers, with 56 percent arguing that strong China ties were important, 44 percent saying the same about the United States, and 61 percent supporting the hedging proposition.¹²³

Interestingly, numbers in Egypt were much more evenly divided. A November 2022 poll found that 55 percent of Egyptians believed that the Egypt-China relationship was important, compared to 52

percent saying the same about the United States, a gap that is within the poll's margin of error, and Egyptians were evenly split 49 percent apiece on whether the country should hedge against U.S. abandonment through closer China and Russia ties.¹²⁴

Those polling numbers are not a clear assessment of soft power, and they say little about public attitudes toward the more liberal models of the West and the more authoritarian model of China. It is hard, in fact, to imagine how one could get research permission in those states to ask those questions broadly. It is significant, though, that these are nations that have been the targets of substantial U.S. attention—both through educational exchanges and cultural efforts dating back to the 1970s, and strong government-to-government cooperation on security issues that in some cases has lasted even longer. That a larger fraction of the public believes in the importance of close ties with China than with the United States, and the widespread belief in the importance of having a balanced relationship between multiple powers rather than aligning as closely as possible with the United States, represents an important victory for China's global strategy.

At least when speaking with a U.S. researcher, English-speaking Arab elites are keen to highlight the differences between the United States and China. “China is a market, not a model,” one Emirati researcher suggested, and a Kuwaiti businessman complained, “It is not clear how they do business.”¹²⁵ While China provides a lower-cost structure, the Kuwaiti felt communication was easier with the West.¹²⁶ An Egyptian businessperson cautioned that while the Chinese model can provide financing, “You have to look at the intentions, too.” This Egyptian argued that Chinese financing in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa led to default, and ultimately to Chinese ownership.¹²⁷ An Egyptian official who has negotiated with the Chinese had a more balanced view, suggesting that the Chinese “are tough in negotiation, but they control their temper. They are masters of micro and macro. They are patient negotiators, and they don't lie.”¹²⁸ Yet, that description is an almost clinical description of negotiations, with no sense that personal chemistry can help bridge differences. A former U.S. ambassador, long resident in the Middle East, said that culturally, Arabs “don't understand the Chinese. They can't figure out what makes them tick. There is no cultural communication.”¹²⁹ A veteran Arab journalist who is close to the Egyptian government said simply that the Chinese “are not good at mixing.”¹³⁰

On an analytical level, some Arabs are skeptical that partnerships with China can yield all that is promised. Kuwaitis have watched the highly touted “Silk City” partnership with China languish for more than a decade, although they are as critical of the Kuwaiti role as the Chinese one. Similarly, Chinese cooperation on Egypt's New Administrative Capital has waxed and waned and has ultimately yielded much less than initially promised. One Egyptian business executive argued that both the scale and pace of bilateral cooperation are “too aggressive. There are 44 new cities in the pipeline,” he said in March 2022. “It's too much, especially if there are external shocks.”¹³¹

And some Arab leaders wonder just how applicable the Chinese experience is to Arab governments after all. A veteran Arab diplomat argued that there is no way to repeat the China experience in the Middle East, “Because the human factor is completely different. . . . [They] are not in a position to replicate it because of the nature of the people.”¹³² A former Egyptian government official concurred, suggesting that Islam had created a “fatalistic attitude toward development”

that engenders passivity.¹³³ Former *New Yorker* China correspondent Peter Hessler moved to Egypt, and in one memorable 2015 article wrote about expatriate Chinese entrepreneurs there. The entrepreneurs had a dour view of the country's workforce and economic prospects. They argued that the work ethic was poor, especially among men, and gender roles blocked women from full economic participation.¹³⁴

Interestingly, some Chinese say their understanding of the Arab world is superficial at best. A Chinese diplomat told a former professor that "the United States and Great Britain have many . . . human resources, but our channels are basically official. We don't know many people. We don't know the kings and bankers and complicated Arab camps and different political colors, family relations, clans." The scholar added that with almost no heritage speakers who can act as a bridge, "We Chinese have a hard time integrating into that region," adding also that anti-Muslim bias is widespread in China.¹³⁵

Whether such comments are intended more as straightforward analysis or represent a Chinese effort to—in Deng Xiaoping's formulation—"hide capabilities and bide time" is unclear. Yet the two are not contradictory. China is quite intentionally not seeking to imitate the U.S. path, and part of the U.S. path is inspiring imitation. One could imagine China would gain significantly by emboldening others to resist imitating the United States without inspiring a simultaneous imitation of China. The "China model," in this case, can be seen as promoting global resistance to the adoption of Western liberalism. Arguably, the China model represents the notion that governments around the world can follow the Chinese path, in that the economy flourishes and stability is maintained while the government picks and chooses those aspects of modernity their populations will embrace and rejects aspects that it sees as contributing to instability or immorality.

U.S. Policy Responses

The policy challenge China poses to the United States is an unconventional one. Whereas the Cold War pitted the United States and the Soviet Union against each other, China argues that there is no contradiction in building stronger relations with the United States and China simultaneously. China and Middle Eastern states alike point to the vague notion of a China model to undermine what each sees as undesirable U.S. hegemony. All of these countries agree that they are merely seeking to foster a respect for legitimate difference, and no one is choosing sides. In the process, each country is enhancing its leverage against the United States and making it harder for the U.S. government to accomplish its goals in the Middle East.

There is a certain instinct in the U.S. government to fall back on Cold War models and see Sino-American competition in the Middle East as a zero-sum, symmetrical affair. The United States works with an array of allies and partners to weave together diplomatic cooperation, military basing, commercial relations, and a host of other ties to drive a common purpose and isolate an adversary. It assumes China is doing the same.

Yet, China is playing a different game. It is not looking for allies and, in fact, does not pursue formal alliances at all. Instead, China is seeking to undermine the solidarity of U.S. partners to create a world dominated by ad hoc, at-will bilateral relationships—in which China is the dominant party. It obscures some of this by embracing a slew of loosely held multilateral groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the BRICS, all of which hold meetings that are long on verbal expressions of solidarity and short on binding mutual obligations. These groups play a very different role than the treaty-based organizations that are fundamental

to U.S. foreign policy. Through these efforts, China is not seeking to out-align the United States so much as it is seeking to undermine U.S. alignments, thereby nullifying many of the advantages that the United States enjoys in global affairs. It does so partly defensively, to avoid U.S.-led isolation, and partly opportunistically, to exploit opportunities that the United States creates through its own efforts to isolate adversarial countries.

Some of this can be seen working in practice. The United States built a 35-country coalition to repel Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Amid the war in Ukraine, U.S. partners and allies in the Middle East have been circumspect about aligning with the United States against Russia. They have been reluctant to condemn Russian actions and reluctant to enforce sanctions against Russian entities. It is easy to see how this trend advances Chinese interests. If states are reluctant to act collectively against Russian aggression, they are even less likely to act against future Chinese aggression, should it occur. After all, most countries have only distant relationships with Russia. China is the leading trading partner of most of these countries, an important source of technology and infrastructure, and a country that most assess to be a rising global power. Even Western European countries with deep and strategic U.S. ties and long histories of close cooperation with the United States are uneasy about being drawn into a Sino-American rivalry. Middle Eastern states that see diminishing U.S. interest in the region are even more reluctant.

The proper U.S. response to this set of circumstances is threefold: **establishing a clearer set of U.S. priorities, making a clear-eyed assessment of partners' motivations, and crafting a mix of incentives and consequences to shape partners' behavior.** The first of these is both the most obvious and most important. *The United States must determine where the Middle East fits into the U.S. global posture.* Too often in recent years, U.S. visions for the region have been asserted negatively rather than positively, as an indication of what the United States will no longer do—or what it will no longer do to excess—rather than what it will. Yet, the Biden administration's commitment to align U.S. ambitions in the Middle East with available resources without specifying those resources has led many to judge that the drop-off will be acute.¹³⁶ In addition, dramatic shifts in policy and strategy between different administrations, and in particular the Trump administration's skepticism of alliances and the Biden administration's warm embrace of them, cannot help but provoke hedging behavior by allies and partners alike.

While there is little that any presidential administration can do about the policies of its predecessors and successors, there is much that it can do to assert its own priorities. Still, administrations are often reluctant to do so with much clarity. This is in part because the U.S. system often finds it far easier to accrue priorities than dispense of them. It also reflects a concern that publicly shedding priorities has more costs than benefits. U.S. national security advisers often fall back on the formulation that “the President has no higher priority” to reassure audiences, inadvertently highlighting the profound challenge of even beginning to order the myriad objectives of U.S. foreign policy. Even so, a clearer U.S. articulation of its enduring priorities—including but not limited to energy security through the energy transition, freedom of navigation for global seaborne trade, nonproliferation, and counterterrorism—is a task of the utmost importance.

As part of this priority, *the United States needs to redefine the U.S. security role in the region from policeman to security partner*. For more than five decades, the U.S. security approach has been to push Middle Eastern militaries to build capabilities that are complementary to U.S. capabilities while simultaneously pushing them to buy U.S. equipment. The consistent assumption has been that in the event of actual hostilities, U.S. soldiers would do much of the fighting and dying. The American public is increasingly skeptical of that bargain. A more sustainable approach would have two components. The first is to push regional states to develop more genuine capabilities, as Israel has done for some time and the UAE has done more recently. Rather than end direct U.S. support, as some have advocated, the goal here is to raise the threshold of actions that require direct U.S. support. Developing these capabilities is a multi-decade process that must touch on everything from personnel to logistics to acquisitions to doctrine, as the Saudis have discovered since embarking on their own defense reform effort. Enhancing these efforts needs to be a strategic priority for the United States.

The second aspect of redefining the U.S. security role is to make good on two decades of efforts by U.S. administrations to integrate the security capabilities of regional states. Many are too small by themselves to develop full-spectrum capabilities, but the ability to operate as a coalition—which requires efforts to align doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities, as well as aligning efforts at early warning—would give each a significantly larger margin of security.

Although the instinct of many is to use speeches and statements to proclaim bold U.S. intentions and then work toward making them a reality, it is the wrong approach here. The approach the U.S. government should adopt is to act first and create a record of accomplishment, and then deliver speeches and statements that connect the dots for a skeptical audience.¹³⁷ The security space is not only one of profound U.S. advantage compared to China, but also one where China is unlikely to be able to compete effectively for decades, if ever. There are two principal challenges for the United States here: managing a maturing in these security ties while maintaining the confidence of partners and maintaining enough influence with partners to dissuade them from embarking on open-ended military adventures.

After establishing a clearer set of U.S. priorities, the second piece of the puzzle is **gaining a better understanding of how Middle Eastern states view the potential for deeper relationships with both the United States and China**. Part of China's attraction is the government's ability to make and implement agreements swiftly, and part is the lower cost of Chinese goods. Part, too, is the sense that opening up to China gives them leverage in all of their negotiations, on everything from pricing to terms and conditions.

On the issue of speed, *the U.S. government needs to see its slow and bureaucratic processes for what they are: a competitive liability against China, and thus a strategic vulnerability*. Some of these processes are well justified to ensure proper diligence, some are a consequence of law, and some are a consequence of bureaucratic inertia and accumulations of custom. To the extent that the U.S. government identifies great power competition as a core security concern across all domains of government, and not just the Department of Defense, accelerating U.S. government decisionmaking

and implementation needs to become a strategic priority—across the entire interagency process and on Capitol Hill.

Competition must push U.S. officials to both understand what the Chinese are offering and what Middle Eastern states are seeking. To do so, they must put as much time into understanding what the Chinese government puts on offer as Chinese officials do of their American counterparts. Some Arab officials report that when Chinese delegations come in, they essentially red-team the U.S. side, presenting what they believe the U.S. proposal will be, at what price, and with what conditions. They then present their own counteroffer. Too often, U.S. officials take comfort in the logic of the superiority of the U.S. side and presume to know the needs and expectations of their partners. Yet, the result is that Middle Eastern states sometimes treat U.S. cooperation as a luxury good: something that is too expensive to rely on every day and something that should be acquired only in instances when it can be seen easily or when superior performance is vital. Thinking creatively and critically about the U.S. value proposition, and understanding better how to both enhance it and articulate it, is a vital priority that is too often neglected.

From a competitive perspective, the hardest puzzle for the United States to address is *its desire to move the world toward systems that embrace human rights and rule of law, as well as China's hostility to linking morality with international affairs*. That difference—which should be sustained—is likely to represent a persistent aspect of advantage to China. Yet, it need not be a debilitating difference. The United States has had enough experiences in its history, both further back and in the more recent past, to have some humility about the effects of its choices and the strength of its foresight. Countries as different as South Korea, Chile, and the Czech Republic have taken very different paths toward greater democratization, and countries such as Peru and Myanmar have once seemed on a very different democratizing course and endured significant backsliding. Massive U.S. efforts to promote democratization in Iraq and Afghanistan have fallen profoundly short of their goals. The United States should not seek to be the referee of whether countries' political and economic journeys are in the right direction and at the right pace, nor should it see itself as the principal catalyst for change in foreign lands. Efforts should focus on both the complexity and necessary duration of efforts to foster positive change. The United States should seek to reward those inside of government and out who make courageous efforts to build more robust systems that support the rule of law and ensure that the U.S. political system serves as a positive example to countries around the world. The last part is the hardest, but ultimately, it is the most important.

The last piece—**imposing consequences for negative behavior and incentivizing good behavior**—is far easier to describe than to execute. It has several aspects. The first is *reaching a clearer internal understanding of what is most important*. As noted above, the U.S. system is often bad at prioritization, and it accrues objectives far better than it sheds them. U.S. government bureaucracies each seek to advance their own priorities, and they are often quite different. Yet, from the perspective of target countries, the U.S. system produces a muddle of demands that cannot possibly all be satisfied, and that even the United States does not expect to be fully satisfied. A clearer set of targets from the U.S. side—in what areas and regarding what issues the United States insists on being preeminent—would help address this weakness.

The second aspect is the need to *maintain discipline in imposing consequences for malfeasance*. When adversaries and competitors are waiting in the wings to fill gaps that the United States leaves, there can be a U.S. instinct to seek comity and compromise. Creating credibility for U.S. parameters worldwide is more important than any single deal or any single relationship. Communicating this effectively to partners and allies is both delicate and difficult, although a more streamlined set of priorities should ease this task. When the U.S. response is both clear and expected, it may become less necessary over time. In this regard, the United States already has demonstrated important guardrails on Middle Eastern states' Chinese ties. For example, an agreement to sell the F-35 fighter to the UAE has been delayed, reportedly because of U.S. concerns that the UAE's installation of Huawei's 5G telecommunications network would open the door to deeper Chinese understandings of U.S. weapons capabilities. The Emiratis suspended talks over the deal in December 2021, and the agreement may not go through at all. Both sides have expressed their limits, and each appears willing to walk away from a significant agreement that each side wanted.

The third aspect is *being willing to invest in incentives*. Priorities help here, but equally important is a sense of both empathy toward regional governments as well as creativity. The Middle East is looking at profound change in the coming decades as young graduates flood the workforce and the energy transition upends economies. In the near term, cheap Chinese infrastructure can buy political support, but long-term political survival requires solutions with technical, educational, vocational, and business components. The United States has a considerable comparative advantage in these areas. China builds things for money and repatriates the profits to China. U.S. companies invest in people and processes, and they develop management cadres that endure for decades. The legacy of Aramco, which began as a consortium of four U.S. oil companies, is instructive in this regard. It became an increasingly Saudi company that for decades has produced ministers and the country's top technical, engineering, and management talent. There are few major projects in the kingdom that do not have leadership that encompasses at least some Aramco alumni, and Aramco is a company that is shot through with U.S. DNA. As the region prepares for the coming transition, it will need an invigorated cadre of people and institutions that stay in the region, not foreign construction workers who return home to China.

When combined with the possibility that some adversaries, such as Iran, may have an even harder time with these challenges and provoke additional security threats as they struggle, the U.S. security proposition, when embedded in a broader economic growth relationship, becomes even stronger. Although the sentiment in the United States often seems to trend toward divesting from the Middle East, investments tied to encouraging closer ties are more appropriate.

Counterintuitively, the energy transition appears destined to enrich the region in the near term, as low-cost production (in terms both of dollars and carbon emissions) will give Middle Eastern producers a larger share of global markets, even as those markets are shrinking. Awareness of the challenges ahead is also making regional leaders especially focused on their long-term sustainability. China's own economic problems, partly self-inflicted during the coronavirus pandemic, dim China's luster. As the region went through a period of writing off the United States and its sustained interest,

its sense of comfort and entitlement has diminished. A focused U.S. effort would not need to be expensive, and it could reap broad returns.

Connected to all of this is a need to bring the U.S. public along. The United States cannot effectively compete with China in the Middle East when many Americans are hostile to U.S. involvement there. Decades of war have persuaded the U.S. public that the Middle East's most serious challenges have military solutions, and they resent putting U.S. soldiers' lives at risk in exchange for arms sales. The Middle East will remain vital to the global economy and to global security for decades to come. Even if the United States is principally focused on China, China and the world will have a strong focus on the Middle East, and the United States will need one too.

Conclusion

“**W**e have to find an alternative to condescendingly screaming at people not to follow the China model,” a U.S. military veteran with long experience in the Middle East explained. “I think that liberal democracy, capitalist democracy, scares the shit out of them. It’s not entirely consistent with their culture and their history . . . and it was brought there by the colonizers.”¹³⁸

Yet, for many in the United States, it is unimaginable that the U.S. model of economic and political development would not have universal appeal. Small minorities with financial or political stakes in the status quo would be expected to defend their privilege, but the masses should be naturally pro-American. After all, for many in the United States, the country is a “city upon a hill,” as John Winthrop admonished fellow New Englanders almost 400 years ago—some combination of a manifestation of divine providence and a model for global emulation.

After World War II, Americans took their missionary heritage and set out to replicate U.S. conditions abroad. U.S. officials were convinced that securing the country required blocking Marxist inroads in the developing world and expanding the circle of freedom to reach the billions who lived there. The U.S. historical experience was their template for using economic and political development to help prosecute the Cold War.

After the Cold War ended and a unipolar world emerged, echoes of the same instinct to equate global economic prosperity and freedom with U.S. security emerged after 9/11. The Bush administration made unprecedented efforts—and investments—to spread democratic institutions and improve governance throughout the Middle East. Speaking to the National Endowment for

Democracy in 2003, President George W. Bush argued, “Freedom is worth fighting for, dying for, and standing for—and the advance of freedom leads to peace.”¹³⁹ He added his belief that “the prosperity, and social vitality and technological progress of a people are directly determined by [the] extent of their liberty,” and the rise of middle classes strong enough to protect their rights contributes to the spread of freedom.¹⁴⁰

Similarly, U.S. officials had confidence that economic growth would help guide “China’s peaceful rise.” In the estimation of then deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick in 2005, “China does not believe that its future depends on overturning the fundamental order of the international system. In fact, quite the reverse: Chinese leaders have decided that their success depends on being networked with the modern world.”¹⁴¹ As a more integrated China became more prosperous, Zoellick suggested, China would open up internally, because “closed politics cannot be a permanent feature of Chinese society. It is simply not sustainable—as economic growth continues, better-off Chinese will want a greater say in their future, and pressure builds for political reform.”¹⁴²

The narrative then, through 75 years of U.S. policy, was that the world was ineluctably moving toward greater freedom, prosperity, and peace. U.S. policy to promote imitation of the U.S. path would hasten that journey.

China has had a different narrative, predicated on the country assuming its rightful place in world affairs after more than a century of humiliation and subjugation. China has had no interest in following a U.S. path, nor has it thought one was necessary. Instead, China has been cautious and circumspect while pushing its global rise. It has led with trade, touted its embrace of “win-win solutions,” and widely advertised its commitment to noninterference in the domestic affairs of its partners.

The Middle East is an especially sensitive case for China. The country’s economic growth depends on imported energy, about half of which comes from the Middle East. Yet, China recognizes that the United States has been the overwhelmingly dominant power in the region for more than a half-century, with an unequaled military and diplomatic presence. China is wary of conflict with the United States in the Middle East, and it neither seeks to compete head-to-head with the United States nor to displace it. Instead, China’s regional strategy is to make its own inroads in the region while neither getting bogged down nor tipping the Middle East into instability. Doing so means enticing countries currently aligned with the United States to adopt a more unaligned posture, using state-directed economic engagement as its calling card. China explicitly contrasts itself with the United States, noting that as a state it can move more quickly and predictably, that it neither second-guesses nor lectures to its partners, and that its goal is not to remake them in China’s own image.

The vehicle for much of this is the impression—probably stronger in the Middle East than in China itself—that there is a China model for radical economic transformation without an accompanying social and political disruption. The “China experience,” as some Chinese prefer to call it, is an impressive one: decades of double-digit growth accompanied by huge investments in industrialization and massive internal migration. Yet, Arab states impressed with China’s

remarkable rise often seem more interested in China's outcome rather than the path it took to get there, and China has little interest in inspiring imitation.

Instead, what is important to both China and the Arab states is undermining the presumed Western monopoly on pathways to development. Societies premised on Lockean notions of natural rights, the sanctity of the individual, and the centrality of private property are understood to be but one of an array of options. The Chinese experience gives Arab states leverage to resist Western efforts to reshape their societies, introduces what the Chinese presumably see as a useful friction between Arab states and the West, and adds luster to bilateral cooperation with China.

For the United States and its allies, a proper assessment of the situation is the first step to addressing it. China is not trying to supplant the United States, it is trying to supplement it. U.S. partners and allies in the Middle East—and the region contains eight “major non-NATO allies” of the United States—are similarly seeking to supplement their U.S. relationship. They partly want military equipment the United States is reluctant to sell, and they partly want investment and financing for capital development projects. Even more, though, they want to be courted, to not be taken for granted, and to be able to pursue benefits from every corner. Just as all four of President Donald Trump's addresses to the UN General Assembly called for the United States to pursue an “America first” strategy, and for every other country to do the same, virtually all Middle Eastern states believe they would benefit from more aggressively pursuing their own individual interests and adopting positions of greater nonalignment.

Context matters here. No Middle Eastern country is seeking to follow a China model with any fidelity; at the same time, no country thinks it is either realistic or desirable to take a purely American path. No Middle Eastern country considers itself to be “premodern,” and as a consequence, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century clarity that inspired countries such as Turkey and Japan to pursue radical modernization along the lines of the Soviet Union or imperial Germany has yielded to a muddle of incremental options. Governments are seeking to grow their strength, balancing efficiency and effectiveness with stability, security, and resources. They see improved governance as a tool with both costs and benefits, and they see it as obtainable irrespective of whether they follow a more authoritarian or liberal path. Indeed, there are aspects in which China's governance outperforms the United States. These countries view themselves not as choosing between options but among them, experimenting with contradictory initiatives in hopes of making gradual but steady improvements in an increasingly crowded and noisy policy environment.

To many in the Middle East, pure imitation of the U.S. path is both unwise and unattainable. It relies on citizens who are entirely different from their own, in a robust legal and policy environment and a vibrant economy. For years, Arab officials visiting Washington have averred that U.S. democracy took 200 years to reach its current state and that they need a century and a half to catch up. The Arab uprisings of 2011 continue to reverberate in the region. In places such as Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen, governments continue to struggle to assert control over their entire territory; in other places, governments see potential revolutionaries continuing to lurk. The United States needs to be sensitive to the charge that it is both sanctimonious and reckless, lecturing partners while leading them into anarchy. Under current conditions, many regional governments consider mainstream

U.S. advice to constrain government authority, liberalize political activity, dispense with patronage, expand free speech, and empower political opponents to be madness.

But the United States is not without options. The U.S. government needs to be clearer that in seeking a world that is more prosperous and stable, it is not seeking mere imitation. Every country will treat its own issues in its own way, but should countries seek partnership, the United States is both a superior choice and a possible one. It needs to better articulate the benefits of a closer alignment, the costs of a looser one, and the criteria by which closeness is judged. The answer to this question is likely to vary from administration to administration, which itself will promote some hedging behavior from regional partners. Even so, a clearer framework—and one that allows for both resilience and dynamism—would be helpful.

Already we have seen the U.S. government articulate redlines for Chinese engagement, particularly on issues of technology, infrastructure, and military hardware. This is appropriate. Yet, the United States should not seek to list comprehensively every activity it frowns upon, implicitly encouraging partners to come right up to the line of what is permitted and what is forbidden. The United States should be clearer in outlining principles and examples, pushing partner states to judge what is consistent with acceptable boundaries and what is outside of them.

Even more important than communicating the costs of some kinds of Chinese ties, the United States needs to help its partners better understand the unique value proposition of closer U.S. ties, especially when it comes to the development of human capital that will shape the region's future in the next five decades. China's offerings in this regard are weak, not only in terms of university education, but also in terms of developing management experience. China's record of empowering local employees in the Middle East and grooming them to take on leadership positions pales in comparison to the United States and its allies. While there is certainly a role for Chinese-style industrial development in countries' overall plans, it is hard to imagine it provides a pathway toward national prosperity.

In science and technology, a key to future prosperity, Western science—especially in the United States—developed a robust Covid-19 vaccination. Leaving aside the question of Chinese officials' role in containing the Covid-19 virus in its earliest stages, China's broad efforts to promote a homegrown vaccine and distribute it widely made good headlines but not good public health outcomes. Reports of widespread vaccine hesitancy throughout the Arab world to take the Chinese vaccine validate the fundamental U.S. value proposition: the United States provides robust solutions to complicated problems.

On economic issues as well, a U.S.-guided path toward more open markets, a well-functioning banking system, and a capable and well-educated workforce may not provide the “sugar rush” of results that directed government grants (or in the case of wealthy Gulf states, government spending) provides, but it provides benefits that endure. U.S. government officials have no monopoly on wisdom in this area, and they need to work hand-in-hand with private sector leaders in business and banking to develop robust systems, but as U.S. allies in East Asia demonstrate, these patterns develop virtuous circles that endure.

The superiority of such systems is likely to become more evident as the “Chinese economic miracle” recedes in the public memory, the Chinese economy cools off in the post-Covid era, and China begins to grapple with the economic realities of a shrinking population. Strong patterns of growth in U.S. partners such as India, some of which are being boosted by Gulf investment, can help reinforce this trend.

To take advantage of these opportunities, the United States will need to continue to push for ways to lower the transaction costs of partnering with the United States. A combination of law, regulation, and U.S. bureaucratic inertia can mean that straightforward transactions can take months or years to implement. Chinese officials regularly approach Arab officials with proposals for economic cooperation—one said, “I receive a proposal every week”—while sometimes explicitly “red-teaming” the U.S. government response by outlining the timeline and conditions of U.S. cooperation while explicitly outlining a supposedly superior Chinese offer.¹⁴³ Within the parameters of law, the U.S. government should seek ways to advance the agility of its decisionmaking process. It should explore amendments to laws that would speed up implementation while preserving necessary checks on abuse. Too often, Arab officials say, the United States acts as if it has a monopoly. One of China’s advantages to them is that it reminds them that they have a choice.

Most importantly, though, the United States needs to remember that Middle Eastern states are not making a choice as they did during the Cold War. There is no Iron Curtain, and the dilemma is not to choose sides. These states see themselves in a dynamic market in which they are constantly seeking to assess their own worth and sense the demand signals. In this, the United States has significant advantages alongside some vulnerabilities. No country is seeking to fall into a Chinese orbit, and China has no interest in creating an orbit into which they can fall. Likewise, few seek to isolate themselves from the United States. The United States is likely to remain predominant in the region as long as it seeks to do so.

Yet, China is seeking to chip away at U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, undermining efforts to strengthen a U.S.-led global system that the Chinese government views as directed against it. The idea of a China model to which states can aspire helps advance Chinese goals in this regard, if only to entice states to push back on the United States and draw closer to China.

As China and the United States are each other’s largest trading partners, both sides understand that competition, contestation, and cooperation necessarily coexist. It will be so in the Middle East as well. Sharpening understandings of the value of close U.S. partnership, lowering the costs of maintaining U.S. partnership, and clarifying the consequences of undermining U.S. partnerships in the Middle East provide the best path forward for U.S. policy.

About the Author

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