



The Sino-American Rivalry in the Middle East

Why the United States Can't Neglect the Middle East in Its Global Confrontation against China

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Chinese president Xi Jinping's recent high-profile visit to Saudi Arabia has renewed discussions over the Sino-American rivalry in the Middle East. Many analysts have taken the extensive trade and investment agreements signed between the two countries, as well as Xi's warm reception in Riyadh, to be yet another indicator of Washington's decline in the region. Others remain skeptical that Beijing can—or even aspires to—displace the United States as the predominant foreign power in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). To advocates of US disengagement from the Middle East, exaggerating China's influence and ambitions will lead Washington to overcommit to the region instead of prioritizing great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

This long-standing effort to “pivot to Asia” was initially announced by the Obama administration in 2011 and was built upon by his successors. For instance, even despite pledging to bolster American engagement with partners during his trip to the Middle East last summer, President Biden and his administration have still failed to adequately incorporate the region into their broader strategic priorities, as can be seen by the relative lack of emphasis on the MENA in the 2022 National Security Strategy as well as Team Biden's unwillingness to address Iran's malevolent behavior over the past few months.

But while proponents of the “pivot” are correct about the considerable importance of the Indo-Pacific to US geopolitical and economic interests and are right to be wary of additional costly military escapades, America's rebalance to East Asia cannot come at the expense of its political, economic, and military preeminence in the Greater Middle East. As a crossroads between Europe and Asia and home of a vast possession of hydrocarbons that are vital for the functioning of the global economy, the region will remain structurally crucial to the broader international system. Moreover, Beijing's expanding ties with MENA states, especially through

the Belt and Road Initiative, have not only appreciably served its economic interests but have also provided the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with extensive geopolitical leverage to further its global ambitions and erode Washington's strategic advantages. Under Xi's aggressive and muscular foreign policy, China has also increased its military footprint in the region, through both conventional means and "dual-use" civilian infrastructure.

Disengagement from the Middle East also (paradoxically) risks leaving the United States *more*—not less—entrenched in regional disputes. By neglecting the needs of its traditional allies, Washington paves the way for Iran to pursue its revisionist ambitions and drives partners into the arms of Beijing, which has expanded security and economic ties with Tehran and its regional adversaries simultaneously through a clever "balancing act." These close relationships with actors on multiple sides of intraregional disputes have allowed China to garner support for its revisionist claims in the Pacific and work through the Islamic Republic to keep the US bogged down in the Persian Gulf.

Thus, the outcome of the Sino-American rivalry in the Greater Middle East will have major ramifications for the strategic picture in East Asia and beyond. As Gen. Michael E. Kurilla of US Central Command remarked in July 2022: "This region is at the center of America's strategic competition with Russia and China."¹ If the United States is to succeed in its global confrontation against China, it must prioritize maintaining a Middle Eastern order that safeguards American interests and checks the influence of geopolitical rivals—both internal and external.

A CRUDE GAME

Despite the decline of US dependence on Persian Gulf oil since the "Shale Revolution" and other recent attempts to promote energy independence, the American economy—as demonstrated by the effects of COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine—is still vulnerable to supply shocks and other disruptions in international energy markets. Oil remains a globally traded commodity, and the Middle East's possession of almost half of the world's proven oil reserves, 27 percent of the world's oil production, three out of four of the world's biggest transit choke points, and the world's largest natural gas reserves will continue to give it an outsize role in the global economy.²

Moreover, as was the case during the Cold War, America's allies in Europe and Asia are heavily dependent on oil and natural gas from the Middle East. Despite Asian countries' attempts to diversify energy sources and COVID-19's effect on their oil trade with the Gulf, the underlying economic interdependence between the two regions has not fundamentally changed. Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan (an especially important flash point between the US and China in East Asia), and several other countries in the Indo-Pacific still import a significant percentage of their oil and gas from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, and more so after international sanctions on Russian energy intensified since Putin's invasion of Ukraine. A similar trend is also taking place in Europe, where countries have replaced Russian oil and gas with imports from the Middle East. China itself also has developed a massive economic

stake in Western Asia since the country's industrial output grew in the late 1990s; currently, over 40 percent of China's oil imports and a large proportion of its natural gas imports come from the region.³

Recent progress toward clean energy will do little in the near term to diminish the importance of hydrocarbons from the Middle East to the global economy. As Meghan O'Sullivan and Jason Bordoff point out, not only are clean energy sources unlikely to fulfill rising energy demands in the coming decades (particularly among developing nations that are struggling to transition away from fossil fuels), but price volatility and dwindling investments in fossil fuels in the developed world will give traditional low-cost producers outsized influence on the global stage.⁴ Saudi Arabia and Qatar have also demonstrated success in exporting low-carbon hydrogen and ammonia to allies in Europe and Asia, some of whom lack both natural gas and storage capacity and will remain dependent on the Gulf States for low-carbon fuels until a larger and more diversified market for hydrogen and ammonia emerges.

Thus, American grand strategy must prioritize preserving the uninterrupted flow of energy from the Middle East to the US and its allies. Though MENA leaders seek to maintain their independence vis-à-vis both Washington and Beijing as part of their "hedging" strategy, they may nonetheless be eventually forced to lean toward sides—or even choose between them—as hostilities grow, which could have a transformative impact on the balance of power in Europe and Asia. Though America can currently impose an energy blockade on China (or threaten to do so) in the event of a conflict, courtesy of the US military presence in the Gulf, Beijing could turn the tables by—in the words of Michael Doran and Can Kasapoğlu—"placing its thumb on the windpipe of its rivals, including Taiwan" if it develops enough sway over its energy-rich partners.⁵

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN THE MENA

Though energy is a paramount concern for both Washington and Beijing with regard to the Middle East, it is certainly not the only one. Since 2000, China has also rapidly expanded its trade and overseas investments with several states in the region. These efforts intensified significantly in 2013, when Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive trillion-dollar network of hard and soft infrastructure projects worldwide. In addition to promoting the country's domestic economic growth by improving its connections with Europe and Asia, the BRI has also been described by analysts as a centerpiece of China's strategy to achieve great-power status, reshape the existing international system, and displace the US and Western Europe as the center of global commerce.

The Middle East is structurally critical to the global BRI. One of the original economic corridors of the BRI, the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, directly featured the Middle East and North Africa as an endpoint. Similarly, the Chinese leadership has heavily invested in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor—widely considered to be the flagship project of the BRI—as it provides Beijing with a new oil shipping route to the Persian Gulf and enhances its strategic presence near the Strait of Hormuz. As the BRI expanded beyond these initial corridors and maritime routes, the Persian Gulf and the Red and Mediterranean

Seas grew in their importance to China, which seeks to transform the Middle East into a key regional hub for linking markets and supply chains across Eurasia.

Beijing's growing appetite for regional influence led it to become the largest foreign investor in the Middle East and the main bilateral trading partner for the Arab world and several other countries throughout the MENA. China has even attempted to craft free-trade agreements with the Gulf Cooperation Council since 2004 and is reportedly close to finalizing one with Israel. Moreover, as Jonathan Fulton covers in his report on China's Middle East policy for the Atlantic Council, Beijing has signed several bilateral economic and trade agreements with key players in the MENA. This includes comprehensive strategic partnerships—which entail a high degree of political trust and intimate economic ties—with Algeria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt.⁶ Though many of these investments are energy related and weighted toward the Gulf, BRI partnerships have also encompassed infrastructure construction, trade and investment facilitation (and for the Gulf States, coordination with their "Vision" programs), and cooperation on technology, clean energy, and satellite navigation as part of a "1 + 2 + 3" pattern.⁷ Non-Gulf States such as Israel, Turkey, and Egypt are also active BRI participants.

These deepening inroads in the MENA have not only positioned Beijing to eventually outcompete the US and Western Europe for economic influence in the region but have also fueled its projection of power on the global stage by significantly bolstering the BRI as a whole.

YUAN DIPLOMACY

China's emphasis on securing energy sources and expanding the BRI have led some observers to claim that its goals in the region are predominantly, if not solely, commercial. Others have questioned the extent to which China's economic engagements and joint infrastructure projects with regional states truly threaten US interests and have identified potential areas of cooperation between Washington and Beijing on reconstruction, development, green energy, and conflict resolution. China's overall economic slowdown and cancellation of some BRI projects seem to be additional cases in point that Beijing's challenge to American hegemony—in the MENA and elsewhere—is exaggerated.

What these arguments overlook, however, is that China has taken on wider political, diplomatic, and security roles in order to protect its growing commercial stakes in the region. And while Beijing may depict many of its commitments as benign and in line with Western goals, a closer look at the prosecution of China's policies refutes this narrative. As Dawn Murphy illustrates in *China's Rise in the Global South*, though not seeking to change the distribution of territory or immediately overhaul the US-led order in the Middle East, China is nonetheless exhibiting increasingly norm-divergent and competitive behavior in the realms of politics and economics directly related to its vital interests.⁸

Through cooperation forums, special envoys, and strategic partnerships and dialogues, China has gradually crafted alternative spheres of influence in the region to position itself to challenge liberal international norms and fall back on an alternative world order should the

current one collapse. These tensions are only likely to intensify as China's power grows, the current international system continues unraveling, tensions in the Pacific ramp up, and trade relations with the West break down. And contrary to skeptics' contentions, China's economic slowdown could actually lead it to divert more, not fewer, of its resources to the MENA.

This norm-divergent and competitive behavior in the Middle East has clearly manifested in how China has sought to push back against the US rebalancing to Asia with its own respective "March West." BRI partners' increasing dependence on Chinese finance, investment, and technology has given Beijing political leverage to garner support for its revisionist territorial claims in the South China and East China Seas—a point that was emphasized directly in China-Arab States Cooperation Forum declarations in 2016, 2018, and 2020. Likewise, several Muslim-majority states have endorsed Beijing's position on its crackdown against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Thus, Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East has evolved from a primarily commercial outlook to a broader geostrategic imperative and has become closely linked to both China's repression domestically and its aggression in East Asia.

CHINA'S GROWING MILITARY FOOTPRINT IN THE MENA

China's burgeoning military presence in the Middle East has traditionally been understated for several reasons. First, many analysts have argued that Beijing's overall security footprint and arms sales in the region pale in comparison to those of the United States. The superior quality of US weapons and the difficulty entailed in replacing such systems have also convinced American policy makers that Washington will remain the preferred military patron for its Middle Eastern allies. Some commentators have also claimed that Beijing has neither the appetite nor the ability to overhaul the American-backed security architecture in the region, as this framework preserves the uninterrupted flow of energy that China is so economically dependent upon.

But although China does in some ways "free ride" off of the US security umbrella, Beijing also regards Washington's ability to block its maritime transport and energy supplies from the MENA as a major strategic vulnerability. As Grant Rumley illustrates in his assessment on China's security presence in the Middle East, this fear has compelled Beijing to steadily increase its military engagements in the region, initially limited mostly to peacekeeping and antipiracy naval operations.⁹ In 2017, China appended a naval facility—its first overseas military base—to the Doraleh port in Djibouti, which overlooks the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Beijing eventually augmented this facility to potentially dock a nuclear submarine or aircraft carrier. China has also participated more actively in joint military exercises and port calls with US partners and adversaries alike, including several recent trilateral naval drills with Iran and Russia in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean. And, despite Washington's advantages in the arms sales domain, China's rapid provisions of unmanned armed vehicles, or UAVs—which the US has traditionally been reluctant to supply regional partners—and transfer of ballistic missile technology to Middle Eastern countries has made it a pivotal player in the conflict

raging between Iran and its Gulf adversaries and also positioned it to possibly even close off US drone sales to allies altogether.

According to Rumley, China has supplemented this projection of hard power with a tactic of “civil-military fusion,” a low-cost method of bolstering its security presence in the region through an interconnected framework of modernized ports, while downplaying its global military aspirations by pointing to its lack of an American-style basing network. As outlined in military documents such as *Science of Military Strategy*, Beijing has identified ports and parks positioned along “strategic strongpoints” that could potentially serve a “dual use” for the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which Chinese firms operating BRI ports projects are legally obligated to support during wartime.¹⁰ China has experimented with this approach in numerous countries throughout the world, leading to major controversies over the Khalifa port in the UAE and the Haifa port in Israel, both of which US officials suspected Beijing of intending to utilize for military purposes. Similarly, China’s legal requirements for technology companies such as Huawei to perform intelligence work for the Chinese government have made the Digital Silk Road—a markedly structured undertaking that Beijing is likely to prioritize in the long run—another major point of concern for American policy makers.

China’s growing network of physical and digital infrastructure in the Middle East has presented the CCP with numerous opportunities for intelligence gathering on US military facilities and political assets, data collection, and improving its cyber offensive capabilities. BRI port-park networks, due to their “dual nature,” could also undermine the US military’s freedom of navigation in the surrounding area and its ability to defend American allies. Moreover, Beijing’s ability to shut down BRI participants’ critical infrastructure networks and power grids threatens Washington’s ability to share intelligence with partners and also gives China considerable control over these countries. Over time, Xi may be able to sway countries against American interests—perhaps by pressuring them to disrupt energy supplies to US allies in Europe and Asia during a military conflict (as some hard-line Soviet military advisers sought to do during the Cold War)—and supplant America as the regional powerhouse.

THE SINO-IRANIAN PARTNERSHIP

China’s extensive relationship with Iran has been a key pillar of its quest for regional hegemony. In 2016, Xi drafted a twenty-five-year comprehensive strategic partnership with Tehran, which was signed in 2021. The agreement gave the Islamic Republic billions of dollars of investment in exchange for steady access to discounted Iranian oil and intensified Sino-Iranian military cooperation through joint training and exercises, combined weapons development, and intelligence sharing. China also initiated Iran’s accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation a few months after the twenty-five-year strategic partnership was finalized.

While not as extensive as, and more “one-sided” than, Beijing’s interactions with the Gulf, the Sino-Iranian relationship nonetheless has several security implications that Western policy makers must consider. First, as was the case after making the 2015 nuclear deal with the P5+1 and the European Union (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA), Iran

will likely use the additional revenue from investment packages and oil sales (much of which with China is currently illegal) to enhance its ballistic missile and drone arsenals and escalate its destructive behavior in the region through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and proxy groups. Co-development of weapons and military training with Beijing will amplify these power projection capabilities. In fact, according to a US-China Commission report on China-Iran ties, Iran and its proxies have directly used drones and missiles likely developed by Chinese technology against US forces in the past, and some reports even suggest that Tehran has passed Chinese anti-aircraft missiles to the Taliban in Afghanistan.¹¹ Furthermore, the enormous economic and diplomatic benefits Iran has received from its partnership with China have allowed it to evade pressure from US sanctions, diminishing Washington's ability to limit Tehran's avenues of regional aggression.

The West's dwindling leverage is particularly concerning in terms of addressing Iran's recent progress with its nuclear program, of which China has been a longtime supporter. Even after Beijing formally pledged to terminate direct nuclear support for Iran in 1997, it has turned a blind eye to Chinese individuals' and firms' provisions of technologies and dual-use components that Iran could potentially use to build weapons of mass destruction. While Beijing allegedly shares Washington's interest in preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, China has endorsed Iran's unreasonable demands and called for an "unconditional" return to the JCPOA (which was inadequate both in terms of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and addressing its malign nonproliferation activity), as opposed to the "longer and stronger" deal initially sought by the Biden administration. Beijing's recent ambivalence toward addressing Iran's foot-dragging throughout the negotiations process further demonstrates that it advocates a revived nuclear agreement primarily to promote its own access to Iranian energy and raw materials rather than to constrain the Islamic Republic's destabilizing conduct.

Sino-Iranian collaboration also has consequences for Washington and its allies beyond the Middle East. Both China and Iran view their partnership as a defiance of the US-led international order and Western global aims. Moreover, Tehran's position at the center of several land and maritime trade routes in Central Asia will help China facilitate its economic ties with Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nepal, thereby making the Islamic Republic a vital geostrategic component of the broader BRI. Chinese development of strategic ports at Jask and Chabahar also strengthens Iran's positioning against Washington in the region surrounding the Strait of Hormuz and provides China with a major naval advantage against the Quad (United States, Australia, India, and Japan) by expanding its "string" of ports in the Indian Ocean. India especially will be threatened if Beijing connects Chabahar Port to Gwadar Port in Pakistan. European security has also been affected by Tehran's economic progress and weapons development under the partnership: Russia's use of Iranian drones has had a notable impact on the trajectory of the conflict in Ukraine. And most importantly, although wary of antagonizing Beijing's partners in the Gulf, Chinese scholars and officials have also admitted that Iran's regional mischief is useful to China in hindering America's ability to shift its attention and resources to the Pacific theater by keeping it preoccupied with the Middle East.

Though some have blamed Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign for Tehran's "Look East" to Beijing, the long history of the two nations' relationship suggests that a "China-Iran axis"

was likely on the horizon regardless of US policy. If anything, the easing of diplomatic and economic pressure against Tehran under the Obama and Biden administrations was what enabled the rapid progression of commercial, political, and military ties between Iran and China, whereas China's overall trade with Iran decreased between 2018 and 2020 after Washington withdrew from the JCPOA. Beijing's unofficial purchases of Iranian oil would later shoot up from late 2020 onward due to anticipations that the Biden administration would ease sanctions on the Islamic Republic. Pressure from the US has also been successful in getting Chinese firms such as Huawei to limit their presence in Iran.

Thus, a rapprochement with Tehran that incorporates it into a regional order will not ease the US rebalancing to the Indo-Pacific. Instead, Washington must maintain diplomatic and economic pressure on the Islamic Republic and work with its MENA allies to establish a robust, integrated security alliance that adequately deters Iran's revisionist ambitions and discourages Sino-Iranian collusion.

CHINESE SOFT POWER AND BEIJING'S "BALANCING" ACT

Beijing's burgeoning political, economic, and diplomatic clout throughout the Middle East is buttressed by its projection of soft power. China's commitment to state sovereignty and "non-interference" in the domestic affairs of other countries has won it a substantial level of support from leaders who are exasperated with human rights lectures from the West. In light of the failure of the Arab Spring uprisings, many throughout the MENA have expressed support for China's model of authoritarian capitalism over America's emphasis on political openness. Additionally, despite duplicitously advancing Beijing's own security interests through civilian infrastructure projects, as mentioned earlier, Chinese officials often contrast their "noninterventionist" approach to Washington's "military adventurism" in their efforts to pry allies away from the United States.

The CCP's investment in Confucius Institutes and involvement in educational initiatives throughout the Middle East, as well as its broader emphasis on "South-South Cooperation," have also played an important role in winning hearts and minds among people of the region. Likewise, the diffusion of Chinese technology throughout the MENA, particularly in the 5G and AI domains, subverts global liberal norms by promoting technical standards favorable to Beijing, challenging Western initiatives such as the Clean Network, and entrenching "digital authoritarianism" through controversial surveillance and data-gathering software.

Another important pillar of China's regional diplomacy has been its self-portrayal as a responsible actor that doesn't take sides in political disputes. By skillfully mediating regional conflicts, Beijing has been able to maintain its adherence to "noninterference" while expanding its influence over both parties. Similarly, as Fulton covers in his report, China has convincingly depicted the BRI as an inclusive, apolitical initiative yielding "win-win" opportunities for all sides by using partnerships as opposed to formal alliances, allowing it to circumvent the traditional obstacles that come with infrastructure development in competitive environments.¹²

Observers of the region have debated the extent to which China’s “balancing act” and reluctance to involve itself in regional skirmishes diminish the prospect of a China-dominated Middle East. For instance, some have predicted that Beijing’s coziness with Tehran will complicate its relationship with Israel and the Gulf States, who will have no choice other than to turn to Washington for their most pressing defense needs against their primary adversary.

But China’s cautious approach toward the MENA hasn’t presented nearly as many liabilities as one would expect. To the contrary, as Doran and Kasapoğlu explain in their piece for *Tablet*, rather than alienating Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, China’s engagement with Iran (along with its successful infiltration of the Middle East’s drone market, as discussed earlier) actually helped Xi increase his leverage over all parties in the Persian Gulf, whereas Washington’s sway over both sides has declined.¹³ Indeed, for the time being, the Gulf monarchies seem to have decided that the economic benefits of trade with China outweigh concerns over Sino-Iranian ties. Other experts have also questioned whether Beijing can remain on the sidelines in disputes as its MENA footprint grows over time. As partners become increasingly demanding in their expectations from China, Xi may gradually be forced to abandon his neutral posturing and come down more firmly on specific sides.

CONCLUSION

Despite China’s economic, diplomatic, political, and military breakthroughs in the Greater Middle East (as well as recent blunders by Washington), the United States has several tools in its arsenal to prevent the regional balance of power from tipping toward Beijing.

First, Washington must reinvigorate its alliances in the region and convincingly signal to its regional partners—with actions, not words—that it will remain engaged in the Middle East for the foreseeable future. Restoring its status as a reliable security patron will require the US to modify its approach to weapons sales, namely by expediting deployments of military hardware, such as cost-effective counter-UAV platforms, that Israel and the Gulf States have sought to defend themselves from Iranian-backed attacks. Beijing has benefited from America’s reluctance to sell UAVs and coproduce defense platforms with its MENA partners and has capitalized on long-standing complaints that US allies have had regarding long waiting times, costliness of equipment like the Patriot missile defense system, and various restrictions over their use. US officials should explore potential arrangements to help partners develop and acquire such systems and harness newly available military technologies. Intelligence on Beijing’s military relationship with Tehran will be especially useful both in terms of upholding the regional security architecture and signaling to American partners that further cooperation with China is inimical to their long-term interests.

Addressing China’s inroads through the Belt and Road Initiative will also be critical for preserving Western interests in the Greater Middle East. While exposing the harmful aspects of the BRI—such as corruption, environmental degradation, and undermining of human rights—is one way of doing this, scolding MENA leaders for their ties to Beijing alone won’t suffice. Washington must also present alternatives to help these states meet their political and

economic needs. Augmenting initiatives such as Development Finance Corporation, Blue Dot Network, and Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment and incorporating them into America's Middle East strategy will be crucial steps in this direction. Promoting competitiveness in 5G/6G, AI, and cybersecurity and equipping American diplomats with sufficient technical expertise should also be a priority for Washington if it wishes to counter Beijing's technological advances in the region through the Digital Silk Road.

Nonetheless, the US must also recognize that matching every Chinese investment in the region dollar-for-dollar on its own is impractical, and allies are unlikely to respond well if coerced to abandon their ties with Beijing completely. Rather, Washington should identify and prioritize particular aspects of Chinese policy that threaten vital American interests, while potentially harnessing some of Beijing's other engagements to its own advantage. Greater investments in the MENA from democratic allies Japan, South Korea, and India and intraregional integration through agreements such as the Abraham Accords can also be major helping hands for Washington in crowding out Chinese financing.

While the US shouldn't abandon the cause of democracy promotion completely, it needs to adopt a more gradual approach to political reform as opposed to the "pariah" strategy and other stringent human rights measures such as withholding military and economic aid from allies (exceptional cases notwithstanding). Such policies risk alienating American partners and pushing them further into China's and Russia's embrace and have generally failed to ameliorate the overall climate of human rights in MENA countries. Instead of focusing on the typical democracy and good governance programs, emphasizing technical assistance and cultural and educational exchanges can allow Washington to play a constructive role in the region and can also undercut Beijing's claim that only the Chinese model can deliver tangible benefits.

Most important, US policy makers need to grasp the tremendous importance of the Greater Middle East to America's global confrontation against China. If Washington limits its strategic imagination to the Pacific theater, it will lose out in bids for hegemony in other crucial parts of the world. The outcome of the Sino-American rivalry in the MENA especially—due to the region's natural resources and maritime and trade routes, China's courting of regional leaders on Xinjiang and South China Sea territorial disputes, and the global implications of Sino-Iranian collusion—will have far-reaching repercussions in East Asia and beyond.

China clearly recognizes that great-power competition won't be confined to the Indo-Pacific. It's about time that the United States does too.

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