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Oil, faith and power politics

A new global alignment is emerging that will have profound consequences for the shape of the international system. Asia and the Middle East are often acknowledged as the main theatres within which the key themes of contemporary world politics are being played out. But frequently overlooked is the emerging web of ties between these two regions – ties that have as a common theme resistance to American political, economic, military and even cultural hegemony.

The most prominent strand of this new affiliation is energy. While Asia has long been dependent on the Middle East for oil and gas, the nature of that relationship is changing. Asia has become an even more voracious consumer of Mid-East oil and gas, while the Middle East's ties to its traditional energy partner, the US, have become increasingly strained.

Today Chinese, Indian, Malaysian and Japanese energy companies are winning exploration and co-production contracts in the region. There are undoubtedly sound economic reasons why this is happening. But it no doubt helps that these companies don't come with the political baggage – a concern for human rights or nuclear proliferation, for example – that often accompany their American counterparts.

A second strand of the Middle East-Asia relationship flows from the first: a growing political and, potentially, strategic affinity. China's energy investments in Iran and Sudan are excellent examples. They are not meant to be a poke in Washington's eye. Chinese oil companies do better in these countries because US sanctions mean there is less competition from established American players. But, given the centrality of energy security to Chinese foreign policy, an economic imperative soon becomes a political one. Thus, China has opposed the imposition of oil sanctions on Sudan and has resisted efforts to raise the Iranian nuclear issue in the Security Council.

China's attractiveness is not, however, limited to the Middle East's rogues. The Sino-Saudi relationship has developed dramatically since Beijing secretly sold medium-range missiles to Riyadh in the mid-1980s. More recently a Chinese company was one of the first foreigners to be given rights to explore for gas in the Kingdom. The sole US bidder withdrew, ostensibly for commercial reasons. But it probably helped that Beijing views the region like Washington used to. Today the US exports turbulent democratisation while China emphasises stability and the steady flow of oil.

Of course, China is not yet a viable strategic alternative to the US in the Middle East. But this will change. It already has the ability to supply states like Iran with weapons to 'deter' US military designs – something that would sit comfortably with China's status quo objectives in the region. China is also acutely conscious of the vulnerability of its long sea lines of communication to the Middle East. As it develops its ability to project naval power – it has already helped Pakistan build a deep-water port on its west coast at Gwadar – the potential for Sino-US strategic competition in the Middle East will grow.

Faith and ideology are other key emerging axes of the relationship. Islamic Asia's growing interest in Islamic fundamentalism exported by countries such as Saudi Arabia tends to be viewed by Washington largely through the prism of the war on terror. This is simplistic. Instead of being driven solely by an interest in extremism, this complex phenomenon is partly a response to what Asian Muslims see as the penetration of their societies by a decadent and highly commercialised American culture.

This is just one example of efforts in Asia and the Middle East to find alternatives to globalisation's pervasive American themes. There are others. Malaysia has been promoting reform in the Islamic world and in October will host the inaugural World Islamic International

Forum – a Davos for Muslims. Meanwhile, Middle East regimes talk about the ‘China model’ of open, internationalised economies and closed political systems. While undoubtedly self-serving, such an approach to development may well prove attractive to populations repulsed by the chaos of democratisation in Iraq.

It would, of course, be wrong to see these various examples of an emerging Asian-Middle Eastern affinity, some more nascent than others, as a formal anti-American alliance. But in many respects it doesn’t matter. Regardless of whether this growing web of ties becomes institutionalised or remain disparate, formed through government and non-government bodies, the net result will be the gradual erosion of American hard and soft power in both the Middle and Far East.

In the Middle East, America’s capacity to reward and sanction will be undercut by regional countries turning eastward for everything from political support in the Security Council to alternative markets and sources of investment. In Asia, a largely domestically-driven tendency toward a more independent foreign policy outlook will be reinforced by a growing sense that Asian and American interests in the Middle East don’t necessarily coincide. And globally, it could well be conflict in the Strait of Hormuz rather than the Strait of Taiwan that sparks a much-anticipated Sino-US rivalry, ultimately challenging the unipolarity that has defined the last 15 years of international politics.