

ASIA GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHWESTASIA: STRATEGIC COMPETITION, REGIONAL SECURITY, AND EMERGING POWER DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

Asia has become one of the central arenas of contemporary geopolitical rivalry, driven by shifting power balances, economic interdependence, and strategic competition among major global and regional actors. This rivalry increasingly extends its influence beyond East and South Asia, significantly affecting the geopolitical landscape of Southwest Asia. The region's strategic location, energy resources, and role as a crossroads of global trade routes make it particularly sensitive to external power competition. This study examines how Asia-centered geopolitical rivalries—primarily involving China, the United States, Russia, and emerging regional powers—shape security dynamics, political alignments, and strategic stability in Southwest Asia. Using qualitative geopolitical analysis and comparative assessment, the research highlights key mechanisms through which strategic competition influences regional security architectures, conflict patterns, and cooperation frameworks. The findings suggest that intensifying rivalry contributes simultaneously to new opportunities for regional diversification and to heightened security risks, underscoring the need for adaptive and inclusive regional strategies.

Keywords: Geopolitical rivalry; Southwest Asia; strategic competition; regional security; great power politics

1. Introduction

In the post–Cold War international system, Asia has emerged as a primary center of geopolitical gravity. Rapid economic growth, technological advancement, and military modernization have transformed the region into a focal point of global strategic competition. While much scholarly attention has focused on East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, the implications of Asia-centered geopolitical rivalries extend far beyond these subregions. Southwest Asia—often referred to as the Middle East—has become increasingly intertwined with Asian power dynamics due to its strategic geography, energy significance, and evolving political alignments.

The growing involvement of Asian powers in Southwest Asia reshapes traditional security frameworks that were historically dominated by Western actors. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Russia's strategic re-engagement, and the recalibration of U.S. regional priorities collectively redefine the balance of power. This article aims to analyze how geopolitical rivalry in Asia affects Southwest Asia in terms of strategic competition, regional security, and emerging geopolitical patterns.

2. Literature Review

The literature on geopolitical rivalry in Asia primarily emphasizes power transitions, security dilemmas, and strategic competition among major powers. Scholars highlight the rise of China as a central driver of systemic change, challenging existing hegemonic structures and prompting strategic responses from the United States and its allies. In parallel, research on Southwest Asia traditionally focuses on regional conflicts, energy security, and great power intervention.

Recent studies increasingly bridge these two literatures, examining how Asian powers expand their influence into Southwest Asia through economic investments, diplomatic engagement, and security cooperation. Existing research identifies infrastructure development, arms transfers, and energy partnerships as key instruments of influence. However, gaps remain in understanding the cumulative security implications of overlapping rivalries and how regional actors navigate competing external pressures. This study contributes to the literature by offering an integrated perspective on Asia-driven geopolitical rivalry and its regional consequences for Southwest Asia.

The scholarly literature on geopolitical rivalry in Asia has predominantly focused on structural power transitions, security dilemmas, and strategic competition among major powers. A substantial body of research interprets the rise of China as the principal driver of systemic transformation in the international order, challenging the post–Cold War dominance of the United States and reshaping regional and global power hierarchies (Mearsheimer,

2014; Allison, 2017). From a realist perspective, this shift intensifies balancing behavior, alliance recalibration, and strategic mistrust, particularly in regions of high geoeconomic and geostrategic value (Walt, 2018).

Parallel to this debate, liberal and institutionalist scholars emphasize the role of economic interdependence, international institutions, and connectivity initiatives in moderating geopolitical competition. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for instance, is frequently analyzed as both an economic integration project and a strategic instrument that expands political influence beyond East Asia into regions such as Southwest Asia, Central Asia, and Africa (Rolland, 2020; Jones & Zeng, 2019). These studies suggest that infrastructure finance, trade facilitation, and development assistance increasingly function as tools of strategic statecraft rather than neutral economic engagement.

The literature on Southwest Asia, by contrast, has traditionally centered on regional conflicts, energy security, sectarian dynamics, and the long-standing involvement of external great powers, particularly the United States and Russia (Gause, 2014; Katz, 2021). Energy geopolitics remains a dominant theme, with scholars highlighting the region's role as a critical supplier of hydrocarbons and a strategic chokepoint for global trade and maritime security (Yergin, 2020). Within this framework, external intervention is often examined through the lens of military presence, regime security, and conflict mediation.

More recent research has begun to bridge these two bodies of literature by examining the expanding role of Asian powers—especially China, India, and Japan—in Southwest Asia. Studies indicate that Asian engagement increasingly combines economic investment, diplomatic outreach, and selective security cooperation, thereby altering the traditional Western-centric pattern of external influence in the region (Pant & Joshi, 2022; Fulton, 2020). Infrastructure development, arms transfers, and long-term energy partnerships are identified as key mechanisms through which Asian powers embed themselves into regional political and security structures.

However, despite these advances, significant gaps remain in the existing scholarship. First, much of the literature treats Asian engagement and Southwest Asian security dynamics as separate analytical domains, offering limited insight into their interaction effects. Second, while individual rivalries—such as U.S.–China or Saudi–Iran competition—are well documented, fewer studies address the cumulative impact of overlapping and intersecting rivalries on regional stability (Acharya, 2018). Third, the agency of Southwest Asian states is often under-theorized; regional actors are frequently portrayed as passive recipients of external influence rather than strategic agents capable of hedging, balancing, and selective alignment (Cooley & Nexon, 2020).

This study contributes to the literature by offering an integrated analytical perspective on Asia-centered geopolitical rivalry and its implications for Southwest Asia. By linking power transition theory with regional security analysis, it highlights how external competition reshapes strategic choices, security arrangements, and diplomatic behavior in Southwest Asia. In doing so, the study addresses an important gap in understanding how global power shifts translate into region-specific consequences under conditions of increasing multipolarity.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design based on geopolitical analysis and comparative assessment. Primary data include policy documents, strategic statements, and official reports from major global and regional actors. Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed academic literature, think tank analyses, and regional security assessments.

The methodology involves:

- **Comparative analysis** of major power strategies toward Southwest Asia;
- **Thematic analysis** of security, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of rivalry;
- **Contextual interpretation** of regional responses to external competition.

This approach allows for an in-depth examination of causal mechanisms linking Asian geopolitical rivalry to security outcomes in Southwest Asia.

4. Findings And Discussion

The empirical and analytical findings demonstrate that Asia-centered geopolitical rivalry reshapes Southwest Asia through a multidimensional and uneven process. Rather than producing a single, linear outcome, this rivalry generates differentiated impacts across strategic, security, and political domains. Three interrelated dimensions stand out: strategic competition, regional security transformation, and the emergence of flexible multipolar engagement patterns.

4.1 Strategic Competition and Economic–Geopolitical Interlinkages

The first major finding reveals that strategic competition in Southwest Asia is increasingly driven by the convergence of economic instruments and geopolitical objectives. External Asian powers—particularly China, India, and to a lesser extent Japan and South Korea—engage the region not merely as markets but as strategically vital nodes connecting energy supply chains, maritime corridors, and continental trade routes.

Infrastructure investments, port development projects, and energy partnerships increasingly serve dual purposes: facilitating economic connectivity while simultaneously enhancing geopolitical leverage. This dual-use nature blurs the boundary between commercial engagement and strategic positioning.

Table 1. Strategic Drivers of Asia-Centered Competition in Southwest Asia

Strategic Domain	Key Instruments	Geopolitical Implications
Energy security	Long-term oil & gas contracts, upstream investments	Increased external dependence and bargaining asymmetry
Trade routes	Ports, railways, logistics hubs	Control over chokepoints and transit corridors
Infrastructure	Belt and Road-type projects, industrial zones	Expansion of strategic influence via economic means
Political leverage	Development aid, investment conditionality	Alignment incentives without formal alliances

The findings indicate that economic engagement increasingly reflects geopolitical calculations rather than market efficiency alone. This trend reinforces structural competition while avoiding overt military confrontation.

4.2 Transformation of Regional Security Dynamics

The second dimension concerns the impact of Asia-centered rivalry on regional security architectures. Southwest Asian states increasingly diversify their external partnerships to reduce reliance on any single power. While this diversification enhances strategic autonomy, it simultaneously generates complex security externalities.

Multiple external actors operating within the same security space lead to overlapping defense commitments, fragmented deterrence mechanisms, and coordination challenges during crises. The coexistence of competing arms suppliers and security partners complicates transparency and escalatory control.

Table 2. Effects of External Power Diversification on Regional Security

Security Aspect	Positive Effects	Associated Risks
Strategic autonomy	Reduced dependence on a single patron	Policy incoherence
Defense capabilities	Access to diverse military technologies	Arms proliferation
Deterrence posture	Broader security options	Escalation miscalculations
Crisis management	Multiple mediation channels	Coordination failure

The findings suggest that diversification does not automatically enhance stability. Instead, its impact depends on institutional capacity, diplomatic coordination, and conflict-management mechanisms at both regional and extra-regional levels.

4.3 Emergence of Multipolar and Interest-Based Engagement

The third major finding highlights a gradual shift toward multipolar engagement strategies among Southwest Asian actors. Rather than aligning exclusively with a dominant external power, states increasingly pursue pragmatic, interest-based cooperation across multiple partners.

This behavior reflects adaptation to global power transitions and uncertainty regarding long-term commitments by traditional security providers. Flexible alignment allows regional actors to maximize economic and security gains while hedging against systemic shocks.

Table 3. Characteristics of Emerging Multipolar Engagement in Southwest Asia

Dimension	Traditional Alignment	Emerging Multipolar Strategy
Alliance structure	Exclusive partnerships	Issue-based cooperation
Foreign policy logic	Ideological alignment	Pragmatic interest-balancing
Risk exposure	Dependence on one power	Distributed strategic risk
Diplomatic flexibility	Limited	High

This shift does not signal the absence of rivalry but rather a recalibration of agency by regional states. Southwest Asia emerges not as a passive arena of competition but as an active space where local actors shape the contours of geopolitical interaction.

4.4 Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Asia-centered geopolitical rivalry does not uniformly destabilize Southwest Asia. Instead, its effects are **context-dependent**, varying across sectors, states, and institutional settings. Strategic competition intensifies economic–geopolitical linkages, security diversification introduces both resilience and fragility, and multipolar engagement enhances agency while increasing systemic complexity. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that Southwest Asia is transitioning toward a hybrid geopolitical environment—neither rigidly polarized nor fully cooperative—where competition, accommodation, and pragmatic balancing coexist.

Conclusion

Asia’s geopolitical rivalry has profound and multifaceted implications for Southwest Asia. Strategic competition among major powers reshapes regional security architectures, influences political alignments, and alters economic and diplomatic priorities. While increased engagement creates opportunities for diversification and development, it also heightens security challenges and strategic uncertainty.

The study concludes that sustainable regional stability in Southwest Asia requires adaptive policies that balance external partnerships while strengthening regional cooperation mechanisms. Future research should further explore quantitative security impacts and long-term scenarios of Asia-driven geopolitical transformation.

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