# China's Normative Balancing: Global Security Initiative and Middle East Security Architecture

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**Abstract**

*This article examines China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) as a soft balancing strategy, specifically in the form of normative balancing. It employs a qualitative approach based on data collected from the official website of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as secondary sources including journal articles, newspapers and online news platforms. The study analyses the GSI as a normative balancing strategy and explores its implications for the security architecture of the Middle East using a normative balancing conceptual framework. As an effort by China to challenge the dominance of the United States through the promotion of alternative security norms, the GSI has implications for the Middle East security architecture in three key areas: first, it counters the United States' common security rhetoric by advancing the concept of indivisible security; second, it introduces a Sino-centric perspective on regional security issues; and third, it emphasises the norm of non-interference as an alternative to the United States' interventionist approach in the region.*

*Keywords:* China, United States, balancing, Middle East, security architecture

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## Introduction

During President Xi Jinping's keynote address at the China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in December 2022, he openly invited the Gulf States to join the Global Security Initiative (GSI) as part of a 'joint effort to uphold regional peace and stability' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2022b). The GSI is a Chinese-led security initiative aimed at 'eliminating the root causes of international conflicts, improving global security governance, encouraging joint international efforts to bring more stability and certainty to a volatile and changing era, and promoting durable peace and development in the world' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs The People's Republic of China 2023b). According to Alice Eckman, the GSI serves two broader strategic objectives for China: building an alternative global 'security architecture' and positioning itself as a model for developing countries in various sectors (Eckman 2023). Additionally, the Chinese government explicitly highlights a 'new vision of security' in its GSI concept paper (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023b). The Middle East is a competitive and fragmented region characterised by interstate rivalries and identity politics, often manifesting as inter-religious and inter-communal conflicts (Esteshami 2016). As Julia Gurol notes, the region 'has always been prone to external influence, particularly in matters of security' (Gurol 2020: 23). Historically, the United States has been the dominant external actor in the Middle East, with its influence growing significantly after the Cold War (Byman & Moller 2016b). The region has traditionally been viewed as a central focus of US foreign policy (Al Sarhan 2017). In recent years, however, China has emerged as an increasingly important external player in the Middle East. The invitation for Middle Eastern countries to join the GSI was not only extended directly by Xi Jinping but also explicitly included in the GSI concept paper.

This article argues that the GSI represents China's normative balancing strategy to constrain US hegemony. The GSI serves as a rhetorical tool for China to promote an alternative security architecture grounded in the principles of non-interference, indivisible security and Sino-centrism. The article aims to analyse the GSI as China's soft balancing effort in the form of normative balancing against the United States and the implication of the GSI as normative balancing strategies for the Middle East's security architecture. To support this argument, the article applies the conceptual framework of normative balancing to explain the GSI as China's alternative security architecture designed to counter US dominance through the promotion of alternative security norms. A qualitative research approach is employed, drawing primarily on data from the official website of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as secondary sources such as journal articles, newspapers and online news. Keywords guiding the research include 'China', 'United States', 'Sino-American rivalry', 'Global Security Initiative', 'soft balancing', 'security norm', 'security architecture' and the 'Middle East'.

This article makes two key academic contributions. First, it introduces the concept of normative balancing as another form of soft balancing against United States hegemony, highlighting how China employs the GSI as a core component of this strategy. Second, it enriches the discourse on Middle East security architecture by examining China's active efforts to invite Middle East countries and by using the GSI as the security norm in Middle East security issues. The article is structured into five sections. The first section is the introduction. The second section delves into the conceptual framework of normative balancing. The third section explores the interests of China and the United States in the Middle East. The fourth section analyses China's GSI as a normative balancing strategy toward United States hegemony and its implication on the Middle East security architecture.

## China global initiative security and the limit of soft balancing concept

Soft balancing emerged as a concept in the mid-2000s to explain the lack of hard balancing behaviour towards US hegemony after the Cold War (Ferguson 2012). Robert Pape (2005), a leading scholar on the topic, defines soft balancing as 'actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine U.S. unilateral aggressiveness'. Lanteigne (2012) elaborates that traditional hard balancing has become strategically risky in the post–Cold War context. As a result, states have turned to more indirect, nonmilitary means such as diplomatic or economic measures to counter dominant powers. The concept has since been interpreted and refined by various scholars. Paul (2005) describes soft balancing as the formation of limited coalitions and the upgrading of alliances to constrain hegemonic behaviour. Similarly, Walt (2009) argues that soft balancing under US dominance involves coordinated diplomatic actions to achieve outcomes opposed to US preferences – outcomes unattainable without multilateral support. The main idea of soft balancing efforts is that the state does not necessarily have to increase its relative power by using military force and other material capabilities to balance the threatened state. As argued by Wivel and Paul (2020), soft balancing is the opposing strategy of hard balancing, which relies on arms build-up and formal alignments. These scholarly perspectives underline that soft balancing is a strategic adaptation that allows states to exert influence in a unipolar system without engaging in open confrontation.

However, over the past decade, the global order has undergone significant changes. The perception of US decline, the rise of China as a competing power and a general shift toward multipolarity have altered the dynamics of power. Consequently, scholars have debated the continued relevance of soft balancing in this evolving context (Lanteigne 2012). Critics question whether soft balancing, originally framed within a unipolar world, remains applicable (Brooks & Wohlforth

2005). In response, He and Feng (2008) argue that soft balancing is not merely a balancing act in unipolar power distribution but also a rational behaviour under conditions of economic interdependence. Expanding on this, scholars have since analysed soft balancing behaviours within bipolar and multipolar systems (Feng & He 2017; He & Feng 2008; Paul et al. 2025). A prominent case of contemporary soft balancing strategies can be seen in China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) to counterbalance US dominance through alternative security frameworks. The GSI provides an illustrative example of soft balancing that avoids direct military confrontation with the US-led order, which China perceives as a source of instability (Freeman 2023). Yip (2024) notes that the GSI is not merely a reactive policy but reflects China's long-term vision for international security. Xiangying (2024) emphasises that the GSI promotes core norms such as peace and non-hegemony, positioning China as a responsible global actor. Through the GSI, China constructs an alternative security norm system that implicitly critiques and counters the US practices. The concept paper for the GSI, for example, states that it aims to 'eliminate the root causes of international conflicts' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People's Republic of China 2023). Furthermore, China's official discourse such as in documents like 'U.S. Hegemony and Its Perils' and 'The State of Democracy in the United States: 2022' portrays the United States as a source of global instability, war and democratic coercion.

However, soft balancing appears to have limitations in fully explaining the GSI as China's soft balancing strategy. While the GSI could be seen as China's soft balancing efforts toward the United States, it is not an institution and has not yet taken an institutional form. Rather, the GSI represents China's normative effort to counter US hegemony in security affairs through rhetorical mechanisms such as the promotion of alternative security norms. The concept of soft balancing has limited explanatory power in this context because the soft balancing concept emphasises the use of institutional mechanisms to balance against hegemonic powers. As Paul (2018) notes, one of the key features of soft balancing is the use of institutional constraints. Moreover, Paul et al. (2025) identify four primary instruments of soft balancing: international institutions, limited alignments, economic sanctions and the denial of legitimacy. Many scholars also emphasise the presence of institutions as a major and important element in the soft balancing strategies of China and Russia toward the United States. For example, BRICS has developed into a robust soft balancing coalition (Papa & Han 2025), and China has used the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to engage in soft balancing behaviour against the United States (Song 2013). In contrast, China's GSI is a new security framework promoted and led by China, but it lacks an institutional mechanism. This makes the GSI a form of soft balancing that does not rely on the traditional institutional features typically considered essential to soft balancing strategies. Institutions are considered primary instruments of soft balancing because they

provide weaker states with a means to balance against the hegemon. Institutions offer states legitimacy to deny the hegemon's behaviour or interests. As noted from Finnemore (2009), legitimacy is 'tacit acceptance of the social structure in which power is exercised'. Institutions provide weaker states or those seeking to counterbalance a hegemon with a 'corridor' to resist or constrain its actions without resorting to military force. This ability to oppose lies in the legitimacy conferred by the institutions. As Wivel and Paul (2020) explain, institutions can grant weaker states the legitimacy needed to implement economic and political sanctions against more powerful states, which are essential elements of a soft balancing strategy.

However, China's GSI lacks institutional mechanisms, so China's establishment of the GSI may be perceived as ineffective when evaluated through the lens of soft balancing theory. Nevertheless, China has clearly positioned the GSI as a strategy aimed at balancing against the United States through noncoercive means. This suggests that the GSI showed the limitations of the soft balancing concept in explaining China's recent strategic behaviour. However, soft balancing in the last two decades has also undergone several expansions as a concept to explain state strategies to balancing hegemonic power. The concept has undergone three key dimensions of expansion. First, it has seen vertical expansion, with scholars applying soft balancing arguments to historical cases beyond the unipolar context (Saltzman 2012). Paul (2018) emphasises that soft balancing is not confined to second-tier states responding to a hegemon but has been used as a security strategy for over two centuries. Second, horizontal expansion extends the concept's applicability beyond great powers to include small and middle powers (Paul et al. 2025). Third, and perhaps most significantly, scholars have refined the theoretical framework of soft balancing by identifying different types and mechanisms of such behaviour (Paul et al. 2025). This broadening of the concept highlights that the changing structure of international power does not diminish the relevance of soft balancing. Rather, it expands its applicability, giving rise to a variety of non-coercive strategies. For example, Kai He (2008) introduces the notion of 'institutional balancing', where states pursue security through multilateral institutions in an anarchic international system. This involves inclusive and exclusive strategies, depending on whether institutions are used to integrate or exclude specific actors. Other scholars, such as Kelley (2005), underscore the role of norms and institutions in shaping soft balancing behaviour. Ferguson (2012) further identifies the use of 'normative' power resources by China and Russia, such as alternative political norms to challenge US ideological influence.

## Normative balancing as a variant of soft balancing strategies
The expansion of the soft balancing concept has opened up the possibility that it could be adapted to explain a wider range of contemporary state balancing strate-

gies that do not necessarily fit within its traditional assumptions, especially where institutional functions are emphasised within soft balancing mechanisms. While the GSI lacks institutional mechanisms, it could still be considered a variant of soft balancing strategies. According to Paul et al. (2025), scholars advancing soft balancing theory must clearly delineate what qualifies as soft balancing and what does not. Definitions of soft balancing vary widely. Some view it as any action by weaker states to influence stronger ones, while others limit it to coordinated responses to security threats from a hegemon (Whitaker 2010). The most commonly used definition of soft balancing is from Pape (2005) who describes it as actions that do not directly challenge US military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate and undermine aggressive unilateral US military policies. But because the soft balancing concept is quite broad in definition it has gathering critics that argue that soft balancing interprets nearly all strategies of opposition as responses to the balance of power, instead of considering other possible motivations (Brooks & Wohlforth 2005). However, Hurrell (2006) argues that 'those who take a skeptical view of soft balancing risk setting the bar is too high and underplay the role of United States power and United States policies in shaping policy across a range of apparently very diverse issue areas', including using values and norms to justify hegemonic power behaviour and interest toward another state.

Hegemonic power could push certain values and norms to be adopted and label other states that do not follow those values and norms as 'norm-violators'. Hence, hegemonic power then could use values and norms to dominate other states. The United States, as a hegemonic power, has been using normative reasons to justify its foreign policies. For example, the United States NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011 is justified using the 'responsibility to protect' norm (Dunne & Gifkins 2011), and the United States military intervention in Bosnia and Somalia in 1992 was justified as a humanitarian action to stop human rights violations (Western 2002). However, the United States using human rights values to justify its military intervention, has been criticised for having double standards. As noted by Turner (2003), the United States' NATO-led intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was justified because the Kosovo Liberation Army violated human rights by committing killings, abducting and detaining Serbian police as well as Serbian and Albanian civilians. However, the United States also supports Turkey as a key regional ally even though the Turkish government has committed extrajudicial killings and human rights abuses against the Kurdish population. China's government has also addressed the United States' double standard on human rights. United States Secretary of State Anthony Blinken stated there are ongoing human rights abuses in China where, in Xinjiang, the Chinese government continues to carry out genocide and crimes against humanity against predominantly Muslim Uyghurs. In response, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said

that if the United States cared about human rights, it should address its foreign policy impact, especially in the Gaza Strip, where the United States vetoed the UN Security Council's efforts for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza four times (Staunton 2024). Furthermore, the United States also uses normative reasons to push behavioural change in other states. An example is the United States' coercive promotion of democracy in Iraq. According to Whitehead (2009), the United States justified its military operations in Iraq by arguing that it would trigger a new surge of democratisation. The United States also formulated Iraq's new constitution and forced Iraq to become a democratic country. But the coercive democracy promotion by the United States in Iraq created a system dependent on divergent sectarian interests (Ottaway 2023). Using normative reasons to fight the authoritarian regimes and to promote democracy, the United States not only justified its military intervention in Iraq but also enforced behavioural change on the state, pushing it to adopt democracy and Western liberal values and norms. China has heavily criticised the United States' normative reasons as hegemonic behaviour that creates conflict and disturbs peace.

The GSI then represents China's effort to balance United States hegemonic power through norms. China's GSI aims to challenge the United States' existing security framework by introducing alternative norms, even though it lacks formal institutional mechanisms. The GSI represents a variant form of soft balancing strategies, referred to in this article as 'normative balancing'. This variant helps explain China's strategy to counter the US hegemony through noncoercive means, despite the absence of institutional structures traditionally associated with soft balancing. Normative balancing can be described as state actions or efforts to challenge the United States or hegemonic powers through nonmilitary means by introducing alternative norms specifically aimed at countering the dominant norms used by the hegemon to legitimise its actions. The normative balancing conceptual framework integrates elements of neorealism and constructivist theory. Indeed, realist and constructivism theories seem to oppose each other; neorealism emphasises the importance of material power and its capabilities among states in the anarchic world that shape state interest, while constructivism focuses on the importance of social norms and ideas rather than material conditions that shape actor interest. However, as Samuel Barkin (2003) stated, constructivism and realism are compatible and 'not that constructivism is necessarily realist, but that constructivist research is as compatible with a realist worldview as with any other'. According to Lebow (2004), the synergy between realists and constructivists could contribute to studying international relations. Moreover, Mattern (2004) elaborates on Barkin's argument about realist constructivism, which primarily focuses on how 'power structures affect patterns of normative change in international relations' and 'how a particular set of norms affects power structure'. In this sense, normative balancing assumes that norms

not only govern state behaviour by following the logic of appropriateness, but also serve as a source of power for hegemonic actors to govern and influence the behaviour of other states or to justify their own actions.

States choose normative balancing strategies as their soft balancing approach because they aim to introduce norms that are not yet institutionalised. This becomes an important departure point for the GSI, as China's strategic behavior could be explained using normative balancing. As China has perceived the United States using certain norms and values to exert its hegemonic power, the GSI can be seen as Beijing's attempt to act as a norm entrepreneur by promoting new security norms, positioning China as the primary norm-setter. Norms should not be taken for granted but understood as continuously negotiated and challenged. As noted from Nanda and Permata (2024), states can influence global affairs by introducing and persuading certain norms because norms do not emerge in a vacuum but are actively promoted and built by norm entrepreneurs and continuously compete with other norms. The concept of the norm entrepreneur can be traced to Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) argument that certain actors introduce and persuade states to adopt specific norms; these actors are referred to as norm entrepreneurs. A norm entrepreneur plays a crucial role in promoting norms because norms compete with each other (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

Hence, the concept of normative balancing can help explain the lack of institutional mechanisms in the GSI as China's soft balancing strategies. China will then seek to promote and persuade other actors to accept its new security norms. Through this process, the norms may eventually become institutionalised or, in the most advanced stage, internalised and regarded as taken for granted. China's GSI is then positioned as an alternative security norm that challenges US political intervention and security alliance, and emphasises dialogues and multilateralism to manage conflict. According to China's vice minister of Foreign Affairs Chen Xiandong, the GSI represents Xi Jinping's thoughts on diplomacy in international security. The GSI calls for 'extensive consultation and joint contribution for shared benefits instead of the hegemon dictating all' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People's Republic of China 2024). The hegemon that the GSI challenges is the United States because China stated that 'in order to maintain its hegemony, the US has long been monopolizing the definition of "democracy," instigating division and confrontation in the name of democracy' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023c) and 'The United States has developed a hegemonic playbook to stage "color revolutions," instigate regional disputes, and even directly launch wars under the guise of promoting democracy, freedom and human rights' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023). China believes that the United States has used certain values and norms to justify its geopolitical agenda, maintain and preserve its hegemony, and mold other countries with its values and political system.

Because China's normative balancing aims to constrain hegemonic efforts to use norms and values as tools of domination, the GSI's alternative security norms and values serve as a competing security norm that challenges the prevailing hegemonic security norm. A study by Markey and Larsen (2022) explain that the GSI is not only a response to the Ukraine War but also appears to be a Chinese grand strategy for a global alternative to the United States–led security institutions. In the context of the GSI itself, as an alternative security norm the GSI possesses six core concepts and principles (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023b), where it will commit to (1) a vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, (2) respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, (3) abiding to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, (4) taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries, (5) peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, (6) maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains. According to the GSI core concept, China has ruled out unilateralism and hegemony, and believe a balanced, effective and secure architecture should be established.

## China, United States and Middle East security architecture
*United States interest and Middle East security architecture*
Since the end of the Cold War, the United States' foreign policy has heavily focused on the Middle East (Ashford 2018; Salman et al. 2015). This focus stems from the United States' grand strategy, which has aimed to establish and manage a global security system to contain and deter external threats (Jeffrey 2016). Byman and Moller (2016) explain that United States' interests in the Middle East can be categorised into five main areas: securing access to oil supplies, preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, combating terrorism, safeguarding Israel's security and encouraging the spread of democracy. Though according to the testimony of the United States deputy assistant secretary for Regional Security in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs on 10 August 2021, US involvement in the Middle East is primarily aimed at disrupting international terrorist networks, deterring Iranian aggression and supporting the territorial defence of its partners and allies (United States Department of States 2021). At the same time, according to Katulis (2025), a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, United States security interest in Middle East is energy security, support for US partners, regional stability, freedom of navigation, prevention of war, counterterrorism, containment of Iran and non-proliferation. The United States' security interests can be summarised as ensuring energy security, particularly access to oil, counterterrorism, supporting its allies (especially safeguarding Israel's security as its main ally in the Middle East) and containing Iran, which is also linked to concerns over nuclear proliferation. Aside from the United States' traditional energy security interests, counterterrorism has become a primary focus of US security policy in the Middle East, as

Washington policymakers have long viewed the region as a breeding ground for terrorism. Following the September 11 (9/11) terrorist attacks, a belief emerged that one of the root causes of Islamic extremism lies in the repressive nature of Middle Eastern regimes (Hobson 2005). The United States has also been a strong supporter of Israel, a stance that has generated widespread discontent among both governments and populations across the Middle East (Alterman 2024). US Efforts to contain Iran and its nuclear programme were evident in 2017, when President Donald J. Trump persuaded Saudi Vice Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to support the formation of the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), a NATO-style security pact aimed at countering Iran's growing regional influence through collective action by Arab nations. The proposed alliance was envisioned to include Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Jordan and Egypt as member states (Farouk 2019; Oztig 2021).

The United States has been using two norms to manage its primary security interests and justify its foreign policies in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War: promoting democracy norms through intervention and advancing security alliances based on the norm of collective security. Intervention to promote democracy has been utilised by the United States to tackle its main security interest in the Middle East, such as counterterrorism, especially in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush's administration identified several causes of violent extremism; however, the prevailing assumption was that terrorism stems primarily from nondemocratic governance (Morris et al. 2021). During President George W. Bush's administration, spreading democratic values and norms was seen as a solution to the problem of terrorism in the Middle East and served as a strategy in his global 'War on Terror' campaign. President Bush's stance for democratic solutions for the terrorism problem is showed as the traditional United States stances for its foreign policy that is based on the liberal internationalism principle. As liberal democracy spreads, peace will be attained. As Diamond (1992) argues, a more democratic world would be a safer, saner and more prosperous world for the United States. Democratic countries do not go to war with each other, sponsor terrorism against other democracies or build weapons of mass destruction to threaten one another. Democratising Arab regimes was seen as a pathway to securing peace in the conflict-ridden Middle East, which was also closely tied to the US interest in protecting Israel. In his 2002 Middle East Initiative, President George W. Bush stressed the need for change, stating: 'It is untenable for Israeli citizens to live in terror. It is untenable for Palestinians to live in squalor and occupation.' He called on Palestinians to build a democracy based on tolerance and liberty, promising that if they pursue these goals, 'America and the world will actively support their efforts' (PBS News 2002). The United States' invasion of Iraq was also justified to impose a democratic regime in Iraq that would defeat part of

the 'axis of evil' which was seen as a serious threat to both the United States and the broader international community. The justification included claims that Iraq possessed nuclear, biological and chemical weapons (NBCWs) (Wood 2019). Political and military interventions justified by spreading liberal democracy, topping regimes possessing weapons of mass destruction and protecting the security of its allies have become central elements of the United States' approach to security in the Middle East.

MESA, as part of the United States' security architecture for the Middle East, aims to strengthen partnerships among Arab countries to confront extremism and terrorism, and to promote peace, stability and development at both regional and international levels (Lopez 2019). The establishment of the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) reflects the United States' approach to shaping regional security based on the principle of collective security. From the United States' perspective, promoting MESA supports key strategic interests, especially containing Iran and curbing their nuclear ambitions, and ensuring Isreal's security, because Iran is considered its primary regional adversary. MESA has been widely viewed as an anti-Iran initiative due to Tehran's exclusion and its portrayal as a threat to regional stability. It has even been described as an attempt to create a Middle Eastern version of NATO, or an 'Arab NATO'. This framing was evident in a 2019 joint statement emphasising efforts to advance MESA and build greater cooperation in the Gulf region in the face of common threats (United States Department of States 2019). The use of 'common threat' highlights the collective security principle underlying MESA. Critics argue that MESA represents a United States–driven effort to institutionalise collective security in the region, primarily to counter Iran and reduce the influence of China and Russia (Farouk 2019). This strategy aligns with existing regional defence structures that also operate on collective defence principles, such as the Arab League's Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation, the Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsula Shield Force, the GCC Joint Defense Agreement and the Joint Arab Force (Farouk 2019). The GCC itself, consisting of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, was established in 1981 as a political and economic alliance with defence elements, although it does not identify a specific adversary (Jones 2009). However, recent United States–GCC meetings have increasingly focused on Iran. At a May 2024 meeting in Riyadh, former United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Dana Stroul noted that discussions centred on Iran as the most urgent threat, including steps to strengthen collective defence (Stroul 2024). A joint statement from the September 2024 United States–GCC meeting reaffirmed commitments to closer cooperation across defence and security and reiterated a shared determination to address Iran's destabilising regional activities (United States Department of States 2024). In sum, the United States has consistently pushed for collective security norms in Middle East security architecture, with Iran framed as the principal source of regional instability.

## The Middle East in China's global strategy: Interests, critique and alternatives

China has emerged as a significant actor in the Middle East in recent decades. As Fulton (2021) notes, China has evolved from a marginal external player to an influential power in the Middle East. Not long ago, its engagement in the region was considered limited and primarily driven by its energy needs (Alterman & Garver 2008). According to Watanabe (2023), China remains principally a geo-economic actor, focusing on energy security and investments to support its supply chain. However, China's role has become increasingly multifaceted. One notable area of China's interest in expansion is in security-related activities. While avoiding a dominant leadership role, China has gradually increased its involvement in regional security through peacekeeping missions and anti-piracy operations. Additionally, it has engaged in several key regional issues, including the Iranian nuclear programme, the Syrian conflict and the Palestine-Israel dispute (Sun & He 2015). Sun and He (2015) also argue that Middle Eastern countries are generally receptive to China's involvement in conflict resolution, viewing it as a noncolonial and nonhegemonic actor. As the only developing country among the permanent members of the UN Security Council, China is seen as a more neutral alternative to Western powers in the region.

China's interests in the Middle East include securing energy resources, maintaining regional stability, promoting economic ties through exports and countering terrorism. Its concern with regional stability and security is closely linked to the smooth implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the protection of its energy interests (Wu 2021). China considers the Middle East an important region for securing energy resources, expanding markets for its goods and investments, and advancing infrastructure development and connectivity. Beijing believes that sustained peace and stability in the region are crucial to fully achieving the economic gains from its involvement (Liangxiang 2020). China's energy security is closely linked to stability in the Middle East. This connection became clear during the 2003 Iraq War, which disrupted oil exports from the region and underscored the urgent need for China to diversify its energy sources. In response, China expanded its search for oil to other parts of the world, including Central Asia, South America and Africa. Nevertheless, even with the growing volume of imports from these areas, China's dependence on Middle Eastern oil has remained substantial. Projections indicate that by 2030 53% of China's oil imports will still originate from the Middle East. As such, the region will continue to play a vital strategic role in China's energy landscape (Niu 2021).

At a glance, China's interest in Middle East security is primarily linked to its energy security and the need to maintain regional stability to support its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. In fact, China's energy security is also intertwined with that of the United States, as China remains reliant on the American

security umbrella in the Middle East. As Singh (2021) observes, it is the United States Navy, not the Chinese Navy, that secures oil shipments bound for China through the Strait of Hormuz. The United States maintains a strong naval presence across the region, with its Fifth Fleet headquartered in Manama, Bahrain, while China has been dispatching naval vessels on counter-piracy missions in the Arabian Sea since 2008. These Chinese vessels have occasionally made port calls in Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), signalling a growing but still modest regional engagement. Given that both the United States and Chinese economies depend heavily on global seaborne trade, much of which passes through Middle Eastern Sea lanes, maintaining the stability in the Middle East remains a shared strategic interest between the United States and Beijing. But, while China's and the United States' interests seem 'in the same shoes' in the context of regional stability and energy security, China has a different approach in engaging with Middle East security and political issues. This difference stems from China's approach for its global strategy. According to Niblock (2020), there are six key elements of China's global strategy which are: safeguarding China's sovereignty; China's rejection of strategies based on 'hegemony, expansion or spheres of influence'; actively contributing to building a community with a shared future for mankind; creating structures of cooperation among countries whose interests and values are deemed to be complementary to China's; building a fortified national defence and a strong military; and promoting China's economic interests on the world stage.

Hence, China's approach to its interests in the Middle East differs significantly from that of the United States, even though they may share common interests in certain issues, such as energy, commerce and energy flow through Middle East Sea Lane, and regional stability. The United States primarily pursues its security interests in the region through military intervention and by actively building collective security alliances. This approach has been heavily criticised by China, particularly the use of norms such as promotion of democracy and collective security, which China views as sources of instability. In contrast, China's global strategic approach directly challenges and critiques the US strategy in the Middle East. The rejection of hegemony in international relations and the assertion that respect for national sovereignty must be the guiding principle in all interstate relations are recurring themes in the speeches and official documents issued by Chinese leaders and government bodies. China's appeal to countries in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America largely centres on this anti-hegemonic stance (Niblock 2020). The United States' hegemonic practice is also mentioned by various Middle East state leaders. According to President of Iran Masoud Pezeshkian, under his administration Iran 'will champion the establishment of a "strong region" rather than one where a single country pursues hegemony and dominance over the others' (Pezeshkian 2024). Furthermore, during the 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan, President Xi Jinping met with President Masoud Pezehkian who asserted that Iran is ready to

collaborate with China to maintain strong mutual support for their core interests and to oppose hegemony and bullying. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, when giving an interview with China Central Television (CCTV), also mentioned that China plays an important role as a superpower and stated that 'when it talks about partnership, it talks about a new principle, not about hegemony' (Ali 2023). Like Iran, Syria also established a strategic partnership with China during President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Hangzhou on 22 September 2023.

China has clearly emphasised its distinct approach to security issues in the Middle East and how it pursues its interests in the region. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that 'in the eyes of the United States, international law seems to be a tool that can be used whenever it finds useful and discarded if it does not want to use it' (Alterman 2024). This statement underscores China's criticism of the United States for selectively applying international law or norms that have been institutionalised to justify its actions and foreign policies, which China views as reflecting hegemonic tendencies. As China's government stated through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs official website, 'Democracy is a common value of humanity and must not be used as a tool to advance geopolitical agenda or counter human development and progress. However, in order to maintain its hegemony, the US has long been monopolizing the definition of "democracy", instigating division and confrontation in the name of democracy' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023c). China showed its strong stance against the United States's hegemonic practice in the Middle East and mentioned Iraq as an example. As noted from Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin on 20 March 2023 'The US decision to wage the Iraq War was based on a lie. The war wreaked havoc on Iraq and the Middle East, and had a devastating impact on world peace and stability. . . Hegemonism must be firmly rejected' (Embassy of the PRC in Montenegro 2023). Furthermore, as M. Singh (2016) argues, the United States advances its interests through a robust military presence, generous military and economic aid to allies, the promotion of political and economic development, and both diplomatic and occasional military interventions. In contrast, China has sought to cultivate cordial relations with all governments in the region, through dialogue, non-interference, multilateralism and against the collective security approach that the United States pushes in the Middle East region. In order to balance the United States's approach in the Middle East that China's government has labeled 'hegemonic', the Chinese government then soft balances it through normative balancing efforts by creating the GSI as a new security norm that serves as an alternative for Middle East security architecture that was led and dominated by the United States.

## The GSI and Middle East security architecture

Because the GSI represents China's normative balancing against the United States, it functions as a rhetorical instrument within security discourse aimed at con-

straining US dominance. Through the GSI, China positions itself as a norm entre-preneur, promoting alternative security frameworks that challenge US influence, particularly in the Middle East. This strategy exemplifies a form of soft balancing, which has become increasingly pronounced amid the intensifying Sino-American rivalry. While the rivalry began to surface during President Barack Obama's 'Pivot to Asia', it was under President Donald Trump that it became institutionalised. Within his first year in office, the Trump administration released a new National Security Strategy that reclassified China from a strategic partner to a strategic competitor, framing the bilateral relationship as a zero-sum contest (Hu 2020). Unlike the Cold War, the Sino-American rivalry is not rooted in opposing political ideologies but in a contest for global influence within a deeply interconnected international system. As Rudolf (2021) argues, this rivalry differs significantly from the US-Soviet dynamic, given the high level of economic interdependence between China and the United States. This interdependence makes the competition one of influence and strategic positioning rather than ideological confrontation. In this context, China seeks to counter what it perceives as US hegemony through soft balancing measures, avoiding direct military confrontation or coercive tactics. Despite overlapping interests in some areas, China's global strategic approach remains firmly opposed to hegemonic practices, particularly those associated with the United States. This position is reflected in numerous statements by senior Chinese officials. From China's perspective, the United States is unlikely to allow any unchecked expansion of Chinese global influence, especially as the rivalry has intensified since Trump's first term. On the other hand, the US increasingly views China as a revisionist power aiming to reshape the international order. As (Perthes 2021) notes, the Sino-American rivalry is a multidimensional contest that spans economic, technological and geopolitical domains. Therefore, as explained in the previous section, although China and the United States may share the same inter-ests in the Middle East, China has consistently emphasised that its approach to the region is fundamentally different from that of the United States. Beijing views the United States as a hegemonic power whose use of norms such as democracy promotion to intervene and collective security has contributed to instability and conflict in the region. As the Sino-American rivalry intensifies, China is increas-ingly positioning itself in opposition to US hegemony in the Middle East. In this context, China is using the GSI as a normative balancing strategy to counteract US dominance and promote an alternative security framework.

The Middle East is cited as a priority region in the GSI, which outlines a 'five-point proposal on realizing peace and stability in the Middle East' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023b). Even before the official launch of the GSI in 2022, President Xi Jinping had already advocated for a common, comprehensive, coop-erative and sustainable security architecture in the region during the 8th Ministe-rial Meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in 2018 (China

Institute of International Studies 2022). The GSI represents China's soft balancing in the form of normative balancing against US hegemonic practices in the region. The United States promotes collective security as the guiding norm for Middle East architecture, relying on military alliances to maintain its influence. It also uses norms such as promotion of democracy and human rights to justify political and military interventions. In contrast, China's GSI emphasises security through dialogue, negotiation and multilateralism. Unlike the US alliance-based model, China rejects exclusive blocs in favour of inclusive and cooperative mechanisms. It has also strengthened ties with Arab states through multilateral platforms. As Foreign Minister Wang Yi noted, the CASCF serves as an engine driving the development of China-Arab relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs thePRC 2018). At the Second Middle East Security Forum in 2022, Wang reiterated that the GSI offers a platform for cooperation with Middle Eastern countries and the international community to jointly build a new regional security architecture (China Institute of International Studies 2022). Because the GSI functions as China's normative balancing against the United States' hegemonic presence and policies often justified through democracy promotion and collective security, the GSI is then positioned as a counter-norm to the United States' approach in the Middle East. The GSI reflects China's efforts to promote alternative norms that shape how security issues should be managed. In the context of Middle East security, the GSI embodies a security norm that challenges the norm principles that United States employs to advance its security interests in the region. China, as a norm entrepreneur, actively promotes three key security norms through the GSI: non-interference, indivisible security and Sino-centrism. The three main security norms of the GSI will have implications for the security architecture of the Middle East if China successfully promoted the norms, as they directly challenge the traditional security approach of the United States. Ultimately, this may influence how security is structured and managed across the region.

The first security norm that China promotes through the GSI is non-interference. This norm directly challenges the United States interventionist approach to Middle East security, which has been evident since the end of the Cold War through military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as in the broader context of how the United States manages and protects Israel security issues as one of its key security interests in the region. The non-interference aspect of the GSI is clearly reflected in the GSI Concept Paper, which emphasises the importance of 'respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries' and asserts that 'a country's internal affairs stream has no external interference'. These principles underscore China's commitment to a security approach that contrasts sharply with the interventionist policies often pursued by the United States in the Middle East (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023b). The non-interference norm of the GSI differentiates China's approach to the Middle Eastern security architecture from

that of the United States. From China's perspective, the United States has used various norms and values to justify and maintain its entrenched hegemonic position in the region. In contrast, China emphasises a principle of non-interference. As stated in the GSI Concept Paper, the initiative advocates non-interference in internal affairs and respect for the development paths and social systems independently chosen by the people of different countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People's Republic of China 2023e). This principle was reaffirmed at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2024, where Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Chen Xiaodong stated that China will continue to explore the Chinese way to address hotspot issues featuring a commitment to non-interference in internal affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2024a).

China has actively cultivated relations with various Middle Eastern countries on the basis of these non-interference principles. This commitment was exemplified during President Xi Jinping's meeting with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian at the BRICS summit in Kazan, where both leaders affirmed their mutual support and commitment to upholding the non-interference norm (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2024d). The partnership between China and Iran reflects the broader application of Wang Yi's four proposals for a new security architecture in the Middle East, which are positioned as key elements of the GSI (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2022a). First, all countries' legitimate security concerns should be respected, and no state should seek unilateral or absolute security. This reflects the norm of indivisible security. Second, the dominant role of Middle Eastern countries in regional affairs must be upheld, reinforcing the principle of non-interference. Third, all parties should abide by the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, reflecting China's emphasis on multilateralism. Fourth, regional security dialogue should be strengthened through platforms such as a proposed Gulf security dialogue, promoting mutual trust and common security through diplomacy. This reflects China's diplomatic approach with Chinese characteristics to addressing security issues in the Middle East.

The implications of China's GSI and its non-interference norm could potentially be significant for Middle East security architecture. On 12 June 2025, Israel launched Operation Rising Lion, a series of missile strikes targeting the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the attack was aimed at 'the heart' of Iran's nuclear programme (Lam et al. 2025). Iran then retaliated by launching a series of missiles to Israel's capital Tel Aviv. Iran retaliation against Israel sparked a reaction from Washington. The United States' political elites remain divided over how to respond to the escalating conflict between Israel and Iran. Republican hawks were quick to express their support for Israel, despite the fact that Israel first initiated the missile strikes on Iran. In contrast, progressive Democrats criticised Israel's actions, emphasising that a war with Iran would not serve the strategic interests of the United States (Al Jazeera

2025). President Trump himself stated that the United States may or may not join Israel's campaign against Iran, reflecting Washington's ambiguous stance on the conflict (Holland et al. 2025). In contrast, China adopted a more decisive and clearly pro-Iran position. Beijing strongly condemned Israel's actions, asserting that they violated fundamental norms of international relations. However, unlike the debate among American political elites regarding the possibility of direct military intervention, China clearly emphasised the need to deescalate the conflict through dialogue despite Beijing's strong support toward Iran. President Xi Jinping stated that 'the force used by Israel against the Iranians cannot establish lasting peace between the two sides', while Foreign Minister Wang Yi affirmed that 'China is ready to play a constructive role in containing the escalation of the conflict between Tehran and Tel Aviv' (Helmy 2025). China's approach reflects its broader interest in maintaining regional stability, as prolonged political turmoil in the Middle East could seriously disrupt its energy supply. Throughout the crisis, China consistently promoted a non-interference approach, in contrast to the interventionist strategies often pursued by the United States. This position was reiterated by Xi Jinping during a summit with five Central Asian nations in Kazakhstan on 17 June 2025, where he declared that 'China opposes any actions that infringe upon the sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of other countries' (Wang & Lee 2025). If China and its non-interference approach are increasingly accepted as the correct framework for managing conflicts in the Middle East, with China positioned as a central negotiator, then the United States' traditional military intervention to secure its interests in the region may face strong backlash. China could use the non-interference norm as a rhetorical tool to exert pressure on Washington. In such a scenario, the United States would find it increasingly difficult to justify its interventionist actions by invoking the rhetoric of democracy promotion, whether to overthrow authoritarian regimes or to support its strategic allies.

The second security norm that China promotes through the GSI is indivisible security. Indivisible security refers to the idea that the security of states within a region is interconnected and that no country should pursue its own security at the expense of others (Freeman & Stephenson 2022). In the context of the GSI, China extends this principle to include a comprehensive view of security, encompassing individual, traditional and non-traditional aspects, as well as balancing security rights with security obligations, and linking security with development. China has designed the GSI around the concept of indivisible security to counter what it views as the hegemonic role of the United States. From Beijing's perspective, the United States is responsible for numerous global conflicts caused by its bloc politics by creating collective security alliances to contain certain countries. The GSI therefore serves as an alternative security norm for the United States' collective security norm. The GSI principle of indivisible security is evidently from the

GSI concept paper as well as from Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China H.E Chen Xiandong, who stated that the GSI highlights 'the indivisibility of the security community of mankind' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2024c). The indivisible security norm promoted by China through the Global Security Initiative may align it with like-minded countries in the Middle East that seek protection from United States hegemony. A key example of this is Iran. In a statement released on 26 October 2024, the Iranian Foreign Ministry responded to Israeli aggression targeting Iranian military sites by asserting that military and political support from the United States and other Western countries for Israel is the primary source of tension and insecurity in the Middle East (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran 2024).

The United States has long been motivated to establish a security bloc in the Middle East to deter Iran. According to Vice President Kamala Harris, Iran is considered the United States' main adversary (Al Jazeera 2024). Tehran's status as a key opponent cannot be separated from Iran's nuclear programme, accusations of Iranian government support for terrorist organisations, and its opposition to US allies in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Following Iran's launch of 200 ballistic missiles at Israel in retaliation for the killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, Vice President Harris stated that 'Iran has American blood on their hands'. The GSI functions as a form of normative balancing aimed at countering the security blocs that the United States promotes in the Middle East, particularly those designed to deter Iran. According to Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Esmaeil Baqaei, 'The real threat to regional security and stability is posed by the military presence of extra-regional actors, their military bases, and the Israeli regime, which is considered the root cause of all insecurity and a threat to Islamic countries' (Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). The reference to 'extra-regional actors' clearly points to the United States, underscoring the perception within the Iranian government of a hegemonic American presence in the region. The GSI clearly stated that indivisible security means that the 'security of one country should not come at the expense of that of others' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023b). Indivisible security will challenge the United States' bloc politics in the Middle East, which Washington actively builds through the GCC and MESA, which will constrain the United States' domination. China is clearly opposing the United States' bloc politics that Beijing perceives as the 'source' of the problem in the world, and the GSI is emerging as a solution.

The third security norm that China promotes through the GSI is Sino-centrism. Sino-centric refers to China's multilateral mechanisms, which it has developed to set or influence regional agendas and ensure its interest are addressed (Freeman et al. 2024). The GSI reflects China's intention to reshape global security norms to favour a Sinocentric order (Kim 2024). China will balance the United States' hegemonic domination by inserting various Chinese characteristics through the

GSI. Today, China is a rising power and a proactive norm entrepreneur seeking fundamental institutional and normative changes to global governance. The GSI is part of China's normative platform to build a community of common destiny (CCD) for mankind, serving as an alternative world-order vision (Kewalramani 2024). CCD refers to a group of nations bonded together by a common interest and fate. Zhang (2018) explained that CCD derives from traditional Chinese culture, which values peace and cooperation. CCD is closely linked to concepts of 'harmony being the most precious' (*he wei gui*), 'one world' (*shijie datong*) and 'harmony between heaven and humanity' (*tianren heyi*). One example of the implementation of the GSI in the Middle East, which China always refers to as a GSI achievement, is the diplomatic normalisation of Saudi Arabia and Iran. On 6 March 2023, China successfully brokered a discussion between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Beijing that led Tehran and Riyadh to normalise relations (Fantappie & Nasr 2023). Iran and Saudia Arabia are two Middle East regional powers arguing that rival relations are narrated as 'the Middle East Cold War' (Grumet 2015; Hiro 2019; Tzemprin et al. 2015). This success is heavily linked with the GSI approach which asserts that security can be brought about through 'political dialogue and peaceful negotiation' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People's Republic of China 2023b). China, through its state-owned newspapers like the 'Global Times', already endorsed the successful negotiation as example of the GSI in practice (Long 2023).

China then balances the United States through normative efforts by actively engaging in various Middle East security issues using the approach with 'Chinese characteristics' that emphasise cooperation, negotiation and harmony. This normative approach is quite different from the United States' approach in the Middle East, assertively instilling democracy in the Middle East. The United States' democracy initiative in the Middle East aims to spread American values and democracy to improve the security of the United States. In the minds of US political elites, especially during the George W. Bush administration, as democracy grows in the Middle East, the region will stop generating anti-American terrorism (Gause 2005). Based on China's report for implementation of the GSI released in 2024 by the China Institute of International Studies, 'China affirmed its support for the Arab countries to solve security issues in the region [Middle East] through solidarity and cooperation' (China Institute of International Studies 2024). Furthermore, based on the GSI implementation report, China has actively facilitated the political resolution of various hotspot issues in the Middle East, from Syrian issues to a two-state solution for the Palestine issues. China will always position itself as the central piece, whether as an initiator or facilitator, and use a diplomatic approach with 'Chinese characteristics' and use its multilateral organisations to further its role in Middle East security architecture. These multilateral organisations include the Shanghai Cooperation Organizations (SCO), the BRICS+ group of states, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia

(CICA), the 'China + Central Asia' mechanism, the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan and the China Horn of Africa Peace, Governance and Development conference (Mariani 2024).

## Conclusion

The United States has long been the dominant external actor shaping the Middle East's security architecture. However, the growing presence of China in the region and Beijing's invitation for Middle Eastern countries to participate in the Global Security Initiative signal a potential shift in the regional order. The Global Security Initiative represents China's normative balancing strategy: a form of soft balancing aimed at constraining the United States' hegemonic influence without direct confrontation. Through the GSI, China promotes a set of alternative security norms – indivisible security, Sino-centrism and non-interference – as a counter-framework to the norms traditionally advanced by the United States.

China positions the GSI as a pathway to reshape the security architecture of the Middle East. Indivisible security appeals to countries like Iran that have long been sidelined by US-led collective security efforts. While Washington has pursued alliance-based strategies that frame Iran as a regional threat, Beijing's approach emphasises mutual security and cooperation across the region. The Sino-centric dimension of the GSI reflects China's ambition to act as a central diplomatic actor by promoting solutions to regional issues through platforms and mechanisms designed with Chinese characteristics. This approach reinforces China's aspiration to play a leading role in regional governance. The norm of non-interference serves as a direct critique of the United States' interventionist policies and capitalises on growing dissatisfaction in the region with external military involvement. By emphasising respect for sovereignty and local agency, China seeks to offer a more acceptable and less intrusive model of engagement. Taken together, these norms form the foundation of China's normative balancing strategy and present a challenge to the existing US-led security order. As more Middle Eastern states engage with the GSI, the region's security architecture may gradually shift toward one that reflects China's vision for a more inclusive, multilateral and sovereignty-oriented approach.

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