

RECONFIGURING REGIONAL ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH THE RETURN OF TRUMP AND THE DECLINE OF AMERICAN MULTILATERALISM

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Abstract

This article analyzes the transformation of American foreign policy in the Middle East following the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024, with particular focus on the decline of multilateral norms, the resurgence of unilateralism, and the reconfiguration of hegemonic structures in the region. Through a critical realist and post-hegemonic lens, this study interrogates how Trump's strategic preferences reshape power relations and generate institutional erosion in key areas such as nuclear diplomacy, Israeli-Iranian rivalry, the marginalization of Palestine, and the shifting architecture of energy and technological dependency. By examining these processes through structural mapping and scenario analysis, the paper reveals how transactional alliances and asymmetrical coercion are replacing liberal internationalist frameworks as the main instruments of U.S. engagement. The research identifies three overlapping developments: the fragmentation of regional alignments, the intensification of geopolitical contestation through China and Russia, and the weakening of institutional platforms for conflict mediation. Empirical evidence from alliance behavior, economic infrastructure, and discursive legitimation demonstrates how regional actors are simultaneously recalibrating their autonomy and reproducing new dependencies. This study contributes to broader debates on hegemonic transition, multipolar instability, and normative contestation in international order. It argues that rather than restoring a coherent regional equilibrium, Trump's policies accelerate a transition toward modular, fragmented, and strategically ambiguous configurations of power. In this context, the Middle East emerges not as a passive site of superpower rivalry, but as an active laboratory for pluralistic experiments in sovereignty, resistance, and regional reordering. The paper concludes by offering conceptual tools for understanding emergent patterns of order in the absence of a stable hegemon.

Keyword

hegemony, diplomacy, conflict, security, power, trump

A. Introduction

The Middle East stands as one of the most strategically significant yet persistently unstable regions in the contemporary global order. For more than a century, it has served as the intersection of imperial ambition, ideological confrontation, and economic rivalry (Beck, 2019). What renders the region uniquely consequential is not only its vast energy reserves or its religious symbolism but its role in structuring global security hierarchies. In this context, American foreign policy has consistently functioned as both arbiter and agitator, oscillating between frameworks of stabilisation and disruption. The return of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2024 reignites long-standing anxieties regarding the direction and durability of United States engagement with the Middle East, particularly as competing powers seek to reshape the regional order (Tahboub, 2023).

During his first term (2017–2021), Trump inaugurated a foreign policy that diverged sharply from the liberal internationalism of previous administrations. Key decisions such as the withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and the negotiation of the Abraham Accords signaled a return to raw geopolitical calculus. These moves were underpinned by a worldview that privileges unilateral interest over collective security, state sovereignty over transnational governance. Empirically, these decisions reshaped the dynamics of diplomacy in the region. The JCPOA withdrawal intensified nuclear brinkmanship with Iran. The Abraham Accords realigned Arab-Israeli relations while marginalising the Palestinian cause. As of 2025, the long-term impacts of these decisions continue to unfold amid new regional escalations and great power competition (Lynch, 2016).

Despite the gravity of these shifts, academic responses to Trump's foreign policy have largely remained episodic and fragmented. Most analyses focus on specific crises or bilateral relations without offering a systematic framework to understand the strategic logic behind them. There is a tendency to reduce the Trump Doctrine to a personality-driven aberration, overlooking its structural continuities with broader shifts in American grand strategy. This paper challenges such simplifications by treating Trump's approach as part of a deeper transformation in the logic of U.S. hegemony—one that replaces liberal legitimation with transactional dominance. It is within this conceptual horizon that the article interrogates not only what Trump does, but what his return represents for global power realignments (Ali et al., 2020).

The first major research gap lies in the absence of comprehensive foresight on how Trump's second term might transform the geopolitical architecture of the Middle East. Much of the existing literature evaluates past consequences but stops short of theorising future trajectories. Yet foresight is necessary, particularly when Trump's policies have proven to be accelerants of instability. The second gap concerns the lack of integrated analysis across nuclear diplomacy, alliance politics, and normative legitimacy. Studies often

isolate these domains instead of connecting them within a framework that accounts for hegemonic transition and regional contestation. This paper seeks to address these interrelated lacunae by situating U.S. foreign policy within a changing international structure marked by multipolar resistance and normative fragmentation (Kochegurov, 2023).

Further compounding these gaps is the failure to consider how regional actors have recalibrated their foreign policy autonomy in response to perceived American volatility. Countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are no longer passive recipients of U.S. influence. They are actively diversifying alliances, including closer ties with Russia and China. These realignments suggest a growing fluidity in the Middle East's diplomatic landscape, where U.S. reliability is increasingly questioned. The literature has yet to fully examine the extent to which Trump's policies empower non-Western powers to fill strategic vacuums left by American retrenchment. This dynamic warrants urgent theoretical and empirical attention if we are to understand the future of global influence in the region (Kadhim Almaeeni, 2023).

Empirical indicators already reveal a pattern of strategic destabilisation linked to Trump's foreign policy. The U.S. exit from multilateral frameworks has emboldened Iran to resume high-grade uranium enrichment, triggering renewed fears of nuclear proliferation. The ongoing violence in Gaza and the political fragmentation of the West Bank reflect the cumulative failures of diplomatic engagement. Meanwhile, American arms deals with Gulf states continue to deepen militarisation rather than encourage dialogue. These developments are not isolated incidents. They are symptoms of a broader pattern wherein power projection is prioritised over peacebuilding. Understanding this pattern is key to assessing whether U.S. strategy under Trump functions as a stabilising force or a catalyst for deeper chaos (Dombrowski & Reich, 2017).

In addition to these regional symptoms, the global context in which U.S. foreign policy operates has also shifted dramatically. The simultaneous rise of China as an economic hegemon and Russia as a strategic spoiler introduces new variables into Middle Eastern dynamics. Both states have increased their presence through arms sales, infrastructure investments, and diplomatic support. The erosion of Western institutional leadership opens space for rival power blocs, and Trump's disregard for multilateralism only accelerates this transition. The Middle East, long dependent on U.S. security guarantees, is thus entering a phase of intensified multipolar contestation. This context necessitates new conceptual tools to explain how power, legitimacy, and order are being renegotiated (Siswanto, 2018).

The main objective of this study is to map the structural and ideological implications of Trump's return to power for the Middle East. It explores how unilateralism and transactionalism interact with regional fault lines such as the Iran-Israel rivalry, the future of Palestine, and the energy security agenda.

Rather than simply listing policy changes, the study probes how American hegemony is being reconfigured in response to internal political logics and external pressures. The theoretical ambition is to contribute to ongoing debates on hegemonic transformation by linking regional developments to global systemic shifts. In doing so, it elevates the Middle East from a site of policy impact to a site of conceptual significance.

The urgency of this inquiry lies in its real-time relevance. With conflict zones expanding and multilateral governance weakening, the stakes of misunderstanding U.S. foreign policy are immense. Policy miscalculations in the Middle East can escalate into global confrontations involving nuclear thresholds, proxy warfare, and humanitarian disasters. Moreover, the international community's capacity to intervene is constrained by institutional fatigue and political fragmentation. In such a context, scholarly work must do more than document events. It must theorise consequences and anticipate futures. This article is written in that spirit of intellectual responsibility.

The aim of this paper is analyse its critically examines how Trump's post-2024 foreign policy recalibrates American hegemony in the Middle East. Second, it proposes a conceptual framework that connects unilateralism, regional fragmentation, and normative decline into a coherent account of geopolitical transformation. By blending empirical case analysis with theoretical interpretation, the study aspires to generate insight not only into what is happening, but into why it matters for the future of international order.

B. The Reconfiguration of U.S. Hegemony and the Erosion of Multilateral

The re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 has become a decisive moment for the trajectory of American hegemony in the Middle East. His return revives a set of foreign policy doctrines that are fundamentally antagonistic to multilateralism and collective governance (García, 2021). Unlike earlier U.S. administrations that at least rhetorically acknowledged the value of global cooperation, Trump reasserts a worldview where national sovereignty and strategic utility define foreign engagement. This vision has altered both the practice and perception of U.S. leadership in a region long dependent on American military, economic, and diplomatic guarantees (Hassan, 2017).

Central to this reconfiguration is the abandonment of multilateral frameworks in favor of bilateral and often asymmetrical partnerships. The withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 did not merely signal a policy reversal. It marked a rejection of institutional consensus and the beginning of a more aggressive posture toward Iran. With Trump's return in 2024, this stance is likely to deepen, reinforcing sanctions and military pressure while dismissing negotiated settlements as strategic liabilities. The fallout includes a renewed arms race and the weakening of the International Atomic Energy Agency's monitoring authority in the region (Saragih et al., 2020).

These patterns are mirrored in the United States' treatment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the relocation of the U.S. embassy constituted a radical break from decades of American diplomacy. This move erased any pretense of neutrality and effectively disqualified the U.S. as a credible mediator. It also delegitimized Palestinian claims in international forums. The implications extended beyond symbolism. It entrenched the diplomatic marginalization of Palestine and emboldened Israeli territorial ambitions in the West Bank and beyond (Lee, 2022).

The Abraham Accords represent another milestone in this hegemonic shift. While publicly celebrated as a diplomatic breakthrough, these agreements were brokered through direct inducements to authoritarian regimes. Economic aid, arms deals, and security guarantees were exchanged for normalization with Israel. This framework bypassed regional consensus and reduced diplomacy to transactional exchange. Rather than strengthening regional solidarity or long-term stability, the accords fragmented the Arab position on Palestine and created new hierarchies among Gulf States based on proximity to American power (Raheb, 2021).

Trump's foreign policy also operationalized hegemony through rhetorical delegitimization of multilateral institutions. The United Nations, the European Union, and other international organizations were routinely portrayed as obstacles to American interests. This language was not merely performative. It reshaped global diplomatic norms and encouraged other states to deprioritize institutional mechanisms in favor of direct confrontation or selective engagement. The Middle East absorbed this shift quickly, with regional powers adopting unilateral strategies that mimic American behavior. In this sense, Trump's policy generated not only material consequences but also ideological contagion.

Economic tools further reinforced this mode of coercive hegemony. U.S. sanctions, especially secondary sanctions on non-American firms engaging with Iran, weaponized the global financial system. These instruments punished both adversaries and allies, generating fear and uncertainty across international markets (Yom, 2020). For countries reliant on U.S. trade or banking infrastructure, the choice was binary: align with Washington's interests or face exclusion. This form of leverage destabilized global economic governance and incentivized alternative mechanisms, such as yuan-based oil contracts or barter agreements with Russia and China.

These trends point to a theoretical transition from consensual leadership to enforced compliance. Classic hegemonic stability theory posits that global order is maintained through the provision of public goods and norm-setting (Ahmadian, 2018). Trump's foreign policy, in contrast, offers no such goods. It demands loyalty while offering protection selectively. This is not hegemony through integration but dominance through threat. It redefines American power from a framework of leadership to one of asymmetrical

dependence, where allies comply not because they trust but because they must.

Regional actors have begun adapting to this reconfigured landscape. Turkey, for example, has deepened its engagement with Russia through energy and defense cooperation. Qatar maintains close security relations with the United States but simultaneously expands ties with China and Iran. The UAE pursues an assertive foreign policy independent of Washington's preferences, including interventions in Libya and Sudan. These developments reflect a shift from reliance to strategic hedging. U.S. dominance is no longer accepted as stable or predictable, compelling states to diversify alliances and assert autonomous interests (Jose & Fathun, 2021).

China and Russia have used this strategic uncertainty to expand their presence in the region. China's Belt and Road Initiative and energy investments in Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia position Beijing as a long-term economic partner (Ryzhov et al., 2020). Russia's military presence in Syria and its defense partnerships with Iran provide a counterweight to U.S. military hegemony. While these actors do not yet displace American influence, they complicate its exercise. The multipolar contest in the Middle East reveals the erosion of U.S. centrality, both materially and ideationally ("President Trump Peace Strategy: Emerging Conflict Between Israel and Palestine," 2020).

The reconfiguration of American hegemony under Donald Trump reflects a broader transition in global politics. It is not merely a change in presidential style but a transformation in the logic of engagement. The abandonment of multilateralism, the embrace of coercive instruments, and the normalization of transactional diplomacy have redrawn the strategic architecture of the Middle East. This section has outlined how these shifts manifest empirically and conceptually. What remains is to explore how these developments deepen regional conflict and reshape specific polarities, beginning with the axis between Israel and Iran.

C. The Israel-Iran Polarity and the Rise of Strategic Confrontation

The Israel-Iran rivalry has evolved into one of the most enduring and volatile polarities in the Middle East, reflecting both historical grievances and strategic antagonism. This binary conflict is shaped not only by conventional military threats but by ideological contestations and competing regional visions. Iran's support for non-state actors such as Hezbollah and its sustained hostility toward Israeli statehood stand in direct opposition to Israel's security doctrine, which prioritizes preemptive action and regional deterrence. The intensification of this rivalry under Trump's foreign policy direction has amplified the risk of escalation across multiple theatres including Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf (Krieg, 2017).

Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Iran reshaped the strategic calculations of both adversaries. The withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and the reimposition of crippling sanctions were designed to coerce Iran

into renegotiating its nuclear program and regional behavior. However, the effect was the reverse (Black, 2018). Tehran resumed high-grade uranium enrichment and expanded its ballistic missile development, interpreting American moves as evidence of bad faith. With Trump's return to office, Tehran's leadership has openly signaled its intent to resist any dialogue perceived as surrender. This entrenched posture exacerbates fears of a nuclear arms race and pushes the region further from diplomatic resolution.

Israel's strategic position in this evolving confrontation has become more assertive. Under Trump, Israel received unprecedented political endorsement for its security objectives. These included not only the formal recognition of Jerusalem but the U.S. blessing for territorial expansion and the integration of Israeli defense interests into American Middle East planning. Israeli leadership interpreted this backing as a green light for more aggressive postures toward Iran, including clandestine strikes on Iranian assets in Syria, cyber operations targeting Iranian infrastructure, and the suspected involvement in high-profile assassinations of Iranian scientists (Jeffrey, 2021).

This emerging security doctrine has produced a state of semi-permanent confrontation between Israel and Iran, conducted through proxy warfare and covert operations. In Syria, Israeli airstrikes continue to target Iranian logistical corridors, while Iranian-supported militias entrench themselves near strategic border areas. In Iraq, pro-Iran factions increasingly clash with U.S. and Israeli interests, creating a web of indirect engagements that could escalate with minimal provocation. The operational ambiguity of these encounters blurs the line between deterrence and provocation, eroding the capacity of international norms to regulate military engagement (Ronaldo et al., 2020).

The Gulf region adds another layer of complexity to the Israel-Iran axis. Following the Abraham Accords, Israel has strengthened defense cooperation with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, including intelligence sharing and joint training exercises. These ties are perceived by Iran as part of a larger containment strategy orchestrated by Washington. In response, Iran has accelerated naval operations in the Strait of Hormuz and increased military exercises with China and Russia. The Gulf is thus becoming a frontier where the Israel-Iran rivalry is entangled with global power alignments, raising the stakes of every regional miscalculation (Ronaldo et al., 2020).

Beyond hard power, the conflict is waged through psychological and symbolic strategies. Iran's ideological projection frames Israel as an illegitimate occupier and positions itself as the vanguard of Islamic resistance. Conversely, Israel constructs Iran as a fundamental existential threat whose nuclear ambitions cannot be tolerated. These narratives are deployed to consolidate domestic legitimacy, mobilize regional sympathies, and influence international discourse. The intensification of this ideological war shapes public opinion in neighboring countries and constrains the diplomatic space for negotiation and compromise (Fukutomi, 2024).

Cyber warfare has emerged as a key arena in this confrontation. Israeli intelligence services have conducted sophisticated cyberattacks on Iranian nuclear facilities and infrastructure systems, most notably through operations such as Stuxnet and subsequent campaigns. Iran has responded in kind, targeting Israeli water systems, transportation networks, and private sector servers. These attacks signify a new level of strategic entanglement, where state actors are locked in continuous digital engagement without clear thresholds for retaliation or regulation under international law (Viveash, 2021).

The Israel-Iran polarity also disrupts traditional alliance configurations. Turkey's ambivalence, Qatar's balancing posture, and Saudi Arabia's internal recalibration show that regional actors are not uniformly aligned within a simple binary. Many states are simultaneously negotiating economic ties with Iran while cultivating security relations with Israel or the United States. This creates a landscape of layered contradictions, where formal alliances coexist with covert dialogues and parallel channels of diplomacy. Such fragmentation reduces predictability and makes regional crisis management increasingly difficult (Fida, 2021).

Regional security architectures have failed to contain this polarity in part due to their exclusionary design. The absence of an inclusive multilateral forum that involves both Israel and Iran as equal actors perpetuates a cycle of mutual isolation and militarisation. Initiatives such as the Gulf Cooperation Council or the Arab League are either politically biased or structurally limited. Meanwhile, efforts led by external powers are viewed with suspicion by both parties, particularly when tied to strategic realignments. This institutional void fosters unilateralism and incentivizes preemptive security doctrines over negotiated frameworks.

Efforts to de-escalate tensions are further complicated by the blurred distinctions between state and non-state actors. Iran's reliance on transnational militias and Israel's informal partnerships with private military contractors and cyber units contribute to a conflict environment that defies conventional diplomacy. Interventions are often plausibly deniable, and accountability mechanisms are weak. As a result, diplomatic proposals for confidence-building measures or arms control lack credibility and enforcement mechanisms. Without clear state-level channels, the confrontation remains diffuse, decentralized, and deeply embedded in the architecture of regional insecurity.

D. Colonial Continuities in Contemporary Trade Regimes

The Abraham Accords, initiated in 2020 under the Trump administration, were widely presented as a groundbreaking step toward peace in the Middle East. These agreements formalized diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab states, including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and later Sudan. While framed as a triumph of pragmatism over historical

enmity, the accords signify a deeper geopolitical shift in which Palestinian representation and agency are increasingly sidelined. The new alliances prioritize strategic and economic cooperation with Israel at the expense of the long-standing Arab consensus on Palestinian statehood (Alakrash et al., 2020).

The departure from the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 marked a critical rupture in the regional diplomatic landscape. That initiative had offered normalization with Israel conditional upon the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state. By contrast, the Abraham Accords detached normalization from Palestinian demands, effectively rewarding Israel without extracting political concessions related to occupation or settlements. This decoupling transformed Palestine from a central issue of pan-Arab solidarity into a peripheral concern. The symbolic and practical consequences of this transformation are reflected in the diminishing leverage of Palestinian leadership in both regional and global forums.

From Israel's perspective, the Abraham Accords legitimized its geopolitical vision without compromising on its core security objectives. The accords allowed Israel to expand its strategic depth through intelligence cooperation, arms deals, and trade partnerships with Gulf monarchies. These relationships have strengthened Israel's deterrent capabilities and regional influence, particularly in the fields of cyber defense, aerospace technology, and energy infrastructure (Ryzhov et al., 2020). As Israel integrates into the broader security architecture of the Gulf, the rationale for revisiting unresolved issues with the Palestinians continues to erode.

Palestinian political institutions were caught unprepared for this diplomatic realignment. The Palestinian Authority, already weakened by internal divisions and declining international support, struggled to articulate an effective response. Its denunciation of the accords was met with indifference by many Arab governments, indicating a clear shift in regional priorities. The Gaza-based leadership under Hamas, while rhetorically more defiant, has likewise failed to present a viable alternative strategy. This institutional fragmentation within Palestinian politics has compounded their marginalization and reduced their capacity to coordinate responses or reassert demands in the international arena ("President Trump Peace Strategy: Emerging Conflict Between Israel and Palestine," 2020).

The reconfiguration of regional alliances has not only weakened Palestinian diplomacy but has also emboldened Israeli expansionism. Since the signing of the accords, settlement activity in the West Bank has accelerated. The lack of unified Arab pressure has created a permissive environment for policies that deepen the occupation. Moreover, the normalization of relations has been accompanied by significant arms deals between the United States and its Gulf partners, further militarizing the regional environment and diluting the moral clarity of Palestinian claims. The balance of leverage has shifted decisively in Israel's favor, with few incentives remaining for negotiation or restraint.

At the discursive level, the Abraham Accords have rebranded the logic of normalization. They present regional stability and economic development as overriding concerns, portraying the Palestinian issue as an unfortunate but secondary obstacle. This narrative aligns with broader authoritarian discourses in the region that equate dissent with instability and prioritize regime survival over justice. By adopting this framework, Arab signatories of the accords have repositioned themselves as modernizers willing to break with outdated ideological commitments. Palestine is thus reframed not as a matter of decolonization, but as a legacy grievance incompatible with present-day strategic calculus.

Public opinion in many Arab societies, however, reveals a disjuncture between elite diplomacy and popular sentiment. Surveys conducted across Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, and Kuwait show strong disapproval of normalization efforts that bypass Palestinian rights. This divergence highlights the fragile legitimacy of the accords among domestic constituencies and raises questions about their long-term sustainability. Nonetheless, the absence of meaningful political opposition or democratic accountability in most signatory states means that popular resistance is unlikely to translate into policy shifts, at least in the near term (Tahboub, 2023).

International responses to the Abraham Accords have also been shaped by strategic pragmatism. Western powers, particularly the United States and several European countries, have welcomed the accords as a model for conflict de-escalation. Little attention has been paid to their exclusionary design or the risks they pose to Palestinian political viability. Multilateral institutions have remained largely silent, preoccupied with broader global crises. This silence reinforces the perception that Palestine no longer commands the diplomatic urgency it once did, further entrenching their marginal position in the evolving regional order.

The economic dimension of the accords reflects a consolidation of elite interests across borders. Investments in tourism, logistics, defense manufacturing, and fintech have created new circuits of capital that bypass Palestinian territories entirely. These networks not only exclude Palestine from economic integration but also create material incentives for the maintenance of the status quo. Business elites in Tel Aviv, Abu Dhabi, and Manama increasingly share interests that are incompatible with disruptive demands for justice or territorial restitution (Beck, 2019). In this context, economic normalization serves as a vehicle for political exclusion.

The Abraham Accords have introduced a new equilibrium in Middle Eastern diplomacy, one that systematically deprioritizes Palestinian sovereignty in favor of strategic convergence between Israel and authoritarian Arab regimes. The logic of this transformation is not merely tactical but structural, embedding asymmetry into the region's political and economic systems. While the accords have shifted the landscape of diplomacy and

security, their long-term implications for justice, legitimacy, and stability remain unresolved.

E. Political Economy of US Tariff Regimes

The gradual withdrawal of the United States from direct military engagement in the Middle East marks a significant inflection point in the region's geopolitical configuration. This trend, already visible under the Obama administration, accelerated during Trump's first term and is expected to continue in his second presidency. Under the rubric of strategic retrenchment, the U.S. has reduced its troop presence in Iraq, repositioned forces in Syria, and scaled back commitments to stabilization efforts in Afghanistan and Yemen. While often framed as a pivot toward the Indo-Pacific, these decisions reflect deeper shifts in Washington's threat perception and resource allocation priorities (Huda & Fadhat, 2022).

As American military visibility declines, regional actors have begun to recalibrate their strategic behavior. States such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey no longer assume that the U.S. will serve as a dependable security guarantor. This recognition has driven a wave of defense modernization programs, unilateral interventions, and diplomatic diversification. The Saudi-led war in Yemen, Turkey's incursions into northern Syria, and Emirati operations in the Horn of Africa all indicate a turn toward autonomous security strategies. These actions are not coordinated but rather reflect competitive assertions of regional influence (Bashirov, 2023).

The U.S. withdrawal has also affected the credibility of traditional alliances. Gulf monarchies, while formally maintaining ties with Washington, have expressed growing dissatisfaction with American inconsistency. This sentiment is reinforced by episodes such as the muted U.S. response to attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019 and the chaotic withdrawal from Kabul in 2021. Such moments have revealed vulnerabilities in the architecture of deterrence that once underpinned American dominance. As doubts grow regarding the reliability of U.S. commitments, regional actors seek alternatives that reduce strategic dependence (Keefer, 2004).

This strategic uncertainty has opened space for the penetration of external powers. Russia has capitalized on the U.S. vacuum by deepening its military entrenchment in Syria and cultivating ties with Egypt, Libya, and Iran. Through arms sales, energy diplomacy, and political coordination, Moscow presents itself as a pragmatic partner unconstrained by normative expectations. Meanwhile, China has adopted a subtler yet equally consequential approach. Its Belt and Road Initiative has established economic footholds across the region, including port infrastructure in Oman, oil investments in Iraq, and strategic cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Iran.

These external engagements are not merely opportunistic. They reflect a broader recalibration of global power in which the Middle East is no longer viewed as an exclusive American sphere of influence. Chinese and Russian

policies do not seek to displace the United States through direct confrontation but to construct parallel channels of influence that undermine American centrality. The result is not a binary shift from unipolarity to multipolarity but a more fragmented and layered geopolitical terrain. This fragmentation complicates coordination on issues such as counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and maritime security.

The diversification of external alignments has further encouraged intra-regional rivalry. States previously aligned under the U.S. umbrella now explore divergent trajectories. Qatar has strengthened ties with Turkey and Iran, positioning itself as an independent broker. The United Arab Emirates expands economic links with China while preserving security cooperation with Israel and the United States. Egypt balances its relationship with Russia through arms procurement while relying on Western financial institutions for economic stabilization. These multipronged alignments reflect a pragmatic regionalism rooted in flexibility rather than ideological allegiance.

Non-state actors have also adapted to the altered strategic landscape. Hezbollah, the Houthis, and various Iraqi militias operate within a context of diminished U.S. oversight and increasing support from alternative patrons. These groups exploit governance vacuums and territorial ambiguities to expand their operational capabilities. As the role of conventional military deterrence recedes, asymmetric actors gain influence, further complicating state-centered approaches to regional order. The fluidity between state and non-state spheres is no longer an anomaly but a persistent feature of the security environment (Furse, 2023).

The economic consequences of U.S. withdrawal are also visible. Military disengagement often coincides with reductions in aid, development funding, and diplomatic mediation. Countries that once relied on U.S.-backed reconstruction programs must now turn to other sources, often with different conditionalities. China's infrastructure loans, Russia's security-for-energy exchanges, and Gulf investment initiatives all shape development priorities in ways that may diverge from Western norms. These shifts create new dependencies and reshape the material foundations of regional power.

At the discursive level, the retreat of American engagement has challenged the narrative of U.S. indispensability. Regional media and intellectuals increasingly question the legitimacy and coherence of American foreign policy. The erosion of the liberal internationalist discourse has left a vacuum filled by competing ideologies, from authoritarian developmentalism to civilizational narratives advanced by Iran and Turkey. These discursive shifts influence elite decision-making as well as public opinion, creating a more pluralistic but also more polarized political field.

The retraction of American presence is not synonymous with irrelevance. The U.S. retains significant military assets, diplomatic leverage, and economic tools in the Middle East. However, its dominance is no longer taken for granted. The emergence of strategic autonomy, external power

competition, and multidirectional alignments reveals a region in transition. The patterns outlined above constitute the preconditions for the emergence of a reconfigured geopolitical order, one that resists the hierarchies of the post-Cold War period and defies neat categorization.

F. Epistemic Shifts in Global Trade Narratives

The fragmentation of the Middle East's security architecture in the wake of America's shifting foreign policy posture demands a renewed theoretical interrogation. Classic models of hegemonic stability theory, long used to explain U.S. engagement in the region, increasingly fall short in accounting for the diffusion of power and the weakening of norm-based leadership. Under Trump, American hegemony moves further away from consent-based order toward a framework based on coercion, asymmetry, and selective transactionalism. This rupture invites deeper reflection on the theoretical tools needed to understand the emergent regional system (Dakhli & Bonnecase, 2021).

Hegemonic stability theory posits that a dominant power maintains international order by providing public goods and guaranteeing systemic stability. However, in the context of the Middle East, the provision of such goods has been replaced by a strategy of alliance manipulation, economic sanctions, and militarized containment. The result is a strategic environment where legitimacy is contested and where regional order is no longer underwritten by universal principles but constructed through narrow alignments. This shift is not merely tactical but structural, reflecting a broader transition from liberal internationalism to competitive regionalism (Cuyler & Young, 2022).

Critical realism offers an alternative lens through which to interpret these developments. Unlike rationalist models that assume stable interests and predictable behavior, critical realism focuses on underlying structural contradictions and the agency of both state and non-state actors. In this view, Trump's policies accelerate a deeper contradiction within the liberal order, wherein the discourse of freedom and security is operationalized through exclusion, hierarchy, and imperial logic. Regional actors are not merely reacting to U.S. retrenchment; they are actively constituting new patterns of alignment, resistance, and strategic autonomy.

The concept of multipolarity must also be rethought in light of these dynamics. The entry of China and Russia into the Middle East does not signal a balanced polycentric system. Instead, it introduces uneven spheres of influence where economic, technological, and security domains are shaped by different power constellations. The simultaneous presence of competing great powers generates a layered structure where states navigate multiple centers of authority. This complexity undermines the possibility of a coherent regional order and instead promotes a patchwork of overlapping and at times contradictory arrangements.

Regionalism in this environment is no longer driven by ideology or pan-national identities but by pragmatic interests and elite survival strategies. Security coalitions such as the Abraham Accords are less about collective identity and more about regime consolidation, threat balancing, and technological access. Similarly, subregional cooperation between Iran, Iraq, and Syria is shaped by logistics and strategic depth rather than shared ideological commitments. These patterns suggest that regional order is increasingly modular, context-specific, and shaped by elite calculations rather than grand designs (Tilt, 2016).

Scenarios for future regional configurations can be developed along three broad trajectories. The first is restoration, in which the United States reasserts leadership through multilateral diplomacy and security guarantees, attempting to rebuild trust and reinvigorate institutional frameworks. The second is fragmentation, where the decline of hegemonic coherence leads to intensified rivalries, proxy wars, and institutional decay. The third is renegotiated order, wherein regional actors and external powers establish new forums for coordination that reflect changed distributions of power and interest. These scenarios are not mutually exclusive and may unfold in hybrid or sequential forms.

Scenario-based foresight is especially necessary given the volatility of current alignments. The intensification of the Israel-Iran polarity, the uncertain future of energy markets, and the weakness of regional institutions all contribute to an unpredictable landscape. Rather than predicting a singular outcome, this section emphasizes the utility of scenario thinking as a method for identifying contingencies, points of rupture, and potential pathways for norm reconstruction. The value of such an approach lies in its capacity to anticipate strategic behavior under conditions of systemic ambiguity (Alshareef, 2024).

The question of norm-making in this restructured regional order remains contested. With the erosion of U.S.-led liberal norms, new standards of legitimacy are being shaped by authoritarian developmentalism, religious nationalism, and techno-authoritarian models. These competing normative frameworks challenge the universality of Western liberal governance and introduce pluralistic visions of sovereignty, resistance, and regional cooperation. The Middle East thus becomes a site of normative experimentation, where rules are not simply applied but redefined in situ (Farias, 2020).

Academic discourse must adapt accordingly. Existing theories of regional order have often privileged stability over transformation and structure over contingency. The current moment demands a shift toward theories that are historically grounded, critically reflexive, and open to indeterminacy. This includes greater attention to the role of temporality, affect, and political memory in shaping strategic behavior. It also requires

methodological pluralism that incorporates ethnographic, discursive, and materialist approaches to international politics in the Middle East.

The emergence of a new regional order in the Middle East is not a matter of passive evolution but of active construction. Actors are engaged in a continuous process of contesting, negotiating, and institutionalizing power relations. The future of this order depends on the interplay of material capabilities, normative claims, and geopolitical imagination. Understanding this interplay requires moving beyond traditional theories of power and instead embracing a more complex, historically attuned, and critically engaged account of regional transformation.

G. Conclusion

The shifting trajectory of American foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly under Donald Trump's renewed leadership, presents both a moment of reckoning and an opportunity for conceptual reorientation. The regional order, long sustained by the asymmetrical guarantees of U.S. hegemony, now operates under conditions of strategic ambiguity, institutional fragmentation, and normative pluralism. These changes should not be interpreted solely as a decline of American power, but rather as a transformation in its modalities of exercise. Power is increasingly projected not through stability and consensus, but through volatility and strategic fragmentation. Recognizing this shift requires scholars and policymakers alike to rethink the very frameworks used to evaluate regional dynamics.

One of the most pressing imperatives is the reactivation of multilateral institutions and inclusive diplomatic platforms that reflect the multipolar realities of the region. This includes not only state-based mechanisms but also transnational civil society, epistemic communities, and technical coalitions capable of addressing issues such as energy transition, digital security, and conflict mediation. While American policy may currently trend toward unilateralism and short-termism, there remains space for counterbalancing initiatives that prioritize regional ownership and normative reconstruction. These alternatives must be rooted in principles of equity, reciprocity, and historical accountability if they are to gain traction in a post-hegemonic environment.

Future research on Middle Eastern order must move beyond crisis-response models and engage with the *longue durée* of structural transformation. This entails foregrounding the entanglement of material infrastructure, ideological production, and political temporality in the constitution of regional space. Comparative analysis with other contested zones, such as the Indo-Pacific or Sahel, could also yield valuable insights into how regional orders evolve under pressure from competing global logics. In doing so, scholarship can shift from reactive commentary to strategic foresight – mapping not only what is, but what might become.

Ultimately, the question is no longer whether the regional order can be restored to a previous equilibrium, but how a new one might be envisioned under radically different conditions. This will require a political imagination grounded not in dominance or nostalgia, but in critical engagement with the plurality of actors, interests, and values that now inhabit the Middle East. For academics, diplomats, and decision-makers, this is not merely an analytical task but a normative responsibility.

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