



China, the West, and the Geopolitical Race for the Middle East and Africa

By Omar Khattaly · 14 August 2026

In their book *International Relations*, authors Goldstein and Pevehouse wrote that “foreign policy involves goals, strategies, and instruments used by governments to influence the actions of other actors in the international system.”

Most nations in the international system have such policies, especially toward nations or partners of significant importance in terms of trade and strategic political, economic, and military interests. Throughout modern history, such a system has existed among nations for hundreds of years and has been implemented through the exchange of special envoys and diplomats of both high and lower ranks.

In the United States, foreign policy toward the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has historically favored military and security-focused doctrines over a single, long-term, binding strategic policy that integrates economic, trade, and investment support. Typically, these doctrines were formulated and aggressively implemented directly by the president and his administration.

During the twentieth century, the United States adopted five major foreign policy doctrines. The first was the Truman Doctrine of 1947, which sought to contain Soviet influence. It was followed by the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957, which authorized the use of military force to assist Middle Eastern nations resisting communism, and the Carter Doctrine of 1980, which declared that the United States would use military



force, if necessary, to protect its interests in the Persian Gulf. Later came the Reagan Doctrine of the 1980s, which supported anti-Soviet resistance movements, including those in Afghanistan, and the Bush Doctrine of the 2000s, which justified military intervention in Iraq while promoting the democratization of the Middle East and North Africa and protecting Israeli interests.

Most of these doctrines served the security and military interests of the American government and its closest allies. As a result, many proved to be complete failures with disastrous consequences—particularly the Bush Doctrine and its implementation in Iraq, which had profound effects on the Iraqi people and the stability of the broader Middle East.

During the past century, when discussing an actual government policy focused on the region, the United States has maintained an engagement and presence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for nearly 70 years, dating back to the end of World War II. This policy primarily focused on containing communism, advancing Israeli interests, and securing energy resources. On the other hand, China's official region-focused economic and strategic policy can only be traced back approximately 20 years, culminating in the formulation and adoption of the official China-Arab Policy Paper in 2016.

Before this, China's involvement in the region was primarily centered on pursuing its anti-colonial agenda, especially in Africa, where it supported numerous liberation movements against European colonial rule. China provided military training, weapons, and, most importantly, international political support through organizations such as the United Nations. China was also the first country to recognize Algeria's independence from France in 1962.

So, where do the globe's two most powerful, technologically advanced, and economically dominant nations stand today regarding their relationships with and involvement in the Middle East and North Africa? Have the Chinese established a more stable and enduring foothold in the region, where, until roughly three decades ago, the United States was the country that inspired the aspirations of millions, with countless citizens envisioning their future through America's blueprint for success?

To understand how and why China rapidly caught up with the American and European economies to become the world's second-largest economy, one must examine what the United States and the West did wrong after 2001 and how China took advantage of that period to emerge as a global economic and political powerhouse, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region—the primary focus of this analysis.



While the United States was preoccupied with fighting the Global War on Terror on multiple fronts and attempting to spread democracy through military interventions, China pursued a strategy centered on economic development, trade, investment, and long-term strategic planning. As a result, China achieved an unprecedented pace and scale of economic growth, transforming itself into one of the greatest economic success stories in modern history.

A quick review of China's economic growth over the last quarter-century, beginning in 2001, reveals that its most significant economic expansion occurred during a period when the United States was heavily engaged in military conflicts. In 2001, China's nominal GDP stood at approximately \$1.36 trillion. While Washington was busy implementing the Bush Doctrine and pursuing military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq in an effort to reshape the Middle East and enhance Israel's long-term security, China remained focused on economic development.

By 2011, China's nominal GDP had grown to approximately \$7.67 trillion—an absolute increase of about \$6.32 trillion, representing total growth of 466%. In just one decade, China's economy became 5.66 times larger than it had been in 2001.

During the following decade, from 2011 to 2021, while the United States continued pursuing its Middle East and North Africa (MENA) policies of democratization and counterterrorism—policies that were also intended to strengthen Israel's long-term strategic security—in countries such as Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria, China continued perfecting its long-term economic blueprint and building upon the strategy it had initiated in the early 2000s.

Over this period, China's nominal GDP increased from approximately \$7.67 trillion in 2011 to about \$17.82 trillion in 2021, an absolute increase of roughly \$10.15 trillion, representing growth of approximately 132%. This remarkable expansion firmly established China as the world's second-largest economy and significantly narrowed the economic gap with the United States.

In short, based on these figures, one could argue that China benefited strategically from periods when the United States was heavily distracted by prolonged military engagements. While Washington devoted enormous financial, military, and political resources to wars, counterterrorism operations, and its broader strategic objectives in the Middle East—including efforts to create a regional security environment more favorable to Israel—Beijing remained focused on long-term economic development, industrial expansion, trade, infrastructure, and global investment. The correlation between these two developments is striking and forms an important part of understanding China's rapid rise as a global economic power.



While China's political interest in the Middle East, North Africa, and Africa in general dates back to the 1960s, its more focused economic interest became increasingly evident by the end of the twentieth century. In his 2008 book *China into Africa: Trade, Aid, and Influence*, Robert I. Rotberg wrote:

“At the end of the 1970s, China shifted away from foreign relations based on ideology. Following the launch of its economic reform policy in 1978, its relations with the outside world became more pragmatic. In 1982, the Twelfth National Congress of the Communist Party proposed establishing relations with progressive parties and organizations abroad. In other words, the Party would cooperate with parties that adhered to diverse ideologies, not only with socialist or communist parties.”¹

This shift marked a fundamental change in China's foreign policy. Rather than allowing ideology to dictate its international relationships, Beijing increasingly adopted a pragmatic approach centered on economic development, trade, investment, and strategic partnerships—an approach that would later become a defining feature of China's engagement throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Africa.

Over time, China's strategic involvement with the Middle East and Africa (MEA) region was developed through carefully drafted and coordinated policies that date back to April 29, 1954, when China's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence were officially introduced as the basis for its future foreign policy and international relations. The Five Principles were:

- Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.
- Mutual non-aggression.
- Mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs.
- Equality and cooperation for mutual benefit.
- Peaceful coexistence.

Sixty years later, in 2014, the Chinese government reiterated its commitment to these Five Principles as the baseline for its foreign policy. This policy was well received in the Middle East and Africa, especially since democratization, regime change, and free elections were not at the top of the list of priorities for the region. Rather, economic growth and development for their people were the priority. China's new advanced industrialization and technology could help achieve these objectives without the pressure of political change and the chaos that the West supported during the Arab Spring movement of 2011.



Prior to this, in 2004, Chinese President Hu Jintao traveled to Cairo, Egypt, and, from the Arab League headquarters, announced the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) as an official framework for future relations.

On January 13, 2016, China issued its official China-Arab Policy Paper as a blueprint for a future strategic relationship with the MENA region. It was a comprehensive paper covering future political and economic goals with the region. This policy focused on three core strategies. The first was energy, with a focus on oil and gas. The second was infrastructure construction, along with trade and investment. The third was high-tech fields, including nuclear energy, aerospace, and new green energy.

To further cement this relationship, the China-Arab States Summit was held on December 9, 2022, with the presence of 21 Arab heads of state in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The summit established several core principles. On geopolitics, the Arab leaders committed to the “One China” policy, while China committed to supporting the Palestinian cause and giving full support to the two-state solution for Israel and Palestine.

All sides agreed on the importance of a multipolar world, non-interference in domestic affairs, and a strong commitment to and support for areas such as food security, agricultural technology exchanges, humanitarian aid, energy security, and green innovation. Most importantly, serious discussions took place regarding the use of local currencies, including the Chinese yuan, in oil and gas trade.

In the past decade or so, China has invested billions of dollars in loans and grants to build its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with significant investments in ports in Egypt and the UAE and other strategic locations in Africa, as well as industrial zones and projects in Algeria and Morocco, railways, telecommunications, and energy infrastructure. To China, the BRI is a future project connecting its manufacturing industries to Asia, Africa, and Europe.

While the U.S. and Europe are increasing their defense budgets tremendously, especially the U.S., which is expected to spend up to \$1 trillion in 2026, China has increased its financial commitments to these markets to establish and strengthen markets for Chinese products. This, in turn, will translate into greater economic activity and growth in China, as well as a better quality of life for its people.

According to World Bank data, over the 40-year period from 1978 to 2020, China was able to lift approximately 800 million people out of extreme poverty, a shift that represented a reduction of about 75% of the total number of people living in extreme poverty globally.



Between 2000 and 2025, China offered financial assistance and financed over 1,319 major projects and infrastructure developments across the African continent, totaling more than \$180.87 billion. According to information from the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), these projects included:

- 10,000 kilometers of built or renovated railways.
- 100,000 kilometers of regional highways and roads.
- Approximately 1,000 bridges and 100 ports.
- Over 200,000 kilometers of telecommunications and power grids.
- More than 130 healthcare facilities, 80 power plants, and 180 schools.

According to Africa Business Insider, \$66.1 billion of the total investment was allocated to the energy sector, financing massive hydroelectric dams, oil pipelines, and power transmission infrastructure—projects that would benefit both Chinese and African countries.

According to a 2025 China Daily report, Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has also seen a significant increase. From 2000 to 2024, direct equity investments from Chinese corporations totaled approximately \$50 billion, covering areas such as mining, telecommunications, and general manufacturing. These investments provided jobs, skills training, and technology transfer to local communities. Countries such as South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Egypt, and Zambia received some of the largest shares.

To better understand how focused and rapidly growing these trade relationships are, especially between China and Africa, consider the following figures. In 1992, China's General Administration of Customs (GACC) reported that the total trade value between China and Africa was worth approximately \$1.8 billion. By 2025, this figure had grown to \$348.05 billion. During the same period, total trade between the U.S. and Africa increased from \$21.8 billion in 1992 to, according to the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), \$83.4 billion in 2025.

In his 2014 speech at the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), President Xi stated that China was prepared to support the Arab states in increasing employment, advancing industrialization, and promoting economic development. This message was received positively by the region's leaders and people.

This China-Middle East and Africa relationship was summarized best by Yahia Zoubir in his paper *Expanding Sino-Maghreb Relations: Morocco and Tunisia*, where he wrote:



“China has demonstrated to the Maghreb countries that it follows a different philosophy than that of the West in the region. The perception in these countries is that it does not seek to impose its own political, economic, and cultural system on them. They appreciate not only China’s emphasis on its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, but also its pronouncements regarding mutual respect and trust; security and stability; development and prosperity; openness and inclusiveness; cooperation and innovation; non-hegemonic ambitions; leveraging economic development to solve security and humanitarian issues; and support for Arab countries’ development of their national economies.”²

U.S. Middle East & Africa Policy

As I previously wrote, and unlike China’s 2016 Arab Policy, the U.S. government does not have a single, clear, long-term strategic policy toward the Middle East and Africa, but rather regional strategies that respond to major crises or events.

Since the enactment of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, the White House and the President have published the National Security Strategy (NSS) to outline the administration’s blueprint for its global strategy during its time in office. This report is published by the White House through the National Security Council, mainly in coordination with the Department of Defense and the Department of State.

Regarding the Middle East and Africa, the report covers issues such as the security of Israel, counterterrorism, energy security, regional stability, and alliances. The 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) report highlighted the need to reduce the U.S. military presence in the Middle East while maintaining counterterrorism capabilities, ensuring Israel’s security, and providing full support for the Abraham Accords by supporting political and diplomatic normalization efforts between Israel and other Arab and Muslim states. It also emphasized containing Iran’s nuclear capabilities. The Departments of State and Defense also regularly publish strategies that address policies toward global regions, including the Middle East and Africa.

There are deeply rooted differences in the approaches and strategies adopted and pursued by the U.S. and China toward this highly strategic and important region. As mentioned previously, while the U.S. tends to securitize and militarize its approach, China’s strategy is primarily focused on economic development and infrastructure. China’s long-term goal is to become an indispensable economic and strategic partner in the Middle East and Africa. It is pursuing this objective through a long-term and highly patient vision built around the principles of economic-first engagement, political flexibility, trade, technology, and balanced diplomatic relationships,



especially on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, where China supports a two-state solution.

On the other hand, the U.S. has traditionally attached a number of conditions and expectations to its dealings with the region, including human rights, democratic elections, strategic alignment and loyalty—particularly regarding Israel—political pressure, sanctions, and military interventions. Unfortunately, over the last quarter-century or so, the U.S. has failed, in many respects, to achieve its intended objectives in several of these areas.

While the U.S. still dominates significantly militarily and strategically, the Chinese are continuously expanding their influence and economic presence in this region. The contrast between the two approaches is therefore significant. China has largely sought to build influence through economic engagement, infrastructure, trade, investment, and long-term partnerships, while the U.S. has relied more heavily on security relationships, political influence, military power, and conditional engagement. This fundamental difference in strategy has increasingly shaped how countries across the Middle East and Africa perceive and respond to the two powers.

Public Perception and the Long-Term Effects of Policy

Policies have effects, and, in my opinion, their long-term effects should be measured on the streets, not in the palaces of ruling elites. Public perception is ultimately one of the most important measures of whether a foreign policy has succeeded in building lasting influence and goodwill.

In a 2023 Arab Barometer survey, China ranked as the most popular partner in 12 Arab states, while support for the U.S. and Europe continued to decline. In Iraq, a 2022 survey showed overall support for China at 54%, compared with 35% for the United States. In Jordan, a 2023 poll found that 67% of respondents viewed China as the regional power most supportive of Palestinian rights; by comparison, only 28% held positive views of the U.S.³

In Tunisia, approval of China's role in the Middle East rose from 70% to 75% following the October 2023 events, while approval of the U.S. dropped from 40% to 10%. In Egypt, the region's most populous and politically important country, a 2022 poll showed that more than 64% of Egyptians preferred and supported stronger ties with China over the United States.⁴

In Libya, 49% of the public viewed China more positively, compared with 37% for the U.S. In the same 2022 polling, 68% of Algerians viewed China favorably, compared with 46% for the U.S. Finally, in Morocco, 79% of Moroccans held favorable views of China in 2024, an increase of 16 percentage points from 2022.⁵



Taken together, these figures suggest that China's long-term strategy of economic engagement, infrastructure investment, trade, and political flexibility is increasingly translating into positive public perceptions across significant parts of the Arab world and North Africa. At the same time, the declining public perception of the United States raises an important question about whether Washington's traditional reliance on security partnerships, political pressure, military power, and conditional engagement is producing the long-term influence it seeks in the region.

Conclusion

Can the West, and especially the United States, continue with these policies in the Middle East and Africa and still expect to maintain its economic and political dominance in this region? According to Kishore Mahbubani, a former Singaporean diplomat and President of the United Nations Security Council, and the author of the controversial book *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy* (2020). He writes, "After 200 years, we are seeing the end of Western domination of world history." Mahbubani predicts that the 21st century will be the "Asian Century," with China and India overtaking the United States to become the number one and number two economies in the world, while the United States falls to number three by 2050.

His predictions for Europe are even more concerning, as he projects that Europe's economy could be half the size of China's by 2050.⁶ at the start of the 21st century, China's economy was only a fraction of that of the 27-member European Union, with China's nominal GDP at approximately \$1.3 trillion compared with approximately \$9 trillion for the EU. Today, China's and the EU's nominal GDPs are approximately \$20 trillion each.

Can the Middle East and Africa maintain their sovereignty in the middle of this full-on war for dominance, when sovereignty is vital for their development and sustainability? The world's most advanced military and technological powers are entering an increasingly heated battle for economic and geopolitical dominance over the next 25 years, at a time when most countries in these regions, including many oil-rich nations, still depend heavily on imports for basic necessities, from food to clothing. Maintaining sovereignty will therefore be one of the greatest challenges facing many nations in the Middle East and Africa.

One of the biggest challenges facing many countries in the Middle East and Africa is not which camp or power to align with in this battle for survival during the rest of the 21st century, but rather whether any of these nations can maintain their independence while building their own economies and developing their nations and



people. Sovereignty will be both a great challenge and a valuable asset in this geopolitical race of the 21st century, and many nations will lose the fight.

In my opinion, diversification in economic partnerships and foreign policy relations might be a strategy that many of these nations can adopt to better position themselves to protect their sovereignty, build their economies, and develop their nations within this complex geopolitical environment over the next 25 years.

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