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# Strategic Repositioning of the Middle East

## ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURES, SECURITY IMPERATIVES, AND MULTIPOLAR GEOPOLITICS

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## Abstract

How are changing patterns of global energy supply and demand reconfiguring the Middle East's geopolitical position in an increasingly multipolar world? What implications do new energy infrastructures and shifting security imperatives hold for the region? To answer these questions, the study examines the strategic repositioning of the Middle East within global energy geopolitics using descriptive case study methodology. Long anchored at the heart of international energy politics due to its vast hydrocarbon reserves, the region is now navigating a new era shaped by changing patterns of demand and supply. As global energy consumption rises, the emergence of alternative suppliers—particularly US shale production—has reduced Western dependence on Middle Eastern oil, contributing to a broader transition toward multipolarity in global power relations, where major energy importers such as China and Russia is reshaping regional alignments and introducing new sources of influence.

Two critical developments stand out in this context: the securitization of maritime routes and energy installations, and the expansion of energy corridors across politically volatile zones. These factors, while essential for sustaining energy flows, simultaneously intensify the region's exposure to geopolitical rivalries and armed conflict. The study argues that ensuring secure, diversified routes for energy transportation is central to both regional security and global energy governance. Ultimately, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the Middle East's evolving role at the intersection of energy, security, and a multipolar environment.

**Keywords**
*energy security; geopolitics; Middle East; multipolarity; resource corridors*

## Introduction

The Middle East's persistent relevance in global affairs is not a new phenomenon. The region has long played an important role on the global stage due to its ideal geographical location and vast natural resources. Initially, Western countries were drawn to the region because of its strategic importance, prompting the establishment of protectorates and military bases in the area. During the period from the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, the colonial empires expanded their trading portfolios to include more resources and goods, deepening their ties with the region. As energy resources, especially oil, were increasingly integrated into regional countries' foreign policy objectives, energy emerged as a non-traditional global security problem. With the expansion of international trade, moreover, these nations' attention progressively shifted to other regions of Asia, which is now seen as a rising economic powerhouse in the changing world order. Meanwhile, strategic trade routes such as the Horn of Africa and the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca continued to serve as critical arteries for global trade, including energy trade.

This paper aims to examine the new Middle East as a highlight of an increasingly globalized world order, owing principally to its energy availability, access, and trade within the context of multipolarity. The admission of major Middle Eastern countries, such as

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE, to BRICS marks a new era of multilateral engagements, marking a classic shift from sole US dependency to multipolarity, resulting in a shift away from a unipolar setting in terms of energy geopolitics (Gürcan, 2023). This realignment underscores the growing relevance of "multipolarity" as an analytical lens for understanding contemporary global transformations. The literature offers numerous definitions of "multipolarity" (see Gürcan and Otero, 2024 for a literature review on multipolarity), but it is generally understood as an international system dominated by three or more powers, as different from bipolarity conceived as an international system of two great powers and unipolarity as an international system with one dominant power (Stein, 2015). This being said, contemporary multipolarity is no longer defined solely by competition among states, but also by the rise of global governance frameworks—such as the United Nations—which increasingly challenge and limit state power (McGlinchey et al. 2024, Gürcan & Otero, 2024). Importantly, the majority of European powers are increasingly engaged in commerce with Asian countries, resulting in a multipolar geo-economic structure.

Descriptive case study can be defined as a research method that involves a detailed historical investigation of a single event or phenomenon, with the aim of documenting its trajectory, preserving insights for future policy use, and generating analogies that can guide practitioners in recognizing effective strategies (Odell, 2001; Gürcan, 2022). Using descriptive case study methodology, this article is structured in four sections. The first section analyzes the enduring centrality of the Middle East in global energy geopolitics, emphasizing how oil and gas reserves have historically anchored both regional security dynamics and international power competition. It traces the evolution from US-led unipolar dominance—shaped by Cold War imperatives and the petrodollar system—to a more contested multipolar landscape marked by rising Asian powers, and de-dollarization. In the second section, the article focuses on the intensification of pipeline politics under multipolarity. Through examples ranging from the Syrian crisis to the Strait of Hormuz, this section also illustrates how energy infrastructure has

become both a strategic asset and a source of geopolitical vulnerability. It analyzes the strategic role of new transnational energy infrastructure and corridor diplomacy (e.g., IMEC and BRI) in reconfiguring regional alignments and investment flows. In the third section, economic diversification in the region and an outlook beyond oil is presented. Finally, the paper concludes with a section devoted to how Middle Eastern countries are actively pursuing long-term economic diversification to reduce dependence on oil, foster sustainable development, and reshape their identities through reform-driven modernization. Amid a global shift toward multipolarity and US strategic retrenchment, the region is forging deeper economic and technological ties with rising Asian powers—most notably China, India, Japan, and South Korea—through investment, cooperation, and trade realignments, which reflects another aspect of multipolarization in the region.

## Re-Situating the Middle East in Global Energy Geopolitics: From US Unipolarity to Multipolarity

Given the abundance of Middle Eastern hydrocarbon (oil/gas) resources, international actors have exhibited strong interest in the region. A closer look at the Middle East's economic profile highlights the region's heavy reliance on natural resources, especially oil and gas. Countries in the region with significant oil reserves include Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, and Yemen, among others. Meanwhile, countries like Qatar and Iran have vast natural gas deposits. Historically, the establishment of OPEC in 1960 had greatly contributed to the balancing of worldwide oil markets. These institutions were essential in shaping the global oil market while keeping the oil crisis under control. As a result, oil became a supranational commodity and an integral part of every state's foreign strategy. Furthermore, the formation of regional organizations became an important component of regional integration and security. For instance, the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 ushered in the trend of

regional securitization interacting with foreign powers. Bahrain, for example, is home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet (US Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, n.d.). Indeed, the GCC was originally formed to enhance the economic and military security functionalities.

Traditionally, Europe had played a tangible role in the Middle East by establishing trade agreements with the region. With European powers playing a dominant role in the early phases of industrialization, they sought to assert a unipolar influence over the Middle East—shaping the region through protectorates and resisting nationalist movements. A key example is the joint UK-French opposition to Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. These dynamics were later altered when the Cold War powers (the United States and the Soviet Union) expanded their influence in the region, forcing Europe out. Yet, the end of the Cold War witnessed an expansion of US policy. Thus, the US emerged as a unipolar power in the Middle East, providing security to the region's trembling regimes. While Europe established trading relations with other regions, the US stimulated its ties with the region and developed a welcoming and friendly affiliation with the Middle East, with oil and security at its foundation. As Gause (1994) argues, "royalties from oil exploration concessions and then from the sale of oil provided a steady (and steadily increasing) source of revenue to the rulers of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharja (in what would become the UAE) from 1930s through the 1960s (Gause, 1994, p. 45)."

Indeed, natural resources (hydrocarbons) constitute a central pillar in the global security architecture, which are also crucial to the vitality of manufacturing. Thus, the US-led securitization arc was originally designed to prioritize these resources, ensuring their quick and easy transfer to approved clients. The United States became the main importer of Middle Eastern oil after World War II, forming a lasting partnership that impacted the political and economic development of the region. Moreover, the establishment of the petrodollar economy was facilitated by the enormous revenue

created for the area by the influx of Middle Eastern oil into US and European markets (Tran, 2024).

Historically, the Industrial Revolution had already caused global energy consumption to surge, laying the foundation for a petroleum-driven world. As modern technologies such as automobiles, transistors, and computers became widespread, the demand for oil grew even further. In response to this rising demand—and amid the gradual decline of US unipolarity—several emerging economies later began strategically positioning themselves as future industrial powerhouses. Asian countries like China, Japan, India, South Korea, and Singapore made large investments in technological advancement and the training of skilled and semi-skilled labourers in order to take part in the global industrial boom in the longer term. China's remarkable transformation into a global manufacturing hub is particularly noteworthy (Gürcan, 2022). A key component of its strategic expansion was the acquisition of reliable energy supply, particularly from the Middle East. Beijing employed a deliberate and often sophisticated diplomatic approach to progressively develop ties with the region's key oil-producing countries. This new dynamic has sparked significant worries about Asia's expanding influence in regional security. China's place as a stable and important regional leader was solidified in March 2023, when it brokered a peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Cafiero, 2024).

These events highlight the larger global trend towards a multipolar world system. As the United States assumed the role of a crucial security guarantee, particularly for Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, and the larger Middle East region, this transactional relationship developed into a longer-term strategic engagement, but the emergence of the shale oil boom in the late 2000s marked a dramatic shift in this long-standing relationship. The US was able to maintain relative energy self-sufficiency thanks to the development of sophisticated extraction technologies and the subsequent relaxation of the oil export ban. America's energy policy and, by extension, its geopolitical interests in the Middle East were drastically altered by the shale oil boom. Therefore, the conventional oil-for-security paradigm that had long

defined US-Middle Eastern ties has been successfully undermined by the shale revolution. Washington's strategic engagement in the region sparked a process of recalibration with greater energy independence, raising serious questions about the viability of its long-standing security commitments.

Indeed, petroleum has historically occupied a central and indispensable role in the formation and maintenance of ties between the United States and the Middle East. The influx of petrodollars had helped fuel economic development across the region. At the same time, oil trade became increasingly securitized — and at times weaponized. A key example is the 1973 oil embargo, when Arab members of OPEC halted exports to the US and others in response to their support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War. The move triggered a global energy crisis and sent oil prices soaring, demonstrating the geopolitical power of energy. There are numerous other examples throughout history where energy conduits were secured through militarization. Oil tankers were attacked in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), which seriously disrupted the economy. The ongoing fragility of these crucial chokepoints was highlighted in 2024 when US Navy personnel escorted commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz after Houthi strikes. As described by Pradhan (2024),"the recent involvement of the Houthis in the war against Israel has further escalated tensions in the Red Sea, creating significant maritime security challenges for Saudi Arabia. …In response to the deteriorating security situation in the Red Sea, a US-led military coalition has launched Operation Prosperity Guardian to ensure maritime security in the region."

Similarly, the US-led involvement during Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait was a calculated effort to safeguard Saudi Arabia and larger regional oil flows in addition to being a reaction to regional aggression. These incidents highlight the Middle East's ongoing significance in US energy policy, beginning with Saudi Arabia, which has long been seen as a crucial "swing producer" due to its exceptional capacity to raise or lower output. Riyadh has gained significant clout in international diplomacy and the energy markets thanks to this role (Colgan, 2013).

On the one hand, the economic development of today's developing Asian countries cannot keep up with the military influence of the West, particularly the United States. On the other, US unipolar power in the region is under strain as other Asian nations, like China, are significantly expanding their economies in the Middle East. Middle Eastern oil and gas (LNG) transactions are moving away from dollars and towards alternative currency options like the Yuan, Ruble, Euro, and Rupee due to impending issues. For instance, India and Saudi Arabia signed a currency exchange deal for trade (including oil) in 2021. India-Russia oil commerce is conducted in rupees. Moreover, China and Russia agreed on oil-for-loans arrangements in 2016 for the next 25 years. Saudi Arabia and China also reached a currency swap arrangement. Similarly, in 2023, China and Saudi Arabia entered into a local currency swap arrangement valued at $7 billion, aimed at enhancing bilateral trade through the use of their national currencies and diminishing dependence on the US dollar (Bhaduri, 2024). That same year, Iraq permitted the settlement of trade transactions with China in yuan for the first time, marking a significant shift in regional financial practices. In March 2023, China conducted its inaugural liquefied natural gas (LNG) purchase from the UAE using yuan (Chang et al., 2024). In Iran's case, approximately 45% of payments for oil imports were settled in Indian rupees and deposited into an account held at UCO Bank in Kolkata, while the remaining balance was disbursed in euros via Türkiye (Ramdas, 2013).

In this environment, the global recognition of risks undermining the regional security architecture prompted the involvement of multiple actors to fill the resulting power vacuum. As a result, emphasis is placed on the Middle East's stability and security to guarantee the safe flow of energy from these high-risk waters. The involvement of other stakeholders has become more conducive to the changing geopolitical environment. This can be viewed through the lens of pipeline politics as a contributor to the Syrian crisis, as well as Russia's military participation in Syria after 2014. Consequently, the new energy geopolitics has become a complex game with several contestants, pushing multipolarity to the forefront. In

addition to extra-regional powers, non-state actors such as Hamas, the Houthis, and Hezbollah are also competing for influence and access to oil revenues. Put differently, a growing number of less powerful regional actors—often adversarial to the US and ideologically distinct—are nonetheless asserting themselves and increasingly challenging American dominance in the Middle East. Nevertheless, no other state has yet matched the United States in providing the same level of strategic security and protection.

## Corridor Geopolitics: Energy, Infrastructure, and New Routes of Global Power in the Multipolar Era

The Cold War era, a corollary of World War II, had opened the way for a bipolar order between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the US. During this era, oil inevitably became the backbone of military-industrial complexes that produced new armaments, fighter jets, choppers, and submarines. While the Cold War solidified the strategic importance of Middle Eastern oil, the evolving global energy landscape has introduced new dynamics that continue to make the region central to geopolitical competition. Many argue that the future of oil looks bleak, as the coming era is expected to be increasingly dominated by alternative and renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, hydro, nuclear, and, to a lesser extent, liquefied natural gas (LNG). Even in the most pessimistic forecasts, however, hydrocarbons remain the backbone of manufacturing and will continue to drive global economic development. This is where the Middle East retains its strategic significance.

Worthy of special emphasis in this regard is that regional suppliers such as Qatar have been active in the LNG market. Controlling the flow of resources means shaping the very rules of the game, which is why energy pipeline projects often compete with one another. Syria is a typical example of how pipeline geopolitics may be used to contribute to major conflicts, where external powers strive to maintain influence in the region by leveraging internal divisions and strategic dependencies (Gürcan, 2019). As Hinnebusch

further explains, "when there is a hegemonic power (UK, USA) able to 'lay down the law' on behalf of the world capitalist system (in the Middle East ensuring its access to cheap energy), and especially if the regional system is simultaneously divided (the usual condition), it is easy for external powers to exploit local rivalries to sustain their penetration of the region (Hinnebusch, 2003, p. 4)."

The projected natural gas pipelines therefore provide a clear example of the competitiveness in the Middle East's energy sector. For example, a proposed pipeline that would start in Iran, go via Syria, and end at ports in Europe directly threatened Qatar's ambitions to increase its natural gas exports to the rich European market (Gürcan, 2019). Being a large and energy-intensive economic union with 27 member states, the European Union is a highly sought-after location for gas exports. The fact that opposing coalitions of countries supported these competing pipeline projects emphasizes even more how the dynamics of a changing, multipolar world order are changing. According to Rettig, "now that the Assad regime has fallen and relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia have warmed, Turkey is again interested in advancing the Turkey-Qatar gas pipeline project (Rettig, 2025, p. 2)."

The extensive network of Russian gas pipelines that currently supplies much of Europe's energy needs offers another compelling example supporting the narrative of growing multipolarity. Particularly, the Nord Stream pipeline, which directly channels Russian gas to Europe, has fostered a situation of increasing energy reliance on Russia for numerous European states. On the other hand, the United States aggressively backed the construction of the Nabucco pipeline, a project designed to deliver natural gas from Central Asia to European markets, in an attempt to lessen Europe's reliance on Russian gas supplies. This initiative effectively demonstrates that pipeline politics in the Middle East are not isolated phenomena but rather integral components of broader energy strategies on a planetary scale, within which the Middle East region continues to occupy a pivotal position. Moreover, traditional maritime channels such as the Suez Canal and straits such as Hormuz and Malacca have survived to bear large chunks of the global maritime energy traffic.

A quarter of global oil trade goes through the Straits. Yet, traditional vessels have restricted access due to two factors: the limited depth of these routes/channels and their deterioration due to extensive usage.

The status of high seas has been jeopardized in recent decades as a result of terrorist activities, wars, piracy, and other non-state activities. These several issues make the Middle East geo-economically susceptible to instabilities while preserving their relevance. Due to pipeline sabotage by various terrorists and non-state actors, meanwhile, the land infrastructure that delivers enormous amounts of gas and oil resources is in danger. In a similar vein, Middle Eastern countries like Iran are unable to sell their gas to many other countries due to certain limitations, but they do supply these resources to some neighboring countries like Türkiye. Much of this interruption has been caused by the continuing Hamas-Israeli conflict since the October 7, 2023 attacks. Furthermore, several factions seek to control these corridors, which are critical for the survival of global trade. One of the grounds for the Houthis' attack on the Red Sea was control of the Bab-al-Mandeb trade route. These wars have compounded the region's economic turmoil, forcing its people to flee neighboring countries and resulting in economic disparities and suffering. For example, as reported by Malek (2024), "Iran's natural gas pipelines were attacked last month (in February 2024), disrupting flows to the provinces of Chaharmaha - Bakhtiari and Fars."

In this context, non-Western powers were able to fill the power vacuum created by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the emergence of ISIS, and the ongoing instability in the area. After 2011, Russia's renewed interest in the Middle East accelerated. The United States' slow withdrawal from Iraq and Syria due to changing priorities and internal issues made room, not only for Iran and Russia, but also for India and China to project regional influence, which strengthened the broader trend towards a multipolar world order.

India's larger goals to increase connectivity across regions are reflected in its strategic initiatives, such as the India-Middle East-

Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). By connecting New Delhi with important allies like Tehran and Riyadh, these initiatives aspire to expand India's reach to as far as Europe. A smooth commerce and transportation route from India through the Middle East and into European markets is what IMEC specifically envisions, highlighting the geopolitical and economic significance of corridor diplomacy in a world that is becoming more and more multipolar. Through the Mediterranean Sea, it links Greece (and other European nations) with Saudi Arabia, Israel, India, and the United Arab Emirates. The rail line links Jebel Ali (UAE) to Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) and Haifa (Israel), while the maritime route runs from Mumbai to Jebel Ali (UAE) and Haifa (Israel) to Piraeus (Greece).

China's economic corridors, like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), express similar aspirations. As highlighted by Siddiqi (2022, p. 74), "the Khalifa port in UAE, Duqm port in Oman, Jizan port in Saudi Arabia, Port Said in Egypt and Ain Sokhna port in Djibouti all form part of Chinese ongoing projects in the region under BRI." These corridors are transnational and pass through many countries and regions. China's Silk Road cuts through Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Türkiye, to Russia, finally reaching the European touchpoints of France and Belgium, with further scope for expansion. The Maritime Silk Route passes through the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, into the Red Sea, Mediterranean Sea, touching the coasts of Greece and Italy. Such alternative routes increase the buoyancy of global trade while addressing issues such as piracy and other attacks on shipping routes.

Indeed, corridor strategies and pipeline geopolitics are inextricably linked. This being said, the building of pipelines is frequently motivated by factors other than financial gain, and they might be national, regional, or worldwide in scope. Fundamentally, they are geared towards guaranteeing that energy will always be available, reasonably priced, and plentiful for the people who rely on it. Cross-border collaboration is also crucial since the nations that these important infrastructures pass through are ultimately responsible for their upkeep and security. The strain on existing networks

gradually lessens as new pipeline routes are designed and constructed. The transportation of petroleum and liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the Middle East is likely to account for a large portion of the traffic that passes through these new corridors. This change could lessen Europe's reliance on established vendors like Russia.

In this changing landscape, energy geopolitics is no longer just about supply and demand. It is also about the strategic realignment of alliances and the adoption of new frameworks to navigate a world shaped by evolving energy corridors and interconnected interests. These new corridors compete and operate as a deterrent to the opposing influence (for instance, IMEC vs. BRI), and they also serve as alternate ways to a safe business channel for the shipment of oil and LNG, both of which are endangered by acts of militancy and terrorism. For example, in 2019, Houthi forces launched coordinated attacks on key Saudi oil facilities in Khurais and Abqaiq, significantly disrupting the country's oil output (Hubbard, Karasz, & Reed, 2019). They took control of an oil storage facility in Jeddah once more in 2022, which for several months raised questions regarding the safety of Saudi Arabia's energy infrastructure (Al Jazeera, 2022). In the meantime, tensions in the region have also focused on a crucial oil pipeline that connects to Israel's Red Sea refinery and passes through the Negev Desert close to the Israel-Gaza border. Critical pipeline infrastructure has been the subject of recent Hamas and Houthi conflicts, thus endangering Israel's energy security.

These events demonstrate how vulnerable energy corridors are in conflict areas and how crucial multilateral cooperation is to their planning and protection. In order to maintain security and stability, the concept of a multipolar energy landscape requires the participation of numerous stakeholders in addition to varied supply and demand. The economic fortunes of many Middle Eastern countries were also permanently impacted by the volatility of world oil prices after the Arab Spring in 2011. Long stretches of low prices compelled numerous governments to enact tax and fiscal changes in order to control widening budget deficits, even while price spikes

were advantageous for oil-exporting nations that depend on petroleum earnings to finance their national budgets.

## A Future Beyond Oil? Economic Transformation and Strategic Diversification in the Middle East

When weighed against the flaws and challenges of an oil-based economy, the non-oil economic model appears to make sense, considering that it is being built with the grand goal of sustainability, job creation, and contribution to the state's coffers, all while striving to establish a new identity that is both modern and rooted in Islamic traditions. Nevertheless, economic diversification plans and other transformative socio-economic programs launched by Middle Eastern nations is expected to be a long-term strategy that will boost the region's financial capabilities while also making it less dependent on fluctuating oil prices. Furthermore, many regional countries propose privatizing only a tiny fraction of their public enterprises under this strategy. For example, in 2016, Saudi Arabia proposed privatizing a tiny portion of its national oil business, the Saudi Arabian Oil business (Saudi ARAMCO) (Macalister, 2016).

The changing status quo in the Middle East has created opportunities for boosting foreign investment, particularly from Asia including India, China, Japan, and South Korea. Today, virtually every sector of the economy — from manufacturing and healthcare to services, tourism, real estate, renewable energy, desalination, education, and agriculture — has been opened up to investments (Hertog, 2017). Energy, however, continues to be at the center of most economic activity and to attract most of the attention and capital despite this wide diversification. Nevertheless, Asian countries may play a significant role in promoting technical innovation in all these sectors. This responsibility has grown more prominent in light of the United States' increasingly restrained global posture. Since the beginning of President Trump's second term, there has been a visible trend of the US scaling back its commitments to long-standing allies, including those in Europe. While its position towards

international organizations, including repeated threats to leave the WTO, UN, and the Paris Agreement, has cast doubt on its dependability as a partner, the nation's foreign policy has become more focused on problems like Taiwan, Ukraine, and support for Israel.

In the Middle East, this changing dynamic is particularly noticeable. Instead of depending solely on Washington, major regional powers—especially Saudi Arabia—are now actively expanding their diplomatic and strategic alliances. The tendency towards a multipolar world order, in which power is shared by multiple international actors rather than concentrated in one superpower, is reflected in this evolution. As an alternative to the West, the Middle East is making a 'Pivot to Asia', with the give-and-take relationship principally rooted in the Oil for Technology plan, which is fitting for the demands of the time. Asia's emerging techno-hubs, such as China, Japan, and South Korea, can act as potential investors in Middle East growth if they meet their investment conditions. For example, Japan and Saudi Arabia have signed numerous Memorandums of Cooperation (MOCs) to boost the Saudi hydrocarbon (oil/gas) industry (Japan Oil, Gas & Metals National Corporation, n.d.). India's ONGC Videsh Ltd., a national oil firm (NOC), has energy assets in several Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the UAE (ONGC Videsh Limited, n.d.). Beijing's China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has assets in Iraq, Oman, and the UAE, while China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) has stakes in Iraq in the Middle East. Beijing also has invested more than forty billion dollars in energy-related areas in the region (Reuters, 2024). As another Reuters report highlights, "Abu Dhabi's state-owned Mubadala Investment Company [MUDEV.UL] has acquired a 44 percent stake worth at least $271 million (203 million pounds) in an oil subsidiary of gas giant Gazprom (Reuters, 2018)."

Meanwhile, in many Middle Eastern countries, societal dynamics are also changing dramatically. The Gulf area is a prime example of how global trends are changing and how communities engage with their governments. These adjustments are part of a larger social and economic reform agenda that aims to meet calls for

increased social, political, and economic equality. Equal rights for men and women as well as larger social spaces that promote cooperation and public engagement are increasingly being pronounced. Thus, similar to social systems in the West, the social contract between the state and its citizens is changing to provide more chances for democratic participation. For a larger portion of the population, this new framework seeks to convert economic progress into human development. Many of the most important economic changes in the region are occurring in this part of the Middle East (Goldani & Asadi Tirvan, 2024).

Accordingly, several nations, like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain, have published extensive Vision Documents detailing their long-term economic goals (International Monetary Fund, 2023). The continuous transition away from reliance on oil earnings and towards new industries including tourism, real estate, and agriculture stands as the main aspiration in these strategic documents. This aspired change is a component of a larger economic diversification strategy, which is essential to the region's attempts to create economies that are more resilient and sustainable in the long run. The area has been dominated by a handful for several decades, but as it opens its doors to many new and growing powers, competition is expected to heat up. Since World War II, the shortage of energy (oil/gas) sources has been more obvious, since there were fewer suppliers and more consumers. However, consumers now enjoy easier access to energy supplies thanks to increased production from the Middle East, Central Asia, Russia, Africa, the United States, Australia, and the growing availability of LNG from Asia. With a number of new producers entering the market, the tension and competitiveness for oil and gas resources that existed a few decades ago have decreased. Notably, consumers now have more negotiating leverage as businesses compete for market share.

According to Ghoble (2023), the current situation in the region reflects a broader shift from a bipolar world order dominated by the US and the Soviet Union to a more multipolar landscape that includes emerging powers like China. US shale-based LNG, with its flexibility and lack of destination constraints, allows the US to

supply markets globally. Both Saudi Arabia and the US are vying to expand their reach into major consumer markets, positioning themselves as rivals in the LNG sector. This puts them in direct competition with Russia and other LNG exporters, likely intensifying geopolitical tensions and fueling a growing sense of insecurity (Ghoble, 2023, pp. 87–88). As a result, importer nations enjoy a competitive advantage over producers. The US shale oil revival has resulted in new alignments. It became clear when Washington lifted its oil export ban and became a net exporter of oil to numerous countries across the world. This had a significant economic impact on Middle Eastern oil exports, particularly Saudi Arabia, which was the main exporter to the United States. It also undermined the strength of the 1945 Oil-for-Security agreement between the two countries. Yet, the United States continues to dominate the global energy arena—not just as a key supplier, but as the only country with the capacity to safeguard energy flows and mitigate risks linked to trade routes and terrorism (Pant, 2008).

## Conclusion

The Middle East has long occupied a central position in the architecture of global energy geopolitics, and this role remains critical despite accelerating global shifts toward alternative and renewable energy sources. As this article has shown, the region's strategic value continues to derive not only from its vast oil and gas reserves but also from the broader geopolitical leverage these resources afford. In the meantime, the traditional framework of US unipolar dominance —rooted in Cold War alignments, the petrodollar economy, and security-based partnerships—has been increasingly challenged by emerging powers and reconfigured by new patterns of energy trade, infrastructure development, and diplomatic engagement. While the United States retains an unmatched capacity to secure energy flows through its military reach and strategic partnerships, its energy independence through shale gas and its shifting foreign policy priorities have significantly altered the foundations of its engagement with the Middle East.

In this evolving landscape, multipolarity has emerged as both a structural condition and a guiding logic of contemporary global energy politics. New entrants—including China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Russia—have not only deepened their economic involvement in the region but also actively sought to reshape its energy geography through strategic investments, local currency agreements, and long-term corridor projects such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). These initiatives illustrate how pipeline geopolitics and maritime trade routes now function as key instruments of soft power, infrastructure-led diplomacy, and geo-economic rivalry. The competition among these corridors reflects not just market ambitions but also competing visions of global order, with the Middle East serving as both a node and a gateway between continents, resources, and ideologies.

At the same time, Middle Eastern states themselves are no longer passive arenas of great power influence but increasingly assertive agents in their own right. Through national development strategies such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and similar initiatives in Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE, the region is embracing a model of economic diversification aimed at reducing vulnerability to oil price volatility and aligning with long-term sustainability goals. These strategies reflect a dual aspiration: to modernize and globalize domestic economies while maintaining political continuity and cultural identity. The selective privatization of state-owned enterprises, the expansion of non-oil sectors such as tourism, logistics, and green energy, and the active courting of Asian investment all indicate a regional shift toward strategic autonomy within a multipolar framework.

Yet, this transformation is not without its contradictions and constraints. The geopolitical competition over energy transit routes, the militarization of critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb, and the persistent threats posed by non-state actors underscore the region's enduring fragility. Episodes such as the 2019 and 2022 Houthi attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure, the vulnerability of Israel's pipeline network during

the Hamas conflict, and disruptions to Iranian exports all reveal how energy corridors remain exposed to political and military contestation. Moreover, the increasing number of energy suppliers —from Central Asia to Africa and North America—has intensified global competition, offering consumers greater leverage but putting downward pressure on traditional exporters, particularly those whose economies remain undiversified.

Nevertheless, despite this rising competition and global energy diversification, the Middle East's hydrocarbons continue to serve as a cornerstone of global industrial output and economic growth. Even under the most ambitious energy transition scenarios, oil and gas will retain a significant share of the global energy mix for decades to come. This reality ensures that the region will continue to play a key role in shaping the future of global energy security and geopolitics—albeit one that is more contested, multipolar, and structurally complex than in the past.

In sum, the re-situation of the Middle East in global energy geopolitics reflects a convergence of old continuities and new departures. While fossil fuel wealth remains the bedrock of the region's strategic importance, the actors involved, the mechanisms of influence, and the frameworks of engagement have all shifted profoundly. The emerging multipolar order is not merely redistributing power across new corridors and alliances—it is also redefining the norms, priorities, and vulnerabilities that shape energy governance in the 21st century. Understanding the Middle East's evolving role requires moving beyond static binaries of dependency or dominance, and instead recognizing the region as a dynamic space where global transitions in energy, power, and development are unfolding in real time. The stakes of this transformation—economic, environmental, and geopolitical—will continue to reverberate far beyond the region itself.

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