



# U.S.-China Competition Will Change The Middle East

May 11, 2020 **Michael Sobolik**

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Call it the new "China consensus."

For the better part of the past two decades, policymakers in Washington have been engaged in a heated debate over how best to handle the People's Republic of China (PRC). Although hardly unanimous, the prevailing view – most famously articulated by then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick back in 2005 – has long been that it is possible to transform the PRC into a "responsible stakeholder" through deeper economic and political engagement. Over the past decade-and-a-half, that conviction paved the way for successive U.S. administrations to champion China's membership in assorted multilateral institutions, knock down barriers to expanded trade, and seek to broaden political contacts with Beijing.

By contrast, the Trump administration has had a more skeptical view of China from the start. While still on the campaign trail, candidate Trump repeatedly railed against what he saw as the PRC's predatory trade practices, which were being carried out at the expense of American workers. But the underlying concern was broader; that Beijing was taking advantage of the liberal world order to subvert democratic principles and outflank Washington on the world stage.

This outlook has carried over into official policy. Enshrined in virtually every strategic document that has been released by the current Administration during its time in office – most significantly the 2017 *National Security Strategy* and the 2018 *National Military Strategy* – is the need for a renewed focus on "great power competition" with China (as well as with Russia).

Yet, until recently, it would be fair to say that this was still a minority view. As of 2018, less than half of all Americans shared the Administration's unfavorable view of China. However, over the past couple of years, a range of issues – from persistent trade tensions to growing awareness of the Chinese government's systematic abuse of its Uighur minority – have helped sour the American public's views of China's ruling Communist Party. In recent weeks, this displeasure has been amplified by a growing public understanding of the scope of China's official duplicity and political machinations surrounding the coronavirus pandemic.

The results were eloquently captured in a late April poll by the Pew Research Center. That study found that fully two-thirds (66%) of the 1,000 Americans polled now had a negative opinion of the PRC. Nearly the same number of those surveyed (62%) viewed Chinese power and influence as a "major threat."

That sentiment is being echoed on Capitol Hill. There is today a growing bipartisan consensus in the U.S. Congress regarding the need to hold China to account for its international conduct – specifically in the case of the coronavirus, but also more broadly.

All of which is bound to have ramifications for America's engagement in the Middle East. Historically, U.S. allies have tried to steer clear of the unfolding U.S.-China confrontation, seeing it as strictly a bilateral affair between Beijing and Washington.

Saudi Arabia, for instance, has sought to strengthen its ties to the Trump administration while simultaneously presiding over a massive expansion of trade with China. The UAE has become Beijing's principal economic partner in the region, even as it has emerged as a key backer of the Trump administration's "deal of the century" for Israeli-Palestinian peace. And Israel, despite its warm relations with the Trump White House, has used its status as a "start up nation" to court massive Chinese investment over the past half-decade, much to the consternation of officials in Washington. The list goes on.

But there's good reason to believe that this sort of balancing won't be sustainable for much longer. As the global coronavirus pandemic continues, China is turning into an important political issue in the upcoming U.S. presidential election. That significance, moreover, is likely to last long after November. It is already clear that the emerging consensus over the need to compete with China will help define U.S. foreign policy for the foreseeable future, no matter who ends up inhabiting the White House.

That, in turn, should matter a great deal to the countries of the Middle East. For, as the United States pivots toward a more confrontational posture vis-à-vis China, it will inevitably become more difficult for regional states to avoid becoming entangled in the unfolding geopolitical competition between Washington and Beijing.