

Ukraine war realigns positions between China, Middle East

When the political skies clear, it could easily be Beijing, and not Washington, that gains ground in the region

As the war in Ukraine enters its third month, more convergence has emerged between China and key states in the Middle East. Motivated by a shared frustration with the United States, China and its Middle East partners have found themselves on the same side more often than not regarding the conflict.

Evidence of this alignment is found in the voting records of three recent United Nations resolutions.

On February 26, the UN Security Council voted on a resolution that would have demanded that Moscow immediately stop its attack on Ukraine and withdraw all troops. Three members of the Security Council abstained, namely China, India, and the United Arab Emirates.

Less than a week later, on March 2, the UN General Assembly voted on a motion calling for an immediate end to the hostilities. In that vote, China, Iran and Iraq were among 35 countries that abstained.

And on April 7, the General Assembly adopted a resolution suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council. This time, a much longer list of Middle East countries abstained, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait and Iraq. China, Iran and Syria were among those voting against.

Taken together, the tallies at the UN reveal an inconvenient truth: Even as much of the world condemns Russia's hostilities in Ukraine, the war has led to China and the Middle East having more in common on various positions.

Some of the commonalities are self-serving. For instance, support for Russia's seat on the Human Rights Council was due to shared concern over precedent, and how their own human-rights records might be judged in the future. Others' moves, such as the UAE's abstention from the UNSC resolution calling for an end to fighting, was driven by annoyance that Washington failed to designate the

Houthis as terrorists despite the group's attack on an oil refinery in Abu Dhabi on January 17.

While Russia maintains relationships with and influence in the Middle East and China – through historical ties, investments, and leverage (as well as shared grievances with the West) – it is actually rifts between the US and the Middle East that are driving Gulf states closer to China.

The consequences of this alignment could be significant. In March, The Wall Street Journal reported that Saudi Arabia was negotiating with China over Beijing's desire to buy oil with renminbi, a request the kingdom is apparently considering on economic and political grounds.

The US-Saudi relationship is at its lowest point in a decade, primarily due to Washington's concerns over Saudi domestic politics and human-rights abuses, especially the 2018 assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. If the renminbi deal happens, it could pose a significant challenge to the dollar's status as the global trade currency.

The war in Ukraine has also added another layer of uncertainty to Washington's relationship with the Middle East.

President Joe Biden's administration is divided between a focus on the Indo-Pacific region and America's role in the European theater – between a rising China and a belligerent Russia. This presents the US with a quandary: Does it have the resources and political will to stay fully engaged in the Middle East? If the answer is “no,” the region will face many uncertainties amid a potential power vacuum.

No country is better positioned to fill that vacuum than China, even if Beijing calculates its steps carefully. Beijing has been boosting its engagement with the Middle East for a decade, and diplomatic engagement has soared.

In 2021 alone, the Chinese foreign minister visited the Middle East twice, stopping in nine countries. Moreover, in January this year, China hosted the secretary general of the Gulf Cooperation Council as well as the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Turkey.

Ukraine isn't the only issue bolstering China's role in the Middle East. The

COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the Chinese presence through the deployment of vaccines. Since 2020, millions of doses of China's Sinopharm have been administered in the region.

Beijing is also eagerly looking for opportunities to enhance its role in regional conflict resolution, regularly making proposals to reach peace in Syria and Iran. China may not yet want to replace the US as the primary security provider in the Middle East, but it free-rides as much as it tries to expand its own influence.

That might be the most important takeaway of the last two months. While the war in Ukraine did not create the convergence between China and the Middle East, it has expedited a process that was already in motion.

With the US preoccupied in the Indo-Pacific region and in Europe, and with bilateral relations strained between the US and key Middle East allies, the region's great-power dynamics are shifting under the clouds of conflict in Ukraine.

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