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GREAT POWER RIVALRY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF U.S.–CHINA STRATEGIES IN YEMEN AND SYRIA (2000–PRESENT)

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Abstract
This article explores the ongoing evolution of the rivalry between the United States and China in the Middle East by examining their respective roles in the Yemen conflict (2000 - present) and the Syria conflict (2014 - 2023). It points out that while both powers desire regional stability and influence, their approaches could not be more different, given the wider trends in their national foreign policy. Unlike the United States, which has more often based its strategy on military intervention, security alliances and coercive diplomacy, China has focused on economic engagement, non-intervention and multilateral diplomacy rooted in respect for state sovereignty. In terms of methodology, it is a qualitative comparative case study that investigates Yemen and Syria across five dimensions, also referred to as variables: the role of regional actors; global competition and normative conflict; economic imperatives and aid strategies; diplomatic engagement and United Nations involvement; and military-security approaches. It relies on both primary (e.g., UN debates, reports and resolutions) and secondary (e.g., academic articles, policy documents and official statements) sources. In Syria against regime shift and opposition groups, U.S. policy shifted towards counterterrorism missions to defeat extremists; likewise, state sovereignty was at the forefront of China's position on the issue, while generally voting with Russia in UN Security Council votes over Libya. In Yemen, the US is supporting the Saudi-led coalition with logistical and intelligence support, instead of pursuing an active military confrontation like China. This observation leads to a broader argument about U.S.–China rivalry as a politics of grand strategy rooted in global power and influence that reflects but should not be solved through "cooperation" in international dispute resolution.

Keywords: U.S.–China rivalry; Yemen conflict; Syria conflict; great power competition; Middle East politics; foreign policy analysis; comparative case study; international order.

Introduction
The 21st century has seen changing great power relations in Middle East as United States and China have frequently adopted different strategies when it comes to conflict zones like Yemen and Syria. This study examines how this conflict between the U.S and China has materialized in the two wars since 2000 providing an insight into the military, diplomatic and economic policies that each power has been using. The U.S being the long term outsider in the Middle East has constantly interfered in the crises in the region due to both security considerations and the ideology (Chaziza, 2024). An emerging China on the other hand has been conservative with more emphasis on the ideals of sovereignty and economic participation. Diving into the history of both of the conflicts and contrasting the two cases, this chapter provides an excellent understanding of the USA-China relations at the time of the regional wars. Real-life situations, policy decisions, and United Nations debates (e.g. a vote in the Security Council and a veto) will be demonstrated with clarity to make the points. It is geared towards an accessible yet scholarly discussion that offers a critical reflection on how great power rivalry has played out

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in Yemen and Syria and how it informs us about how world competition and international order more broadly (Chaziza, 2020).

USA and China in Yemen (2000–present)

The U.S and Chinese positions have been extreme opposites in Yemen where they do not have the same shape, but may not always make it to the final decision. Engagement in the security matters of Yemen in the 21st century by the United States has had a long history but China has been less engaged and has been engaged mostly on the diplomatic or economic front. It is interesting to note that both Washington and Beijing have at least on record been in favor of the internationally recognized government of Yemen and wanted the country to be stable, but their approaches show their respective foreign policy philosophies. American Intervention in Yemen: America became more engaged in Yemen following the September 11, 2001 attacks as a part of the Global War on Terror. In the beginning of the 2000s, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was on the run in Yemen and it was considered to be one of the most dangerous branches of the Al-Qaeda. The U.S. responded by providing security support to the Yemeni government and covert actions, such as intelligence-sharing and drone attacks on terrorist targets. One of the first drone strikes that the U.S. conducted outside of Afghanistan was in 2002 when an AQAP leader was killed in Yemen (Johnsen, 2013; Scobell, & Nader, 2016).

In the 2000s, the U.S. remained interested in counterterrorism in Yemen and American Special Forces helped to train Yemeni units. In Yemen, the U.S. led the support of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative that helped to transition the long serving president Ali Abdullah Saleh who was forced to give up power as a result of the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. The negotiations to get Saleh to leave and transfer power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, were conducted by American diplomats in a Group of Ten with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council as well as the Gulf states (Chang, 2018). The U.S. was described as being part of an inner circle of orchestrating the post-2011 shift of Yemen, even spearheading the reorganization of the Yemen military as part of reforms (Chang, 2018). This showed commitment by U.S. in controlling the political future of Yemen in accordance to its interest in counterterrorism and stability of the region.

In 2014-2015, the war in Yemen escalated to a full-fledged civil war, where the U.S. indirectly participated, via allies in the region. A Zaidi Shi'a movement allied with Iran, the Houthi rebels (or Ansar Allah) took control of the capital Sanaa in late 2014 and forced out the Hadi government by early 2015. As a reaction, a Saudi Arabia-based coalition (with the United Arab Emirates) intervened in March 2015 to reinstate the government of Hadi. The US intervened in support of its Saudi ally supplying them with supplies, information, and military weapons. The air campaign involved U.S. aircraft refueling Saudi and Emirati jets and the U.S. supplying the air campaign with munitions. This was also understood by Washington as a continuation of its overall Middle East policy of containment of Iranian influence (the Houthis being Iran-aligned) and protection of a friendly government **(**Carapico, 2021).

The American officials also stressed the need to fight AQAP, and, later, the local affiliate of ISIS in the anarchy in Yemen. However, the growing number of civilian casualties as a result of U.S. airstrikes by the coalition was a topic of controversy back home. However, at least during the initial years of the war, the U.S. leadership supported the Saudi-led one (Robinson, 2023). Simultaneously, the U.S. employed diplomatic means: it supported the UN Security Council Resolution 2216 in April 2015, imposing sanctions on Houthi leaders and declaring the legitimacy of the Hadi government (Chang, 2018).

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The China also voted in favor of the U.S.-led resolution - yet another fascinating sight of the U.S. and the Chinese diplomacies collaborating in Yemen. Over time, the U.S. reconsidered its involvement since the humanitarian crisis lasted too long and was opposed by the congress. In 2018, the United States ceased to assist Saudi airstrikes by refueling and in early 2021 the United States announced it was no longer assisting with the offensive operations in Yemen. Nevertheless, the U.S. still carries out counterterror attacks (e.g. against AQAP) and has a diplomatic role in coercing a peace settlement.

The presence of China in Yemen:

Since 2000 China has been less conspicuous in its involvement in Yemen since it is an overall practice of China not to engage in conflicts. The Yemen Civil War counterintuitive is that Beijing had friendly relations with the Yemeni government during the early 2000s and 2010s, but was otherwise largely inactive. China had not resorted to military interventions in Yemen against the terror groups like the U.S, but focused on diplomatic support and protection of its growing economic interests. In 2011, China was part of the UN Security Council which took part in the transition process in Yemen. China, though not a key player, joined the U.S. and others in the GCC-brokered transition of power (Chang, 2018). Chinese officials were involved in contacts with Western and Gulf officials, and China championed the outcome of the National Dialogue in Yemen in 2013-2014 (Chang, 2018). This shows that Beijing was conducive to a peaceful political transition according to the international agreement.

The Chinese stand on the civil war, which erupted in 2015 and the intervention of Saudi Arabia was a fine blend of both principle and pragmatism. Beijing had shown its position in support of the legitimate government of Yemen (President Hadi) and supported UN resolutions denouncing the Houthi takeover. In fact, China has voted in support of the entire UN Security Council resolutions on the Yemen crisis including Resolution 2216 in 2015 which Russia (more or less on the side with China over issues related to geopolitics) voted abstinence (Chang, 2018). By so doing, China shifted the more pro-Houthi position of Moscow and inclined towards the Saudi-backed one. This was in conjunction with the wider strategic friendship of China and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh is a good friend to China in issues like Taiwan and Xinjiang and Beijing has left Saudi with a free hand in Yemen (Chang, 2018).

The Chinese authorities publicly referred to the government of Hadi as the rightful one in Yemen (Chang, 2018), which meant that the diplomacy was on the side of the Saudi-led coalition. At the same time, China was not comfortable with the Saudi military intervention and humanitarian expenses. The response of the Beijing to the Saudi airstrikes in 2015 was a quiet dislike: the response did not endorse the military intervention but did not comment on Riyadh or Washington regarding it (Chang, 2018). Rather, the urgent need of China was to evacuate its citizens. Later, in March-April 2015, the Chinese Navy conducted an unprecedented mission to rescue 629 Chinese citizens and almost 280 other foreigners caught in the middle of fighting in Yemen (Chang, 2018). This action not only showed the growing naval power of China but also its desire to protect its people which was a major (yet humanitarian) Chinese military input into the war.

During the years to come, China tentatively became more engaged in China-Yemen diplomatic interactions, trying to play a low profile mediator role. Interestingly, in 2016, a delegation of Houthi officials went to China and negotiated (Kelemen, 2024). This early indicated that China could attempt to mediate dialogue. Nevertheless, according to analysts, starting in 2016, the policy of Beijing changed and leaned more towards the direction of Saudi Arabia perhaps due to the significance of Sino-Saudi relations and an acknowledgment of the leading role of

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Riyadh in Yemen (Kelemen, 2024). China not only continued to maintain contact with all parties but also continued to insist on a political resolution and ceased to position itself as a neutral mediator, rather becoming more actively in favor of Saudi peace efforts.

It was all this time that China was giving an account of how it was assisting in bringing peace and not taking sides as its global brand of being a neutral peace-broker. Indeed, towards the end of the 2010s and the beginning of the 2020s, Chinese diplomats had joined the side of the UN mediation (the mission of Grundberg) and accepted ceasefires. The success of Beijing in brokering a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023 had major consequences to Yemen (Herrmann, 2024). The news of the Saudi-Iran normalization deal (announced in March 2023 at Beijing) also brought about a hope of de-escalation of the proxy war in Yemen, as Iran decreased its assistance to the Houthis, and Riyadh began direct talks with the rebels (Robinson, 2023) . It was a typical example of the new China that did not intervene in the conflict on the military level, but rather utilized its ties with the local actors to reduce the conflict which was the complete opposite of decades of U.S. military policy. China has been also gearing up economically towards the post-conflict period.

It has now become the best friend of the Yemen in terms of trade over the last few years (Chang, 2018), and the Chinese firms will invest in rebuilding and developing Yemen ports as part of the Belt and Road Initiative in the event of peace. On balance, in Yemen neither the U.S. nor China was officially its enemies, but their strategies varied: the former actively intervened in military and political activities, and the latter did not comment, but diplomatically supported the interests of Saudi Arabia and encouraged talks and humanitarian aid.

The USA and China in Syria (2000–present)

The case of Syria is more challenging to the USA-China rivalry in the war, particularly following 2011 when the civil war in Syria turned into a proxy battle between the world superpowers. The front line of some of the key issues was to be disagreed between the United States and China: the U.S. attempted to pressure and overturns the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, but China (along with Russia) protected the regime of Assad in the international arena. In Syria the values and calculation of strategy between Washington and Beijing were wide as compared to Yemen which had a level of convergence in the policy gap. This part describes the role of each of the powers in Syria since 2000 to date.

The U.S. Involvement in Syria:

The U.S-Syrian relationship has always been hostile but kept within check before the uprising in Syria in 2011. Under the Assad family, Syria was declared by Washington as a state sponsor of terrorism (because of its backing of groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas) and had been the target of different sanctions of the U.S. over the years. The Bush government in the 2000s had a limited number of interactions with Syria (like the war in Iraq and border security in Syria) but also saw it as a part of a hostile axis known as the Axis of Evil. No direct conflict, but, relations were chilled. All this was to change with the Arab spring in 2011 (Phillips, 2016a). The U.S. gradually assumed an overtly antagonistic stance as the country began to witness non-violent protests spread across Syria in March 2011 and the Assad regime responded with bloody retaliation by crushing the numbers. In August 2011, President Obama officially declared that Assad must go and the U.S. goal is apparent: a political shift to get rid of the Assad government. Washington could gather the support of European and regional allies (Turkey, Gulf states) to diplomatically and economically pressure Assad. The U.S. approved several rounds of sanctions, both through an executive order and through the UN (UNSC sanctions were vetoed by Russians and Chinese). It also provided non-lethal assistance to the

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Syrian opposition groups and facilitated the formation of the Syrian Opposition Coalition towards the end of 2012 as a political alternative to Assad (Phillips, 2016b). This intervention of the U.S. turned into a secret military element when Syria got involved into a civil war. In 2013, the CIA initiated a secret program (purportedly dubbed Timber Sycamore) to train and arm some of the rebel groups against Assad in Syria. This painted a U.S. policy of enabling moderate opposition forces with anticipation that it would pressure Assad or it would have to overthrow him without any commitment of U.S troops to be on the ground. But the emergence of jihadist forces among the rebels and the involvement of ISIS (Islamic State) in the conflict in Syria complicated the situation. By 2014, ISIS had captured sizeable areas of eastern Syria and Iraq, proclaiming a caliphate. The American focus was turned to counterterrorism against ISIS, which had little impact on reducing the priority of toppling Assad. On September 2014, the U.S. led an international coalition to attack the ISIS targets in Syria with airstrikes (with the Syrian government secretly requesting the terrorist group to be the target of the attacks). Thus, the U.S. military action in Syria, primarily against ISIS, since 2014 was only rhetorically declared, as Assad had lost its legitimacy. The following turnover was in 2015, when Russia intervened in support of Assad using airpower and advisors (September 2015), which helped the Syrian army to reverse the fortunes against rebel forces. The U.S. was not willing to engage Russia in direct confrontation in Syria and limited its intervention to the war against ISIS and the support of the Kurdish-led forces (the SDF) in the northeast (Hinnebusch, & Saouli, 2020). In 2017, the U.S.-backed forces had managed to conquer the territorial caliphate of ISIS in Syria and about 900 U. The Kurdish-controlled areas were left with S troops as a sort of residual force (CFR, 2023) to initiate counter-ISIS missions and as a line of defense against regime and extremist growth. Even though the U.S could not directly intervene in dealing with Assad, Washington used diplomatic and economic powers to the maximum. When Assad resorted to the use of chemical weapons (e.g., the Ghouta sarin attack in 2013), the U.S. wanted to take a path through the UN but the Russian and Chinese vetoes could not allow it (Bannelier-Christakis, 2016).

In 2017 and 2018, President Trump would later unilaterally attack government targets in Syria, by launching missiles, in response to Syrian government attacking civilians with chemical weapons. The U.S was also a diplomatic participant of the Geneva peace negotiations headed by the UN with little success because Assad (with Russian/Iranian behind and Chinese support in the UN) was unable to give up power. On the economic front, the U.S. has imposed harsh sanctions on the Assad regime, especially Caesar Act of 2019 that aims to block any reconstruction aid, or business, that would empower Assad without political compromise. These sanctions and U.S. lobbying international normalization of Assad is a classic form of American policy in keeping Syria isolated as long as it remains an ally to U.S. enemies (Iran and to some extent, Russia). To sum up, the American intervention in Syria has changed to the proxy regime change to counter the red lines of terrorism and humanitarian, and has upheld sanctions and diplomacy to contain the success of Assad regime. This puts the U.S. in a direct conflict with the strategy of China which has been more or less the reverse of the strategy in most aspects (Congressional Research Service, 2020).

Chinese Intervention in Syria:

The lack of interventionist ideals and precedence by the Chinese in Syria has shaped its intervention in the Syrian war. Ever since the onset of the Syrian uprising, Beijing had feared any kind of international intervention that could somehow set precedence of overthrowing sovereign governments. The stances of China were influenced by a number of factors. First,

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China in Syria felt that it was akin to Libya 2011 when it (and Russia) had voted against a UNSC resolution only to see NATO take advantage of it to effect regime change. Unlike the view of the West on the intervention in Libya, China had to feel betrayed and wanted to see to it that there was no renewal of the same scenario. Therefore, when the West-European countries and U.S. were playing with the resolutions that appeared to sanction or to remove Assad by the UN Security Council, China, often in collaboration with Russia, vetoed the resolutions. In fact, it turned out that China used its veto power over Syria-related resolutions eight times during the war an impressive number of Chinese vetoes in total since half of all Chinese vetoes since 1971 were applied to Syria (Fulton, 2024). This involved veto of resolutions in October 2011 and February 2012 which condemned the crackdown by Assad and subsequent resolutions on other issues such as accountability of chemical weapons and humanitarian access. When it happened, China demanded that the resolution should be achieved through dialogue and no punishments or external intervention can assist in the conflict. The position of Beijing was that the sovereignty of Syria ought not to be violated and the crisis should not be solved by forcefully changing the regimes in Syria.The Chinese interest in the Assad regime as strongly supported in the UN did not necessarily stem out of some special affection to Assad himself, but in consonance of Chinese interests and fears. An important issue of concern to Beijing was the emergence of Islamist militancy and the likelihood of this spreading to the Muslim minority areas of China. Thousands of Uyghur militants of the Xinjiang region of China were reported to go to Syria to fight in the extremist forces (Fulton, 2024). One Uyghur fighter even recorded a video to point out that they wanted to gain war experience in Syria so that they could one day support home in China and unleash jihad there (Fulton, 2024). On the Chinese, the collapse of the government of Assad would turn Syria into a haven of terrorists, and even the terrorists who are not Chinese would be lured in (Fulton, 2024). Other than that, the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011 shook the Chinese Communist Party; Beijing was emboldened by the west to promote pro-democracy activism, which it felt threatened its own security domestically with protests and separatism (Fulton, 2024). In this regard, the constructivist-based aspect of China as a nation that believes in stability rather than people power translated into a siding with Assad and his assertion of sovereignty.Besides the UN vetoes, a comparatively low on-the-ground and economic presence in Syria existed in China during most of the war. China did not send troops and weapons (at least officially) to Assad, as Russia or Iran had. The Chinese military advisors or counterterrorism collaboration with the Damascus was rumored, but China, on the whole, confined itself to diplomatic assistance. It possessed a Special Envoy to the Syrian problem, and an embassy in Damascus which continued its work throughout the war. There were also meetings with the Syrian government and the opposition leaders by Chinese diplomats in an attempt (or pretense) to mediate peace talks. However, the peace activities by Beijing were silent compared to those by UN. When the war became the favour of Assad, China started to plan to take a post-conflict role. In January 2022, Syria joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China, which means that Damascus hopes to be invested in by China in reconstruction. However Chinese investment was conservative - Syria was an unstable environment with western sanctions being high level of risk. Actually, trading and Chinese investment in Syria decreased throughout the war years: The China-Syria trade fell to about 0.5 billion in 2022 (down the scale of about 2 billion in 2011) (Fulton, 2024). The official BRI connection to war-torn Syria largely excluded the Chinese companies in the large-scale new projects. Nonetheless, politically, China grew closer to Assad as his regime remained.

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In September 2023, President Bashar al-Assad made a high profile visit to China in his first trip there in almost 20 years and met President Xi Jinping. During that visit, the two countries declared a deal of a strategic partnership, which symbolized the inclusion of Syria into the broader network of relationships that China has with other countries in the Middle East (Fulton, 2024). It is not a security alliance but a diplomatic message, but it demonstrates that China is ready to be a friend of Syria without any secret in the time, when the U.S. does not want to be friends with Assad. Specifically, by 2023 in addition, China helped Syria to rejoin the Arab League, and suggested that the unilateral sanctions should be removed, which was in line with the views of Russia and other advocates of the position that isolating Damascus is not the solution.

In a recap, in Syria the U.S. and China found themselves in polar opposite paths. The U.S. had made every effort to topple Assad (at least at first), employed military force against ISIS (and proxy against Assad via allied support of rebels) and continues to economically strangle the Assad regime. China on the other hand employed its diplomatic leverage to cushion Assad regime against UN censure or sanctions and in the process calling on dialogue and against interference. It did not take any military action, but preconditioned the stage with the farming of the regime in Syria and took the Russian side. The situation in Syria thus is a mini-microcosm of a global conflict: the agenda of liberal change and counterterrorism of America on one side versus the agenda of state sovereignty and stability of China on the other.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative study of Yemen and Syria indicates how the U.S and China have employed different military, diplomatic and economic strategies depending on their interests and the way their rivalry has played out with the regional proxy levels. A number of dimensions come out:

Military and Security Strategies:

The United States has been much more militarily involved in both wars as compared to China. The U.S. had been involved in Yemen supporting the Saudi-led coalition with military support (logistics, arms, intelligence) in fighting the Houthis as well as engaging in its own counterterrorism operations against AQAP. The early support of the coalition war by American military support was vital (Robinson, 2023). Quite the contrary, China was not involved in any war in Yemen. The furthest China has got towards a military involvement was its naval evacuation of its citizens in 2015, and its current naval anti-piracy surveillance of the nearby gulf of Aden that has the side effect of taking China to a closer proximity to Yemen. The same thing happened in the same case in Syria, where the U.S. troops were operating on the ground (Special Forces working with the local militia) and in the air (as the leader of the coalition against ISIS). The U.S. also carried out missile strikes on Syrian government in a couple of instances 2017 and 2018s.

China, on the other hand, kept its military out of Syria's conflict. It neither carried out airstrikes nor deployed troops. This acute opposition symbolizes the capabilities and values of the two forces: the U.S. with its expeditionary military perceives the conflicts in the Middle East through the prism of security that at times necessitates the use of force; China that lacks bases in the region (except a support base in Djibouti since 2017) and adheres to the principle of non-intervention did not want to be involved. The sale of arms also seems to be an interesting issue, as both the U.S. and China provided their regional actors with weapons, albeit differently. The U.S. provided its allies (Saudi Arabia and UAE) with high-tech arms, used in Yemen (e.g. jets and ammunition of American origin in Saudi airstrikes).

Diplomatic Strategies and UN Involvement:

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It was in the area of diplomacy that U.S. China rivalry was most pronounced and particularly in the United Nations. Surprisingly, the U.S and the Chinese diplomatic strategies in Yemen were more likely to concur than to disagree. They both supported UN resolutions to support the Yemeni transitional government and support ceasefires. As an indicator, China has been on the U.S. side in voting on the UNSC Resolution 2216 (2015) that sanctioned the Houthi leaders (Chang, 2018), and both countries have been on the same page in the peace talks led by the UN (e.g. in Kuwait 2016 and later operations). China did not vote against any resolutions on Yemen; instead, it teamed with the U.S. and the other members of the so-called P5 in the effort to resolve the Yemen crisis (Chang, 2018).

It means that Yemen was not a zero-sum game between Washington and Beijing, likely because the two were more concerned with the stability and counterterrorism in Yemen (and Yemen is not as significant to China as to the U.S.). U.S. and Chinese diplomacy in Syria, however, could not coincide with each other. The U.S. and allies such as Britain and France also advanced a series of UNSC resolutions which condemned the actions of Assad, turned on sanctions, or sanctioned interventions- most of which were vetoed by China (with Russia). As mentioned, China voted eight resolutions on Syria (Fulton, 2024) vetoes, which the U.S. and the Western powers considered to be crucial in settling the crisis on their own terms.

The Chinese diplomats frequently used dialogue language and political solution in their debates at the Security Council and this implied criticism of the U.S. who supported rebels. It is important to note that China too has intervened as a diplomatic mediator in other domains: in March 2023, it was a mediator in the Saudi-Iran normalization that had an indirect impact on Syria (Iran, a major Assad supporter, re-engaging with Saudi would ease tensions in the region). The U.S. openly hailed the de-escalation of Saudi-Iran hostility but secretly, there were those in Washington who interpreted the diplomatic coup of China as a diminishing U.S. influence (Herrmann, 2024). Concisely, the U.S. is applying alliances and international institutions to isolate regimes that it does not support (in Yemen, the Houthis; in Syria, Assad), and China to do the same (to protect its allies and give the impression of neutrality or peacemaking). It was a rivalry location, the UN Security Council managed to work together in the situation in Yemen but was painfully divided in the situation in Syria, as each of the powers perceived a varying number of interests in the case.

Economic and Aid Strategies:

The other area of U.S and Chinese difference entailed Economics. Economic statecraft has primarily been a method of punishment or leverage in these conflicts by the United States. Strict sanctions imposed on Assad government in Syria by the U.S. barred Americans and some others to do business in the areas controlled by the Syrian government. The goal of this was to destabilize the regime and make political concessions. The U.S. is also spending colossal amounts of humanitarian aid, but directed its aid in areas not controlled by Assad or via the UN bypassing Damascus (the importance of cross-border aid that China and Russia argued about).

The U.S. economic aid and sanctions also played a role in Yemen: the U.S. provides significant humanitarian aid to Yemeni civilians caught in the famine (it is the largest donor to UN appeals most years), but the U.S. also imposed sanctions on individual Houthi leaders and at one point (early 2021) declared the Houthi movement a terrorist group (a move soon revers When production was at normal levels and it had commercial relationships where possible in Yemen, China was the biggest importer of Yemeni oil. The Chinese authorities have stated that they

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will be willing to take part in the post-war reconstruction of Yemen, which will involve the establishment of infrastructure as part of the BRI (Chang, 2018).

In other words, the U.S. is more inclined to use the economic mechanisms as sticks (sanctions, conditional aid), whereas China is more inclined to use the economic mechanisms as carrots (promises of investment, trade deals), to earn some influence and goodwill, and to stay consistent with its mutually beneficial development discourse.

Global Competition and Normative Conflict:

Yemen and Syria represent the greater global competition between a liberal world order led by the U.S. and a vision of the world as multipolar with its respect of sovereignty led by China (and Russia). This was the open international conflict in Syria: U.S. authorities framed the conflict as the opposition between the free world and authoritarian regimes, often including Assad on the list of foes and indirectly hinting at China as a supporter but making it clear that China is a member of an opposing camp (Herrmann, 2024). To its part, Beijing considered the U.S. actions (particularly any implication of regime change) as the hegemonic intrusion. The conflict was made a proxy with the U.S and the Chinese interests clashing indirectly.

Role of Regional Actors:

The role of the major players in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Assad regime itself, and the Houthis cannot be omitted as well as the attitude of the U.S. and China towards them. Saudi and Iran are on the opposite sides of the conflict in Yemen (Saudi in the battle against the Iran-backed Houthis). The U.S has had a long history of being allied to Saudi Arabia and as such, it was not unexpected to be aligned with the interests of Riyadh in Yemen (to defend the Hadi government and to thwart the Iranian interests through its proxy). Interestingly, China has been attempting to have good relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. It sells weapons and purchases oil to the Saudis, and vice versa, it sells a lot to Iran (China became the biggest oil consumer and an ally that disobeyed the U.S. sanctions).

The China leaned towards the Saudi side in the Yemen war, which is reflected in its backing of Hadi and Saudi policy (Chang, 2018) as Saudi Arabia is simply much more significant to China in energy security (China imports a lot of oil in Saudi Arabia) and to its BRI investments. But China was in touch with Iran, and did not openly blame Tehran with the war, and so it was a potential mediator. The culmination of this middle ground approach was that in 2023, China brokered the Saudi Iran detente that directly had positive effects on the ceasefire in Yemen (Robinson, 2023). This was a diplomatic triumph that could hardly be replicated by the U.S. as Washington had a bad relationship with Iran. The key partners in Syria were Iran and Russia that were on the same side with Assad, yet Saudi Arabia, Turkey etc., were on the side of the Syrian opposition.

In the initial years of operation, the U.S collaborated intimately with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and others to empower anti-Assad rebels (covertly or openly). China however became part of the Assad camp (and by extension Iran and Russia) at least at the diplomatic level. The Chinese support of Assad conflicted with the Saudi stance in Syria- however, intriguingly, it did not hurt Chinese-Saudi relations too much as both appeared to be content to disagree on Syria but expand economic relations in other areas. Gradually, with the softening of Saudi Arabia on Syria (by 2018-2019 Saudi Arabia had started to come to terms with the fact that Assad would remain in power), China experienced even fewer tensions between the interests of the region. This backward movement is a component of the world power shifting. However, the Middle East has yet to experience direct power transition as of the mid-2020s, and the U.S. is the key military player in it, and China is gaining a lot when it comes to security provided

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by other actors (Zhao, 2025). We see, rather, a slow challenge of U.S. power by soft power and economic statecraft on the part of China, and the supply of alternative modes of diplomacy (like the Saudi-Iran deal) which makes China stronger, at the expense of resolving conflicts in a way not oriented towards the U.S.

Conclusion

The United States and China are engaged in a competition in Yemen and Syria, which is symbolic of their respective foreign policy ideologies and the 21st century balance of power is changing. The two forces in Yemen both purportedly sought to have a stable and terrorism free nation but the U.S. went the extra mile to do so by actively engaging in the process through direct military intervention and commitment to alliances but China was the viewer and subsequently played an intermediary role in the disputes in the region. Their policies in Syria were radically divided: the U.S. supported the agenda of political reform and humanitarian intervention (albeit with counterterrorism pragmatism) and China never stopped protecting the right of the incumbent government to remain in power by its sovereignty over the state. Such actions are expounded on the theoretical perspectives of realism and constructivism. According to realism, both the U.S and China were advancing their strategic interests of the U.S in a bid to remain hegemony in the region and contain its adversaries like Iran and China in a bid to make sure that its access to resources and avoid being encircled. Constructivism proves the fact that norms and identities America as a promoter of a liberal order and China as a defender of non-interference and steadiness have played an enormous role in their choice of these wars. Notably, the USA-China competition in the Middle East has not yet (as yet) become a battle to the death. Rather, it has been a proxy and principle battle. Rather than dueling in Yemen, Washington and Beijing mostly accommodated each other the former leading on military, the latter leading on the low profile promotion of diplomacy and the roles of both mostly intersecting in a complex manner but never sabotaging the efforts of peace. In Syria, they served to cancel each other in the UN: U.S.-led attempts at intervention were, and the consequences that China desired (like the removal of sanctions or the acceptance of Assad by the international community) could not be obtained because the U.S. still vetoed it. The existence of regional actors like Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Assad government and the Houthis means that the great powers had to react to the realities on the ground which had been impacted by local proxy wars. The reality is that the multipolarity of the Middle East region offered the U.S and China avenues and challenges of wielding influence. With the development of the 21st century, the USA-China rivalry in such a region as Middle East is probable to grow, yet it will acquire new aspects. The Chinese brokering a detente between old U.S. ally Saudi Arabia and U.S. adversary Iran is an indication that Beijing is ready to take on a diplomatic leadership role that questions the U.S. historical preeminence in the peacemaking process.

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Meanwhile, the U.S. has already exceeded its two alliances (like an Arab NATO or I2U 2 alliance between India, Israel, UAE, U.S.) to maintain the Chinese and Russian influence at arm's length (Herrmann, 2024) . We are reminded by Yemen and Syria that great power intervention can not only serve to prolong the conflict (as in the case of the war in Syria which has been prolonged by intervention of the great powers with their weapons and veto) but also help to end it (as has been the case with the de-escalation of the situation in Yemen which has been facilitated by the pressure put on regional actors by the great powers). To academics and practitioners, these cases suggest the significance of appreciating the politics of power as well as the perceptions and principles that U.S. and China bring to the table.

The simple transfer of the great power rivalry to the local wars is never direct- it is focused through the local prism and warped with the help of the international standards. Last, to resolve the U.S. and China rivalry, a middle ground despite competition, will have to be found. As these wars have shown, there are certain areas of interest shared by the two nations as none of them would wish to see uncontrolled terrorism, proliferation of WMDs in the region and total anarchy in the Middle East. It will matter to develop on those similarities (e.g. jointly in favor of ceasefire or humanitarian assistance, as idealistic as it might appear) so that competition does not transform these proxy arenas into catastrophic battlefields. In conclusion, the case studies of Yemen and Syria of the 21st century can be learnt much about how a strong state and a potential one can clash in each other, and in certain situations can also cooperate, a lesson to the theory of diplomacy and international relations as the world has entered the era of global balance.

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