

# Chokepoints in the Middle East and their Importance for US-China Rivalry

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## Abstract

*The strategic rivalry between the United States and China has become a critical element in contemporary international relations, significantly impacting global security and economic stability. A focal point of this rivalry is the control over key maritime chokepoints in the Middle East, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which are vital for global trade and energy transportation. The problem addressed is the lack of comprehensive understanding regarding how this rivalry affects the strategic importance and security of these chokepoints. It addresses how does the US-China rivalry affect the strategic importance of maritime chokepoints in the Middle East, and what are the implications for regional and global security and trade? Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study draws on secondary data sources, including scholarly articles, policy papers, and strategic analyses. The conceptual framework is grounded in geopolitical and geostrategic theories, emphasizing the significance of geographical factors in shaping state behavior and strategic decisions. Major findings indicate that the US-China rivalry enhances the strategic importance of these chokepoints, potentially leading to increased regional insecurity and disruptions in global trade and energy supply. Careful management and international cooperation are essential to ensure the stability and security of these critical maritime routes in this rivalry.*

**Keywords:** Chokepoints, Indian Ocean, US, China, Geopolitics

## Introduction

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A defining characteristic of modern international relations is the strategic competition between China and the US, which has significant ramifications for world peace and prosperity.<sup>2</sup> Although ideological disagreements have always been at the heart of this rivalry, it has now expanded to include economic, scientific, and military factors as well.<sup>3</sup> The effect of this competition on Middle Eastern marine chokepoints, which are important conduits for international commerce and energy transit, is an important part of it. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Hormuz are very important waterways because of the oil, gas, and cargo that pass through them. The geopolitical conflict between the US and China has intensified the strategic relevance of these chokepoints, making them focal points in the larger fight for influence and power.<sup>4</sup>

The study's main focus is on the threat that the rising rivalry between China and the United States poses to the stability and security of these vital maritime chokepoints in the Middle East. With an emphasis on the strategic reactions of both countries, Markey analyzes the escalating geopolitical rivalry between China and the US in the Middle East. The Salman, Pieper, and Geeraerts contrast the hard power tactics of the United States with strategic hedging, which has allowed China to expand its footprint while the United States has retreated.<sup>5</sup>

Hassan explores the shift from partnership to rivalry, with a focus on China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>6</sup> Roudgar identifies key issues like military presence and regional strategies as drivers of this competition.<sup>7</sup> Dadparvar and Shen emphasize the differences in U.S. and Chinese approaches, noting China's focus on economic ties and non-interference compared to the interventionist policies of the US.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the extensive literature on US-China relations and the strategic significance of the Middle East, there remains a gap in understanding how this rivalry specifically affects the control

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<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Christine Winkler, "Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 3 (October 14, 2023): 56.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel S. Markey and Daniel S. Markey, "US-China Competition in Eurasia," 1st ed. (Oxford University Press New York, 2020), 157-90.

<sup>5</sup> Mohammad Salman, Moritz Pieper, and Gustaaf Geeraerts, "Hedging in the Middle East and China-U.S. Competition," *Asian Politics & Policy* 7, no. 4 (October 2015): 575-96.

<sup>6</sup> Prof. Dr. Shatha Zaki Hassan, "The US-Chinese Rivalry in the Middle East Region after 2013," *The International and Political Journal*, no. 56 (September 1, 2023): 27-50.

<sup>7</sup> Iraj Roudgar, "A Comparative Analysis of Strategic Competition in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific," *Journal of Defense Management*, vol. 07, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Shabnam Dadparvar, Lai-jin Shen, and Farzad Ravanbod, "China's Middle East Policy and the Competition with the United States," *DEStech Transactions on Social Science, Education and Human Science*, no. icssm (May 25, 2017).

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and security of maritime chokepoints in the region. Previous studies have largely focused on the military and economic strategies of both powers but have not adequately explored the emerging dynamics at these chokepoints, particularly in light of China's expanding influence and the strategic recalibrations of US. Due to the gap in the literature, there is a need to develop an understanding of the implications of the US-China competition on these significant chokepoints in the Middle East region.

This study argues that due to the significance of these chokepoints for both the US and China, the competition between both powers can escalate, leading to insecurity in an already volatile region. Consequently, tensions can escalate potentially impacting the global trade and energy security, as these routes are vital passage for the global energy supplies. The competition between the US and China around the maritime chokepoints is just a small aspect of geopolitical competition between two states.

The primary question addressed in this study: How will US-China competition is going to affect the strategic importance of these chokepoints? The sub-question addresses potential implications of this strategic rivalry on global trade and energy supplies. By addressing these questions, the study aims to fill the research gap that exists related to implications of the US-China competition on maritime chokepoints.

The study aims to decipher the implications of the US-China competition on the significance of maritime chokepoints. These chokepoints are vital for global energy security and trade. The blockage of these vital passages can lead to global energy insecurity and crisis. As a result, the free flow of energy and trade through these vital passages is a matter of global concern. Furthermore, the US-China conflict around these chokepoints would not be confined to the Middle Eastern region and has the potential to escalate into a global conflict, which could have ramifications for the security and stability of the entire world. The findings of this study can inform policymakers, academia, and students about the challenges that are associated with the US-China rivalry around maritime chokepoints.

This research utilizes the qualitative research methodology, and uses both primary and secondary data to develop an understanding of the implications of US-China rivalry in the Middle East and its implications for the strategic importance of maritime chokepoints. Primary data includes white papers and policy documents published by the US and Chinese governments.

Secondary data includes books, research paper, policy papers, newspaper articles, and reports published by various think tanks. Furthermore, the study uses descriptive and explanatory tools of research to find out answer of research questions and fill the research gap.

After the introduction, the study is divided into three sections. The first section deciphers the US-China rivalry in the Middle East. It explains the interests of the US and China in the Middle East and the steps they are taking to protect these interests. After this, the second section develop an understanding of the significance of maritime chokepoints, their significance for global trade and energy, and their vital role for ensuring the global energy flows and trade. The third section addresses the implications of the US-China Rivalry on these chokepoints and focuses challenges that might arise for global trade and energy flows, if the US and China rivalry escalate around these chokepoints. Finally, the study concludes the discussion and suggests future areas that can be explore.

## **Conceptual Framework**

To analyze the influence of geopolitical factors on political and strategic choices, geopolitics and geostrategic frameworks are vital concepts in the field of international relations.<sup>9</sup> Helford Mackinder, Alfred Mahan, and Nicholas Spykman played significant roles in the development of these concepts. They contributed to the enhancing the understanding of impact of geography on global power dynamics. According to Mackinder’s “Heartland Theory” Eastern Europe is strategically significant, and controlling this part makes it easier to control Eurasia. As a result, the power controlling Eurasia and Central Europe will control the world.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the Mackinder’s focus on land, Mahan’s theoretical concept emphasized the significance of sea power. He emphasized that sea power is a vital element for influencing global dominance.<sup>11</sup> In the Rimland Theory, Nicholas Spykman emphasized the significance of Eurasia’s coastal areas in achieving global dominance. In contrast to Mahan and Mackinder, Spykman combined the importance of both land and sea power.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hall Gardner, “Geopolitics and Geostrategy,” *International Relations*, Hall Gardner (Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Greg Russell, “Alfred Thayer Mahan and American Geopolitics: The Conservatism and Realism of an Imperialist,” *Geopolitics* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 119–40.

<sup>12</sup> Antero Holmila, “Re-Thinking Nicholas J. Spykman: From Historical Sociology to Balance of Power,” *The International History Review* 42, no. 5 (September 2, 2020): 951–66.

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The main assumptions of geopolitics and geostrategy revolve around the idea that geography significantly determines state behavior.<sup>13</sup> This geographical determinism suggests that physical features, such as mountains, rivers, and seas, as well as human geography, including population density and urbanization, shape how states interact on the global stage.<sup>14</sup> Strategic locations, especially maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal, are seen as critical for global trade and security.<sup>15</sup> Control over these chokepoints provides significant advantages in terms of power projection and economic influence, making them focal points in international politics.<sup>16</sup>

Power projection is another core assumption, where states extend their influence beyond borders to secure their interests.<sup>17</sup> This is often achieved through military presence, economic investments, and diplomatic engagements, all influenced by geographical factors. The theory also emphasizes resource security, highlighting the importance of controlling natural resources and key trade routes.<sup>18</sup> This aspect is particularly relevant in regions like the Middle East, rich in energy resources and strategically positioned along vital maritime routes.

Moreover, geopolitics and geostrategy operate under the assumption of an anarchic international system, similar to realist theories.<sup>19</sup> This perspective suggests that without a central authority to enforce rules, states are in constant competition, striving to control strategic areas, resources, and influence.<sup>20</sup> This competition is driven by geostrategic imperatives, which are specific to each state's geographic realities.<sup>21</sup> For instance, island nations may focus on developing strong naval capabilities, while landlocked countries might prioritize securing key land routes. In

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<sup>13</sup> Gardner, "Geopolitics and Geostrategy."

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Frenkel, "Geography, Empire, and Environmental Determinism," *Geographical Review* 82, no. 2 (1992): 143–53.

<sup>15</sup> Abel Meza et al., "Disruption of Maritime Trade Chokepoints and the Global LNG Trade: An Agent-Based Modeling Approach," *Maritime Transport Research* 3 (January 1, 2022): 10–12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan N Markowitz and Christopher J Fariss, "Power, Proximity, and Democracy: Geopolitical Competition in the International System," *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 1 (2018): 78–93.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Lucian M. Ashworth, "Realism and the Spirit of 1919: Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics and the Reality of the League of Nations," *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 279–301.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Gardner, "Geopolitics and Geostrategy."

the context of US-China rivalry and its impact on the strategic importance of maritime chokepoints in the Middle East, these frameworks are highly relevant.<sup>22</sup>

The geography and natural resources of the Middle East such as oil increase the importance of these maritime chokepoints. These chokepoints are vital for global energy supply and trade.<sup>23</sup> Due to these reasons, maintaining control on these maritime chokepoints is important for the security and power dynamics. The concepts of geopolitics and geostrategy are important tools for examining the behavior of the US and China.<sup>24</sup> This study helps in developing an understanding of the importance of geopolitical factors in determining the states' policies and provides us analysis of the possibility of cooperation and conflict.

### **US-China Rivalry in the Context of the Middle East**

The rivalry between US and China has emerged as a significant feature of international relations. During the Cold War, ideological element dominated in rivalry between the superpowers.<sup>25</sup> However, the US-China competition has spread to multiple areas such as the economy, science, technology, and geography. Due to resources and strategic importance, the Middle East has emerged as a ground for geopolitical competition between the US and China.<sup>26</sup> The US remained the dominate player in the US for decades due to its strong military and strong regional allies to protect its natural resources.

Yet, China's rise to prominence in recent years is due in large part to the country's strategic investments and strong economy.<sup>27</sup> This shift has changed regional dynamics and shows how complicated US-China ties are becoming. Reflecting their larger geopolitical goals, the US and China's strategic interests in the Middle East are complex and multi-faceted.<sup>28</sup> U.S. policy towards ally states, energy security on a global scale, and fighting regional threats like Iran, has been consistent for quite some time.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Mordechai Chaziza, "The US-China Rivalry in the Middle East: Confrontation or Competitive Coexistence," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 11 (April 12, 2024): 14-16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Minghao Zhao, "Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US-China Strategic Competition," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12, no. 3 (September 1, 2019): 371-94.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>28</sup> Abu Zafar, *The US-China Rivalry in the Middle East: A Critical Analysis*, *South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 44., 2023.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

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One example of difference between the US and China's role is the Palestinian Conflict. US policy in the Middle East revolves around Israel. It supports Israel and has provided consistent diplomatic, political, economic and military support to it.<sup>30</sup> Due to the US's Israel-centric policy, the US relationships with other states in the Middle East have faced significant complications. However, China avoided taking sides in the Palestinian conflict. It advocated for a two-state solution and emphasized the resolution of conflict through peaceful means. China's neutral stance increases its policy options and allows it to play a role as a mediator.<sup>31</sup> This also shows that Chinese and US policies are fundamentally different: China focuses on economic and diplomatic means, while the US focuses on strengthening its position militarily and supporting Israel. There has been a significant increase in the economic relations between China and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.<sup>32</sup>

Economic links between China and Middle Eastern nations, especially those in the GCC, are on the rise, which indicates a change in regional power dynamics. In an effort to wean themselves off on US security assurances, GCC governments are actively seeking out new foreign alliances.<sup>33</sup> The United States' dedication to safeguarding these interests and vital maritime chokepoints, such as the Strait of Hormuz, is shown by the widespread deployment of military bases around the area.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast, China's involvement in the Middle East is primarily driven by its need to secure a steady flow of energy resources to sustain its economy.<sup>35</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies China's strategy, focusing on infrastructure development and economic integration. This economic-centric approach contrasts with the more militarized strategy of the United States, though recent developments indicate a potential shift in China's regional role.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "The United States and China in the Multi-Aligned Middle East: A New Strategy for American Influence," *The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy - l'Institut Pour La Paix et La Diplomatie* (blog), January 9, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>32</sup> "Ask the Experts: Is China's Growing Influence in the Middle East Pushing out the United States?" *China Dialogues* (blog), December 5, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Sadaf Farheen, Bushra Anayat, and Muhammad Khan, "China's Growing Interest in the Middle East: Implications for US Role," *Research Journal for Societal Issues* 6 (June 15, 2024): 303–13.

<sup>34</sup> Bernd Kaussler and Glenn P. Hastedt, *US Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East: The Realpolitik of Deceit*, 1st ed. (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017). | Series: Routledge global security studies: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315660073>.

<sup>35</sup> Mordechai Chaziza, "China's Economic Diplomacy Approach in the Middle East Conflicts," *China Report* 55, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 24–39.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

The political and economic ties between China and Middle Eastern countries are growing in importance as China's influence grows in the region.<sup>37</sup> The mending of diplomatic ties between regional enemies Iran and Saudi Arabia, facilitated by China, is a prime example.<sup>38</sup> The potential of China to mediate and play a neutral party role in regional disputes is highlighted by this Initiative.<sup>39</sup>

China has been able to forge relationships with both Iran and Saudi Arabia due to its moderate stance, in contrast to the US, which has long backed Saudi Arabia and regarded Iran with distrust.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to the highly politicized US stance, China's neutrality strengthens its diplomatic clout in the area. Distinct tactics in navigating the intricate political terrain of the Middle East are on full display in the divergent methods taken by the two superpowers.<sup>41</sup>

One example of this trend is the substantial investment in energy and infrastructure projects by China across the region. One such project is Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 program. In addition to improving China's economic standing, these investments also strengthen its regional role.<sup>42</sup> The ever-evolving dynamics of regional politics and the growing intricacy of the US-China competition are highlighted by the diversification strategies used by Middle Eastern governments.

Another facet of the US-China conflict unfolding in the Middle East is technological competition.<sup>43</sup> The US is concerned about the security implications of Chinese involvement in the construction of 5G networks and other forms of telecommunications infrastructure.<sup>44</sup> The United States and China are engaged in a technological rivalry as they both want to increase their economic and technological power.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> jkg66, "China's Increasing Role in the Middle East: Implications for Regional and International Dynamics," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (blog), June 2, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Gedaliah Afterman, "China's Growing Influence in the Middle East," *The Strategist*, March 29, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-growing-influence-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>40</sup> Robin Wright, "How Ten Middle East Conflicts Are Converging into One Big War," *The New Yorker*, January 17, 2024.

<sup>41</sup> Inkstick Contributor, "Is China's Balancing Approach in the Middle East a Recipe for Success?" *Inkstick*, September 29, 2023.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Mohammed Soliman, "The Middle East in an Era of Great Tech Competition," *Middle East Institute*, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Cornwell, "U.S. Flags Huawei 5G Network Security Concerns to Gulf Allies," *Reuters*, September 12, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



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In response, the United States has vocalized its support for domestic technological norms while warning its allies about the dangers posed by Chinese technology.<sup>46</sup> Since both countries are actively pursuing regional strategic advantages, this rivalry is only going to heat up.

The table below summarizes the key aspects of US-China rivalry in the Middle East:

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>United States</b>	<b>China</b>
Historical Context	Dominant presence since the Cold War	Recent emergence as a key player
Strategic Interests	Global energy security, supporting allies, countering regional threats like Iran	Securing energy resources, economic investments
Military Presence	Extensive, with bases across the region	Limited, primarily economic and diplomatic engagement
Economic Strategy	Less focus on infrastructure, more on security	Belt and Road Initiative, infrastructure development
Diplomatic Role	Supporter of Saudi Arabia, often opposes Iran	Neutral mediator, balancing relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran
Israeli-Palestinian Conflict	Strong support for Israel	Advocates for a two-state solution, neutral stance
GCC Relations	Traditional security partner	Increasing economic partnerships, investments
Technological Competition	Concerns over Chinese tech, advocating US standards	Investment in telecommunications, including 5G

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 15.

## The Strategic Importance of Maritime Choke Points

US-China competition is influencing geopolitical dynamics across the globe.<sup>47</sup> The rivalry is evident in the Middle East, where several critical maritime chokepoints play a crucial role in global trade and energy transportation.<sup>48</sup> The Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait are pivotal for the movement of oil, gas, and goods, serving as essential arteries for the global economy.<sup>49</sup> This section examines the impact of the US-China rivalry on these key chokepoints, exploring how their strategic importance has been heightened by the geopolitical contest between these two major powers. By focusing on the strategic calculations of both the United States and China, this analysis provides an appraisal of how their rivalry shapes the security and stability of these vital maritime routes.

### ▪ *The Strait of Hormuz: A Flashpoint in US-China Strategic Calculations*

Most of the oil produced by the Gulf countries passes through the Strait of Hormuz, which is located between Oman and Iran.<sup>50</sup> Twenty percent of the oil passes through this strait, highlighting its strategic importance of this strait.<sup>51</sup> To ensure the free flow of energy through this passage, the US maintains a strong naval presence in this region and considers the free flow energy through this passage as a vital national interest.<sup>52</sup>

Due to China's reliance on the Middle Eastern oil, China also considers this strait vital for ensuring energy security. To ensure energy security, China is investing in the region and also enhancing strategic relations with neighboring states such as Iran.<sup>53</sup> The US considers increasing Chinese presence as threat to its dominant position in the Middle East, which can alter balance of power in the region.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Xue Wang, Debin Du, and Yan Peng, "Assessing the Importance of the Marine Chokepoint: Evidence from Tracking the Global Marine Traffic," *Sustainability* 16, no. 1 (December 31, 2023): 384.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>50</sup> Ahmed Esmael, Majeed Hamzah, and Faisal Shallal, "The Strategic Importance of the Strait of Hormuz and Its Impact on the Iranian -American Conflict" e12 (February 14, 2022): 2020.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> EIA, "The Strait of Hormuz Is the World's Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)," Official Website, *US Energy Information Administration*, November 21, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Alexander Texas Meresin, "China's Geopolitical Strategy in the Strait of Hormuz," *Chinese Journal of International Review* 02, no. 02 (December 2020): 20-10.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

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The US-China rivalry has thus added a new dimension to the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz. Both powers are keenly aware that control or influence over strait of Hormuz can provide significant leverage in their broader geopolitical competition.<sup>55</sup> The potential for conflict, whether through direct confrontation or proxy engagements, remains a concern, as any disruption in the Strait of Hormuz could have far-reaching implications for global energy markets and economic stability.<sup>56</sup>

### ▪ *The Suez Canal: A Gateway to Global Trade*

The Suez Canal is a crucial connecting point, providing the shortest maritime route between Europe and Asia.<sup>57</sup> This canal is a vital artery for international trade, facilitating the transport of oil, Liquid Natural Gas (LNG), and various goods. There are multiple factors that influence the strategic importance of Suez Canal for the US and China. First, it is an important route for global trade. Second, the location of the Suez Canal also enhances its geopolitical importance.<sup>58</sup>

In addition, the US maintains strong political, economic, and military relationship with Egypt<sup>59</sup> due to the importance of this passage for the US military movement. Therefore, the US considers this route of primary interest.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, transportation of oil through this canal also plays an important role in stabilizing the global oil market. Disturbance in global oil market can increase inflation in the US and pose challenges to the US government in maintaining domestic stability.<sup>61</sup>

One reason for China's interest in the Suez Canal is its investment in BRI and its economic reliance on exports.<sup>62</sup> This route is an important trade corridor for exporting goods to Europe. The significance of the Suez Canal for China is highlighted by Chinese investment in ports near this

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<sup>55</sup> Kabir Taneja, "Strait Talking: The China Question Extends from Malacca to Hormuz," *orfonline.org*, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> Ehud Gonen, "China and the Suez Canal—Politics, Economy, and Logistics," *The Suez Canal: Past Lessons and Future Challenges*, ed. Carmela Lutmar and Ziv Rubinovitz (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 27–41.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Edward S. Walker, "United States-Egyptian Relations: Strengthening Our Partnership," *SAIS Review (1989-2003)* 17, no. 1 (1997): 147–62.

<sup>60</sup> Douglas Youvan, *Navigating Troubled Waters: The Strategic Importance of the Suez Canal and Red Sea in Global Maritime Trade*, 2024.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Anas Rakha and Khadiga El-Aasar, "The Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on the Suez Canal Cargo Trade," *Journal of Shipping and Trade* 9, no. 1 (March 25, 2024): 9.

route.<sup>63</sup> The increasing Chinese presence in the region has prompted concerns in US about the potential for China to gain undue influence over Suez Canal chokepoint.<sup>64</sup>

The strategic rivalry between the US and China thus impacts the Suez Canal in significant ways.<sup>65</sup> Both powers seek to ensure their interests are protected, with the US focusing on maintaining the canal's openness and security, while China emphasizes economic engagement and infrastructure development.<sup>66</sup> The interplay of these strategies highlights the canal's role as a focal point in the broader geopolitical competition between the two nations.<sup>67</sup>

▪ ***The Bab el-Mandeb Strait: A Crucial Link in the Global Supply Chain***

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, situated between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula and Djibouti and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa, is another key chokepoint in the Middle East.<sup>68</sup> It connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, making it a crucial link for shipping routes between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.<sup>69</sup> This strait is essential for the transportation of oil and gas, with significant volumes passing through daily.<sup>70</sup>

The United States views the security of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait as critical to its strategic interests, particularly in ensuring the free flow of energy and preventing the region from becoming a hotspot for piracy and terrorism.<sup>71</sup> The US Navy maintains a presence in the region, often working in conjunction with international coalitions to safeguard maritime traffic.<sup>72</sup> China's involvement in the Bab el-Mandeb region has increased significantly in recent years, driven by its growing economic interests and strategic considerations.<sup>73</sup> The establishment of a Chinese military base in Djibouti marks a significant expansion of China's strategic footprint in the region.<sup>74</sup> This base supports China's anti-piracy operations and provides a platform for broader regional

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>64</sup> Gonen, "China and the Suez Canal—Politics, Economy, and Logistics."

<sup>65</sup> "Rivalry between America and China Has Spread to the Indian Ocean," *The Economist*, accessed April 15, 2024.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>67</sup> Parag Khanna, "The Red Sea Crisis Proves China Was Ahead of the Curve," *Foreign Policy* (blog), September 10, 2024.

<sup>68</sup> Attilio Micheluzzi, *BAB EL MANDEB* (MOSQUITO, 2010).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>71</sup> Richard B. Remnek, "The Strategic Importance of the Bab El-Mandeb and the Horn of Africa," *Naval War College Review* 43, no. 4 (1990): 6–30.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>73</sup> Geoffrey F. Gresh, "A Vital Maritime Pinch Point: China, the Bab al-Mandeb, and the Middle East," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11, no. 1 (March 2017): 37–46.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 40.

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engagement, reflecting China's interest in securing its maritime trade routes and projecting power.<sup>75</sup>

The US-China rivalry in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait underlines the strategic importance of Bab el-Mandeb Strait.<sup>76</sup> Both powers are concerned with ensuring the security of Bab el-Mandeb Strait, but their approaches differ.<sup>77</sup> The US focuses on military presence and alliances, while China combines economic investments with a growing military footprint.<sup>78</sup> This duality highlights the complex nature of the strategic competition between the two powers in a region critical to global trade.

### **Strategic Importance and Geopolitical Implications**

If the US-China rivalry escalates, it will have significant implications for the security and stability of maritime chokepoints.<sup>79</sup> These chokepoints play a vital role in global energy flows and trade.<sup>80</sup> The systematic interests of US and China also influence their relations around these vital chokepoints. Furthermore, China's dependence on Middle Eastern energy and the US effort to maintain the status quo in the region also influence their relations.<sup>81</sup>

Due to the importance of these chokepoints for both states, the US-China rivalry can gradually increase friction between both powers that can result in a conflict. However, a significant power gap exists between the two states in the region in terms of military power. The US holds prominent military positions and also has more force.<sup>82</sup> As Chinese interest will grow and friction between both state is going to increases, China may also increase its military presence in the region. This could increase the risk of accidental or deliberate escalation.<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, this rivalry could also influence patterns of regional alliances. Both countries will try to gain the maximum number of allies to strengthen their position in the region.<sup>84</sup> This has

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<sup>75</sup> Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 125 (September 2, 2020): 731–47.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 50

<sup>77</sup> António Alexandre, "The Strait of Bab El-Mandeb: Stage of Geopolitical Disputes," *JANUS NET E-Journal of International Relation* 12 (November 1, 2021).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>80</sup> Jean-Paul Rodrigue, "Straits, Passages and Chokepoints a Maritime Geostrategy of Petroleum Distribution," *Cahiers de Géographie Du Québec* 48 (December 1, 2004).

<sup>81</sup> Burton, *China and Middle East Conflicts*.

<sup>82</sup> "Risky Competition: Strengthening U.S.-China Crisis Management | *Crisis Group*," May 20, 2022.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Chaziza, "The US-China Rivalry in the Middle East, p.12.

the potential to further escalate friction among regional states. Due to the importance of these chokepoints for the global security and stability, there is a need for confidence-building measures and robust diplomacy.<sup>85</sup> Multilateral frameworks and cooperative security arrangements are essential to managing the risks associated with these chokepoints and ensuring they remain open and secure for all.<sup>86</sup>

The US-China rivalry significantly impacts the strategic importance of Middle Eastern maritime chokepoints.<sup>87</sup> The Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait are not only vital for global energy and trade but also serve as key arenas for geopolitical competition between the world's two largest economies.<sup>88</sup> Power politics between the two states influences the regional security dynamics.<sup>89</sup> A conflict management mechanism is necessary between the two states to reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation as well as to develop an understanding both states' legitimate interests in the region.<sup>90</sup> As the competition between the two state intensifies in the region, the threat to global security and economic stability will increase.<sup>91</sup>

### **Implications for Regional and Global Security**

Firstly, as competition between the two state increases, the need to consolidate their military position will increase. Both states are likely to strengthen their military position in the region, which could lead to an arm race. The presence of heavily armed forces increases the risk of inadvertent escalation.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, without robust communication channels between two states, the presence of naval force from both countries in the same region could increase the chances of their interaction and confrontation, especially when the relationship between both states are strained and domestic nationalism is heightened.<sup>93</sup> For example, a small incident between US and Chinese navies could stir up nationalistic sentiment domestically, potentially leading to full-scale conflict.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>86</sup> "Managing Chokepoint Risk | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank," accessed 24 March, 2024.

<sup>87</sup> Alexandre, "The Strait of Bab El-Mandeb."

<sup>88</sup> Galen Murton and Tom Narins, "Corridors, Chokepoints and the Contradictions of the Belt and Road Initiative," *Area Development and Policy* 0, no. 0 (n.d.): 1–21.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 16

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>92</sup> Mordechai Chaziza, "The US-China Rivalry in the Middle East: Confrontation or Competitive Coexistence," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 11 (April 12, 2024).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.,13.

## *Chokepoints in the Middle East and their Importance for US-China Rivalry*

Secondly, the competition over these chokepoints influences the strategic calculations of regional actors. Countries in the Middle East, particularly those around the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, may feel compelled to align more closely with either the US or China, depending on their security and economic interests. This alignment could exacerbate regional divisions and increase the likelihood of proxy conflicts, as seen in the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>94</sup> The involvement of external powers in these disputes, whether through arms sales, military support, or economic investments, can further destabilize the region.

Thirdly, the strategic importance of these chokepoints extends to global supply chains and energy markets. Any disruption in these critical passages whether through conflict, political instability, or other means would have far-reaching consequences for global trade and economic stability. One example of the vulnerable nature of the global supply chain is the incident of blockage of Suez Canal, which led to significant disruption in the global supply chain. This incident also underlines the importance of maritime chokepoints.<sup>95</sup> Both states are facing the dichotomy: on one hand it is in their interest to keep these chokepoints open; however, their strategic rivalry complicates this effort.

## **Conclusion**

The competition between the US and China in the region of Middle East, particularly concerning strategic maritime chokepoints, poses significant risks and challenges for regional and global security. The heightened competition for influence and control over critical routes like the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait underscores the potential for increased military tensions and disruptions in global trade and energy supply. As both powers seek to assert their influence in this geopolitically sensitive region, the likelihood of conflict—whether through direct confrontation or proxy engagements—remains a critical concern. Careful diplomatic engagement and strategic foresight to manage these tensions, ensuring the continued stability and security of these vital global arteries, is essential. The international cooperation and multilateral frameworks are crucial for mitigating the risks associated with US-China rivalry, thus safeguarding the interests of the global community in maintaining open and secure maritime routes. As the

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<sup>94</sup> Antonio Graceffo, “The Proxies and Militias of Middle East Geopolitics,” *Geopolitical Monitor* (blog), May 13, 2024.

<sup>95</sup> Shiqi Fan et al., “Shipping Accident Analysis in Restricted Waters: Lesson from the Suez Canal Blockage in 2021,” *Ocean Engineering* 266 (December 1, 2022): 113.

geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, the international community must prioritize efforts to address the complex dynamics at the Middle Eastern chokepoints, fostering a stable and secure environment for global trade and energy flows.