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Defensive Analysis of Sino-Iranian Naval Ties: Implications for U.S. Strategic Interests in the MENA Region

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean region is known for its abundant energy resources, and the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region is closely connected to it through trade, geopolitics, and energy security. The Indian Ocean is a crucial maritime route, enabling the transportation of oil to global markets. This interconnectedness makes the area a focal point for geopolitical rivalry, as major countries like the United States and China compete for dominance through military bases, port investments, and strategic alliances; however, the growing naval ties between China and Iran have had a significant impact on the MENA region due to a 25-year defense cooperation agreement that includes a comprehensive strategic partnership. This partnership has led to numerous military drills, information sharing, and arms agreements. Neo-realism is adopted as the analytical framework because it explains why China remains cautious, balancing its strategic support for Iran with broader economic and diplomatic goals, including the avoidance of direct conflict with the United States and its allies in the MENA region. Although this relationship does not constitute an official defense pact, this alignment indicates a growing transactional partnership driven by shared geopolitical interests in the Indian Ocean, especially in the vicinity of the Gulf of Oman. Using qualitative research methods, the study aims to assess the implications for U.S. strategic interests, as well as the trajectory of Sino-Iranian naval relations and regional security dynamics. The findings suggest that China–Iran naval cooperation could affect maritime security, energy routes, and the balance of power among major nations, prompting a reevaluation of U.S. strategic posture in the region.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, MENA, U.S, Sino-Iranian, Gulf of Oman, Neo-realism.

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Introduction

The temperate waters of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, which host vital shipping lanes and energy routes for the rest of the world, have become the primary theater of this shift, while the naval aspect of China–Iran relations has strengthened amid shifting global power dynamics, as China's growing influence in maritime geopolitics and Iran's regional ambitions have aligned through naval collaboration. China and Iran pose strategic challenges to U.S. dominance in the Indo-Pacific and Middle Eastern regions, and Iran has accumulated enough enriched uranium to produce nuclear weapons; yet it has held back from clear weaponization, instead maintaining a threshold capability to deter rivals such as Israel and the U.S. (Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2024).

According to Conduit and Akbarzadeh (2019), as China expands its naval influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Iran plans to implement strategic measures in response to sanctions and regional isolation. This research aims to examine the development of naval cooperation between China and Iran, with particular attention to how this cooperation challenges U.S. strategic goals in the MENA region.

The Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean serve as vital routes for international trade, with nearly one-third of global oil shipments passing through the Strait of Hormuz. This strategic significance, although recently reinforced, has deep historical roots dating back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. At that time, China, seeking to expand its influence in the Global South, was among the first countries to recognize the newly established Islamic Republic. During the Iran–Iraq War, China was a key arms supplier to Tehran, providing ballistic missiles and military technology that helped Iran resist attacks from the Republican Guard and Fedayeen Saddam, despite China's official neutrality (Mackenzie, 2010). Meanwhile, the U.S. has historically maintained naval dominance in these waters through the Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain and cooperation with the Persian Gulf nations since the British Empire left the Indian Ocean after the Second World War (Holmes, 2014).

This research examines how the naval relationship between China and Iran is reshaping regional security and how it is transforming the implications for U.S. strategic interests.

Even the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement caused temporary tensions, as China carefully aligned itself with global sanctions; however, the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement during the first Trump term opened new avenues for

cooperation between China and Iran (Concha, 2025). Subsequently, American strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities during Trump's second term further altered the strategic environment (Nagourney & Haberman, 2025), whereas Beijing's support for Tehran signaled a shift that challenges the existing unipolar world order. With increasing U.S. naval activities targeting China in the Indo-Pacific, the question arises whether China will strengthen its military cooperation with Iran to counter American strategic dominance.

The Pentagon must increase its focus on multiple basing options and diverse alliances that continue to shape U.S. military strategies in a more multipolar Middle East. Moreover, the Sino-Iranian alliance heightens the security dilemma in maritime security, prompting defensive measures from U.S. partners in the MENA region and potentially triggering an arms race. In theory, this aligns with neorealism principles, which argue that states, operating in an anarchic environment, seek alliances and military partnerships to counterbalance dominant powers, particularly the U.S. Nevertheless, the China–Iran partnership is more than just a practical alliance; it reflects deeper structural shifts in the global system, including the decline of U.S. unipolarity and the rise of multipolarity, in which mid-tier powers like Tehran exploit great power tensions to secure their survival. A qualitative approach to this research identifies implications for U.S. strategic interests, alongside an examination of Sino-Iranian naval collaboration strategies in the region.

1. U.S. Installations in MENA: An Offensive Strategy toward Iran

Offensive realism, a concept developed by John J. Mearsheimer in international relations theory, posits that states are inherently driven to maximize power and seek dominance within an anarchic international system (Snyder, 2014). From this theoretical perspective, the present research highlights that the United States maintains a robust and multifaceted offensive posture aimed at countering the Iranian Navy. This approach emphasizes naval superiority, force deployment, and strategic containment across the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, and the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The U.S. employs a combination of traditional naval dominance, forward-deployed deterrence, and coalition-based interdiction strategies to constrain Tehran's maritime capabilities (Cordesman, 2022).

Central to U.S. naval strategy is the continuous deployment of Carrier Strike Groups (CSGs) in the Arabian Sea and the Persian

Gulf, which provide rapid-response capabilities and overwhelming firepower. Nuclear-powered aircraft carriers—such as the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower—function as mobile command-and-control platforms. Additional carriers, including the USS Nimitz and USS Carl Vinson, have also been active in the Middle East in recent years and have conducted joint exercises with the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean. These carriers support advanced air assets, including F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jets, early-warning aircraft—most notably the E-2D Hawkeye—and long-range strike platforms. Carrier groups are escorted by guided-missile destroyers and cruisers equipped with the Aegis Combat System (Mongilio & LaGrone, 2025). For instance, Arleigh Burke–class destroyers, armed with SM-6 interceptors and Close-In Weapon Systems (CIWS), were specifically designed to counter Iran's anti-ship missile threats and asymmetric swarm tactics, including attacks involving Iranian guided missiles (Shelbourne & LaGrone, 2024).

In addition, the United States maintains a covert yet highly capable underwater force composed of Virginia-class and Ohio-class nuclear submarines. These platforms are capable of intelligence collection, long-range standoff strikes using Tomahawk cruise missiles, and discreet monitoring of Iranian naval activities. Complementing this maritime posture is an extensive network of U.S. military bases across the MENA region, which function as critical platforms for offensive operations against Iran's naval forces. Strategically positioned, these installations are designed to counter Tehran's maritime ambitions in the Persian Gulf and adjacent waterways (Skovlund, 2024).

These bases constitute the backbone of U.S. power-projection capabilities in the region, enabling persistent surveillance, rapid strike operations, and coordinated coalition actions aimed at countering both Iran's conventional and asymmetric maritime threats. A notable example is the killing of IRGC–Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, which significantly disrupted Iran's proxy maritime networks—particularly those supplying Yemen's Houthi forces with naval drones and missile systems (Gallagher, 2020). The United States has also conducted high-seas interdictions, seizing Iranian weapons shipments intended for regional proxies, including the interception of more than 2,000 AK-47 rifles aboard the USS Chinook.

By 2024, as the United States has sought to reinforce its strategic influence, it has expanded regional partnerships and multinational naval coalitions designed to limit Iran's operational freedom. The

International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), comprising 38 member states, coordinates patrols and intelligence-sharing efforts to counter Iranian maritime harassment, naval mining, and arms trafficking. Similarly, Operation Sentinel—launched in 2019—provides a sustained U.S.-led naval presence in the Strait of Hormuz to safeguard commercial shipping from Iranian disruptions (Damayanti et al., 2022).

Key installations such as Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, alongside forward deployments in Oman and multiple intelligence facilities in Iraq and the Levant, enable the United States to project naval and air power deep into Iran's strategic environment, particularly along its southern coastlines. The operational flexibility and combat readiness of U.S. Carrier Strike Groups, guided-missile destroyers, and submarines allow for rapid threat identification and offensive operations extending into Iranian waters. Strategic partnerships with the Persian Gulf states—including Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia—ensure access to regional bases and intelligence integration, while cooperation with Israel enhances surveillance of Iranian arms transfers to proxy forces.

As naval competition with Iran intensifies, U.S. military installations across the MENA region have undergone further upgrades to their offensive capabilities. Planned deployments of unmanned surface vessels in Bahrain, expanded submarine facilities at Diego Garcia, and increased stealth fighter presence in the UAE all reflect a sustained commitment to maritime dominance (Mens, 2024). Nevertheless, this extensive basing network also presents vulnerabilities, as concentrated military assets become attractive targets for Iranian missile strikes in the event of open conflict. To mitigate these risks, the United States has invested heavily in base defense measures, including Patriot and THAAD missile defense systems, hardened aircraft shelters, and redundant command-and-control facilities to ensure operational continuity under attack (Heim, 2015).

Finally, the development of advanced long-range anti-ship missiles and hypersonic weapons has expanded the strike reach of U.S. forces positioned against the Iranian Navy. Concurrently, advances in artificial intelligence are expected to further transform surveillance, intelligence fusion, and targeting processes, enhancing the overall effectiveness of U.S. offensive naval strategy in the region.

2. Sino-Iran Defensive Pact: Enhancement of Naval Capabilities

Waltz's concept of defensive realism acknowledges the anarchic nature of the international system, which lacks a supreme authority capable of guaranteeing state security. This condition generates the security dilemma, whereby measures adopted by one state to enhance its security may be perceived as threatening by others, thereby triggering cycles of mistrust and arms competition (Lobell, 2010).

Historically, Iran's navy has faced persistent challenges in maintaining its aging fleet, much of which consists of pre-1979 U.S.-manufactured warships, Soviet-era patrol vessels, and domestically reverse-engineered platforms. U.S. and European sanctions, which restrict access to international maritime components and advanced technologies, have significantly constrained Iran's capacity to maintain, modernize, and effectively operate its naval assets. Within this context, the 25-year strategic partnership with China has positioned Beijing as a critical facilitator in alleviating these structural limitations. Chinese maritime technologies have contributed to the modernization of Iranian naval repair and maintenance facilities, particularly in Bandar Abbas, Khorramshahr, and Bushehr (IFP Media Wire, 2017).

Iran's defensive posture vis-à-vis U.S. naval dominance in the Persian Gulf and adjacent waters reflects a sophisticated application of defensive realism. Rather than pursuing direct confrontation with American military power, the Islamic Republic seeks to develop sufficient deterrent capabilities to render military intervention prohibitively costly. The 25-Year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between China and Iran represents a notable shift in Middle Eastern geopolitics, as it gradually enhances Iran's naval capabilities while implicitly challenging U.S. maritime primacy in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The military dimensions of the agreement promote deeper cooperation between two of Washington's principal strategic competitors, thereby complicating U.S. strategic calculations in the region (Mohammadi, 2025).

The Navy of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGCN) has refined swarm tactics based on the deployment of numerous small, high-speed attack craft—such as Boghammar and Peykaap-class vessels—capable of harassing and potentially overwhelming larger U.S. warships through coordinated operations. These tactics generate a persistent low-intensity threat that forces U.S. naval forces to maintain heightened defensive postures. Complementing these swarm strategies is Iran's substantial investment in coastal defense systems, including the Khalij-e Fars anti-ship ballistic missile, with an

estimated range of 300 kilometers, and a range of cruise missiles such as the Ghadir and Qader. Collectively, these capabilities form an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) architecture encompassing the entire Strait of Hormuz and much of the Persian Gulf.

Iran's naval doctrine further emphasizes asymmetric capabilities, including the deployment of Ghadir-class midget submarines optimized for shallow-water operations and mine warfare, alongside growing investments in unmanned underwater vehicles designed for reconnaissance and sabotage missions targeting U.S. naval forces (Office of Naval Intelligence, 2017). The strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz constitutes Iran's most potent defensive asset; the implicit threat of closing this critical chokepoint—through which a significant share of global maritime oil trade passes—provides Tehran with substantial deterrent leverage against potential U.S. military action.

Beyond conventional naval assets, Iran has developed extensive mine warfare capabilities, reportedly possessing thousands of advanced naval mines, including EM-52 and SADAF-02 variants. These mines can be rapidly deployed to disrupt commercial shipping and complicate U.S. naval maneuverability, compelling the United States to dedicate substantial resources to counter-mine operations. Iran's defensive posture is further strengthened through strategic cooperation with China, which provides key technological inputs such as advanced drone components, propulsion systems, electro-optical sensors, and AI-enabled targeting technologies. These contributions have enabled Iran to develop more sophisticated unmanned platforms, including systems such as the Shahed-136 loitering munition. Potential cooperation in hypersonic missile technology could further challenge U.S. missile defense architectures in the region (Akbarzadeh & Naeni, 2025).

Iran's naval strategy also incorporates elements of hybrid warfare, combining conventional maritime forces with cyber capabilities aimed at disrupting U.S. naval communications, navigation, and command-and-control systems. Such measures are intended to amplify perceptions of Iranian resolve and deterrent credibility. The construction of underground naval bases along Iran's coastline enhances the survivability of its forces against potential U.S. strikes, while decentralized deployments and mobile missile launchers further complicate American targeting efforts (Bagheri Dolatabadi & Kamrava, 2024).

Additionally, China's provision of satellite intelligence—reportedly through systems such as Gaofen-4—enables near real-

time monitoring of U.S. carrier strike groups. This intelligence-sharing arrangement reduces Iran's situational awareness gap and improves the targeting precision of its anti-ship missile systems. While the Sino-Iranian partnership substantially strengthens Iran's defensive capabilities, excessive escalation risks provoking severe U.S. responses. Careful strategic calibration will therefore determine whether the partnership succeeds in establishing a durable counterweight to American maritime dominance without triggering direct military confrontation (Samoudi, 2025).

3. Sino-Iran Naval Exercises: Defensively Countering U.S. Hegemony

China and Iran have conducted joint naval exercises—most notably the Security Belt drills in the Indian Ocean—demonstrating their shared objective of challenging U.S. naval dominance. Through these exercises, China provides Iran with satellite reconnaissance data via the BeiDou navigation system, complemented by reconnaissance drones. This cooperation enhances Iran's maritime situational awareness and enables more effective monitoring of U.S. naval movements, a critical advantage for Iran's defensive operational planning (Ghorbani et al., 2021).

These joint exercises also offer China an opportunity to test and exchange asymmetric warfare doctrines with Iran. Chinese naval personnel have reportedly assisted in training Iranian forces in swarm-boat tactics, mine-laying operations, and anti-ship missile employment—methods designed to exploit U.S. vulnerabilities in confined maritime environments. This transfer of expertise is widely believed to enhance Iran's capacity to impose disproportionate costs on the U.S. Navy without engaging in direct force parity. As a result, Iran's maritime situational awareness and target-acquisition capabilities against U.S. fleet operations have improved significantly.

Iran's defensive maritime strategy extends beyond its conventional naval forces to include proxy actors capable of exerting indirect pressure at sea. The Houthi movement in Yemen, for instance, has demonstrated the ability to threaten commercial shipping in the Red Sea using Iranian-supplied drone boats and anti-ship missiles. These actions have compelled the United States to divert naval assets to protect this critical maritime corridor (Awan et al., 2025). Similarly, Iran has supported Hezbollah's expanding maritime capabilities in the eastern Mediterranean, including the deployment of C-802 anti-ship missiles, thereby increasing pressure

on U.S. regional allies, particularly Israel.

This multilayered defensive posture is consistent with defensive realism: Iran does not seek maritime or regional hegemony but rather strategic survival by raising the costs of potential U.S. military intervention to unacceptable levels, while carefully avoiding escalatory actions that could provoke overwhelming retaliation. Iran's geographic advantages—especially its proximity to key maritime chokepoints and the narrow, congested waterways of the Persian Gulf—significantly amplify the effectiveness of its asymmetric naval tactics and constrain the U.S. Navy's traditional blue-water superiority.

Integrated into the broader regional "axis of resistance," Iran's naval strategy extends its defensive depth beyond its immediate coastline, creating a dispersed deterrent network that complicates U.S. operational planning and force deployment (Jia et al., 2024). Looking ahead, Iran's naval doctrine is expected to evolve further, with greater emphasis on unmanned surface and subsurface platforms, enhanced precision-guided anti-ship missiles, and deeper integration with Chinese and Russian maritime surveillance and targeting systems. These developments aim to sustain deterrence against the United States while avoiding actions likely to trigger a large-scale military confrontation.

From a defensive realist perspective, this approach has thus far proven effective in preserving Iran's strategic autonomy despite prolonged U.S. pressure. It illustrates how a comparatively weaker naval power can challenge a superior adversary through asymmetric tactics, geographic leverage, and carefully cultivated alliances. China's involvement adds an additional layer of deterrence to Iran's maritime strategy, as the prospect of Chinese political or military repercussions increases the strategic costs for the United States and Israel. Consequently, Washington must now factor the risk of escalation with Beijing into any direct confrontation with Iran (Abbas et al., 2025).

Ultimately, the sustainability of Iran's naval strategy depends on its ability to continuously innovate in asymmetric warfare, exercise strategic restraint, and avoid overextension that could undermine its carefully calibrated deterrent posture. The gradual reduction of direct U.S. military presence in certain areas has provided Iran with opportunities to expand its influence through measured naval operations that eschew open confrontation while incrementally eroding American maritime dominance.

4. Implications for U.S. Strategic Interests

The deepening naval partnership between China and Iran represents a significant shift in the strategic landscape of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), challenging decades of largely uncontested U.S. maritime dominance in the region. The implications for U.S. strategic interests are substantial, compelling Washington to operate within an increasingly competitive maritime environment marked by growing strategic complexity. This evolving dynamic places pressure on U.S. alliances, heightens the risks of strategic overextension, and forces the United States to balance its intensifying rivalry with China in the Indo-Pacific against a revitalized Iranian maritime posture supported by Beijing.

4-1. Iranian Axis of Resistance: Deterrence across MENA

The expanding strategic and naval cooperation between China and Iran, combined with Tehran's consolidation of the "Axis of Resistance," presents an unprecedented multidomain challenge to U.S. naval operations across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Iran's network of proxy forces further amplifies these challenges by projecting Iranian maritime power indirectly. For instance, Houthi forces have reportedly employed anti-ship missiles sourced through Chinese channels to threaten commercial shipping in the Red Sea (Matsunaga, 2025). Simultaneously, China's development of port infrastructure in Chabahar and Gwadar provides Iran with alternative logistical corridors that bypass U.S. sanctions and monitoring mechanisms, while potentially offering the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) future forward-basing options. As a result, U.S. naval forces that once operated with relative freedom in the Persian Gulf now confront layered threats from Iranian missile systems, drone swarms, and naval mines, all supported by Chinese satellite-based surveillance capabilities (Matsunaga, 2025). According to Zafar and Shahzadi (2025), Hezbollah's expanding arsenal of precision-guided munitions further endangers Mediterranean shipping lanes and heightens the risk of regional conflict spillover.

China's construction of port facilities in locations such as Gwadar and Chabahar has not only enabled Iran to circumvent sanctions but has also increased the strategic depth of its maritime posture. These developments have imposed significant operational consequences for the United States. U.S. naval forces, now exposed to a more hostile and technologically integrated threat environment, have been compelled to permanently deploy advanced air-defense

destroyers and mine countermeasure vessels in the region. This reallocation of assets has come at the expense of U.S. force posture in the Indo-Pacific, where resources are increasingly needed to counter China's expanding naval power (Abbadi & Lachkar, 2025).

The Sino-Iranian partnership has enabled Iran to extend its maritime deterrence beyond traditional geographic limits. Iranian-produced unmanned surface vessels have been observed operating in the Indian Ocean, while China-supplied missile technologies have reportedly enhanced Hezbollah's coastal strike capabilities near Israel. Perhaps most consequentially, China's veto power in the United Nations Security Council and its deepening economic ties with Iran have diluted the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions, allowing Tehran to continue modernizing its military despite sustained American pressure. Rapid advances in Iranian naval technology—including improvements in lithium-ion submarine batteries and cyber warfare tools targeting U.S. naval systems—suggest a deliberate transfer of Chinese technical expertise, narrowing the qualitative gap between Iranian forces and U.S. regional deployments (Dadparvar & Parto, 2025).

The “Axis of Resistance” framework enables Iran to conduct coordinated maritime proxy operations across multiple strategic chokepoints simultaneously, forcing the U.S. Navy into a largely reactive posture over an expansive geographic area. This sustained pressure has begun to reshape regional alignments, as long-standing U.S. partners such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates increasingly diversify their security partnerships through Chinese arms acquisitions and cautious diplomatic engagement with Iran. Iran's strategy of “forward deterrence” ensures that any direct attack on Iranian interests would trigger synchronized retaliatory actions—from Houthi strikes on Saudi energy infrastructure to Hezbollah missile attacks against Israel.

By maintaining plausible deniability through proxy actors and leveraging Chinese and Russian diplomatic protection, Iran has constructed a resilient deterrence architecture that safeguards regime security while steadily eroding U.S. influence and reshaping regional security dynamics in its favor (Emamifar, 2025). The cumulative effect has been a marked increase in the operational and political costs of U.S. naval engagement in the Middle East, accompanied by heightened Iranian assertiveness under the umbrella of Chinese technological and geopolitical support.

As Sino-Iranian naval cooperation deepens, the United States faces a strategic dilemma: accept a reduced presence in critical

maritime theaters or commit additional resources to sustain its waning influence—at the risk of undermining its primary strategic focus on countering China in the Indo-Pacific. This alignment arguably represents the most serious challenge to U.S. naval dominance since the Cold War, combining advanced Chinese technologies with Iran's proxy-based deterrence system and favorable geography to form a durable counterweight to American power (Dadparvar & Parto, 2025). These tensions are further intensified by Iran's formal membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and its alignment with China's Maritime Silk Road initiative, which expands Tehran's access to regional logistics, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and strategic networks.

4-2. Iranian Nuclear Brinkmanship: Regional Power Shifts

Iran's nuclear posturing has significantly reshaped the strategic and maritime dynamics of the Middle East, compelling regional actors to reassess their security strategies while gradually undermining U.S. maritime supremacy. By advancing its uranium enrichment capabilities to near weapons-grade levels without fully crossing the threshold of weaponization, Tehran has established a form of threshold deterrence that reinforces its conventional and asymmetric naval strategies. In the Persian Gulf, the mere prospect of an Iranian nuclear capability has forced the U.S. Navy to adopt more cautious operational patterns, with carrier strike groups maintaining greater stand-off distances from Iran's coastlines (Bracken, 2024).

Traditional U.S. partners such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have responded by diversifying their security relationships. This includes arms procurement from China—most notably Saudi Arabia's reported acquisition of ballistic missile capabilities—as well as expanded diplomatic engagement with Russia. Simultaneously, both states have accelerated their civilian nuclear energy programs, increasingly viewed as strategic hedges against Iran's growing influence rather than purely economic or environmental initiatives (Khan et al., 2025).

Israel, for its part, has shifted from episodic airstrikes to an intensified “war-between-wars” strategy focused on disrupting Iran's nuclear infrastructure, while reluctantly adapting to a regional environment in which complete Iranian strategic rollback appears unattainable. China has emerged as a principal beneficiary of this evolving landscape, positioning itself as a key diplomatic broker—most visibly through the Saudi–Iran rapprochement—while progressively substituting U.S. arms sales with its own defense exports.

The potential emergence of an Iranian nuclear weapon introduces an existential deterrent barrier that compels the Persian Gulf states to reconsider any direct military confrontation with Tehran, instead favoring a tense coexistence. This dynamic is evident in Saudi Arabia's diplomatic normalization with Iran despite the continuation of proxy conflicts across the region. By maintaining escalation dominance, Iran has secured regime continuity while fundamentally altering the regional security architecture. In this environment, U.S. security guarantees appear increasingly unreliable, forcing neighboring states either to accommodate Tehran's strategic position or to pursue their own deterrent safeguards, including weapons of mass destruction–related hedging strategies (Win, 2023).

One of the most immediate consequences has been the growing overextension of U.S. military resources. As the Pentagon attempts to reconcile its strategic pivot toward Asia with the necessity of sustaining robust naval deployments in both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, operational strain has become increasingly apparent. Carrier strike groups that once symbolized uncontested power now face layered threats from Iranian coastal missile batteries, unmanned aerial systems, and drone swarms, necessitating ever more sophisticated—and resource-intensive—defensive measures (Dent, 2024).

The nuclear dimension significantly amplifies these pressures by introducing strategic ambiguity surrounding Iran's ultimate weapons intent. Tehran has raised the potential costs of any U.S. military response to politically intolerable levels, effectively forcing Washington into an unfavorable dilemma: acquiesce to Iran's expanding regional influence or risk uncontrollable escalation. This risk was underscored by retaliatory attacks on U.S. facilities in Qatar following American B-2 bomber strikes against Iranian targets after a ceasefire, illustrating how rapidly escalation pathways can materialize under nuclear shadow dynamics (The Guardian, 2025).

Unless Washington can develop credible countermeasures that restore deterrence without triggering escalation, the United States risks strategic marginalization in maritime theaters that have long underpinned its global power projection. Such an outcome would not only weaken U.S. influence in the Middle East but could also accelerate the broader erosion of American authority across the Global South.

4-3. Sino–U.S. Rivalry: Reshaping Strategic Alliances

The intensifying rivalry between the United States and China is reshaping security alignments across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as regional states recalibrate their defense strategies between long-standing U.S. security guarantees and emerging Chinese strategic partnerships.

This competition has ushered in a new phase of alliance management, with Washington emphasizing interoperability and joint capability development to reinforce the resilience of its regional partnerships. The United States has increasingly prioritized collaborative training programs, technology-sharing initiatives, and integrated command structures. In parallel, Washington has sought to institutionalize these partnerships through long-term defense agreements and has explored expanded NATO engagement with selected regional partners, while navigating the complexities of intra-regional rivalries and the growing appeal of Chinese economic and military initiatives (Amiri, 2020).

The United States has also significantly enhanced its basing infrastructure across the region. Naval Support Activity Bahrain remains the cornerstone of U.S. naval operations, while Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar and Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates provide critical airpower projection and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities. Together, these facilities enable a persistent U.S. military presence and rapid response capacity, ensuring Washington's ability to project power across key maritime corridors. In parallel, the Pentagon has deepened its defense partnership with Israel, effectively transforming the relationship into a quasi–“NATO-plus” framework characterized by unprecedented levels of military integration. This cooperation includes joint missile defense initiatives such as Arrow-3 and David's Sling, as well as coordinated Mediterranean patrols aimed at countering Hezbollah's expanding inventory of precision-guided munitions. Israel's transfer from U.S. European Command to U.S. Central Command further reflects this growing integration and facilitates enhanced coordination with Arab partners.

With respect to Arab allies, the United States has promoted innovative multilateral formats such as the Negev Forum, which brings together Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Egypt within a novel regional security architecture. This framework seeks to advance cooperation on air and missile defense, particularly in response to Iranian drone and ballistic missile threats (Javadi, 2024). The effectiveness of this alliance-centered strategy

will ultimately determine whether the United States can sustain its traditional security primacy in MENA or whether the region gradually transitions toward a more multipolar security order.

Concurrently, China has pursued a calculated expansion of its security footprint across MENA through military diplomacy, defense cooperation, and naval engagement, gradually challenging U.S. predominance while avoiding direct confrontation with Washington. By steering clear of overt conflict and refraining from alignment with New Delhi's net security provider narrative, Beijing has adopted a multifaceted approach that includes arms sales, port-access agreements, and joint military exercises to expand its influence in this strategically vital region. China has capitalized on regional dissatisfaction with U.S. policies, presenting itself as a pragmatic and reliable partner that avoids political conditionality and non-interference rhetoric in its security relationships (Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2024).

China's expanding defense industrial capacity enables it to supply increasingly sophisticated military equipment at competitive prices, often supplemented by flexible financing arrangements attractive to resource-constrained regional militaries. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has framed its regional activities primarily around counterterrorism and maritime security, aligning its engagement with prevailing regional priorities while gradually expanding its operational presence. China's military outreach in MENA is closely integrated with its Belt and Road Initiative projects, creating synergies between security cooperation and infrastructure development.

The PLA Navy (PLAN) has participated in joint naval exercises with regional actors, most notably the Security Belt drills conducted with Iran and Russia, demonstrating growing operational interoperability. These exercises serve both practical and symbolic functions: they enhance tactical coordination while signaling Beijing's willingness to support alternative security frameworks in the region (Andersen & Jiang, 2025). China's naval diplomacy further encompasses port development projects with potential dual-use applications, including its involvement in Pakistan's Gwadar port and infrastructure initiatives in Oman, which could eventually facilitate PLAN operations in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf.

PLAN activities have become increasingly visible, with frequent port calls at strategic locations such as Iran's Bandar Abbas and a sustained presence at China's first overseas military facility in Djibouti—located in close proximity to the U.S. Camp Lemonnier.

China has also expanded defense cooperation with a wide range of regional states, supplying advanced weapon systems to both U.S. allies and non-aligned countries. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates—traditionally close U.S. partners—have all procured Chinese Wing Loong and CH-4 armed drones, underscoring Beijing's growing role as an alternative defense supplier (Badawi, 2024).

Collectively, these naval missions serve multiple strategic purposes: they normalize China's military presence in regional waters, provide opportunities for intelligence collection, and demonstrate Beijing's capacity to project influence beyond the Western Pacific. As Sino–U.S. competition deepens, MENA is increasingly emerging as a secondary—but consequential—theater in the broader contest over global security leadership.

Conclusion

The deepening naval partnership between China and Iran, coupled with the intensifying U.S.–China strategic rivalry in the MENA region, has reached a critical juncture. Washington's longstanding military superiority is increasingly challenged by Beijing's deliberate expansion of naval access, arms diplomacy, and security partnerships. While the United States continues to project substantial hard power through the Fifth Fleet, CENTCOM alliances, and defense cooperation with Israel and Persian Gulf states, China's initiatives—such as port development, joint exercises with Iran and Russia, and targeted arms sales to U.S. partners—are gradually eroding the Pentagon's regional primacy. Iran's nuclear ambiguity and expansive proxy network further complicate the security environment, simultaneously constraining U.S. objectives and amplifying Chinese influence. The resulting multipolar framework allows regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt to recalibrate their alignments with major powers, expanding strategic options while avoiding overdependence on any single Atlantic ally. Over the coming decade, the region may witness either a revitalization of U.S.-led alliances through new security pacts or a continued shift toward a more fragmented security order that limits American operational flexibility in the face of Chinese naval expansion and Iranian unconventional capabilities. Ultimately, the trajectory of regional security will hinge on Washington's ability to adapt its strategies to this emerging era of great-power competition, while preserving the cohesion and credibility of its long-standing alliances in the face of an increasingly assertive Sino–Iranian partnership.

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