JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

MIDDLE EASTERN ALLIANCES IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD: STRATEGIC HEDGING AND MULTI-ALIGNMENT

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23495889

Keywords
Strategic Hedging; Multipolarity; Alliance Theory; Middle Eastern Security; Gulf states; Great Power Competition; Defense Diplomacy.

Article History
Received: *25 August 2026*
Accepted: *16 September 2026*
Published: *20 October 2026*

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Abstract

The erosion of unipolar dominance by America has transformed the way Middle Eastern countries secure themselves. Instead of tying up their security interests exclusively with one patron, many states from this region have decided to diversify their relationships among the United States, China, Russia, and among each other. In this paper, this change in Middle East is analyzed using the theoretical lens of strategic hedging and multi-alignments. For this purpose, a qualitative comparative case study research methodology with process tracing is employed on five cases. According to the study, hedging in the area is neither uniform nor merely opportunist in nature; rather, it is dependent on perceptions of patron dependability, regime security concerns, regional rivalry structures, and the extent to which great powers provide substitutes in terms of arms, technologies, and diplomacy. The study asserts that the consequences of multi-alignment include autonomy benefits in the short term and system-level problems in the long run, which include fragmentation of interoperability capabilities, difficulties in technology transfer, and lack of collective defense effectiveness.

1. Introduction

The regional security architecture in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War until recently was the hub and spoke model where the US was in the hub of the model. The Gulf monarchies, Israel, Egypt, and Türkiye through NATO were dependent on the American security assurance, weapons provision, and political backing. The security architecture is deteriorating. The invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003, the Arab Spring uprising in 2011, the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan in 2021, the "pivot to Indo-Pacific" strategy of the US, and the shifting domestic discourse over the nature of American involvement in the region have shaken the confidence of the region over the commitment of the US. While China has become the largest trading and technological partner for the region, Russia has re-emerged in the region through Syria, energy coordination in OPEC+, and arms diplomacy.

The regional states have chosen to act by broadening their choice rather than cutting loose from the United States. For instance, in 2023, Saudi Arabia became part of the BRICS talk and embraced Chinese diplomacy in mediating between Iran and China while maintaining strong military cooperation with the US. The UAE houses American military forces, normalized its ties with Israel via the Abraham Accords, and at the same time deepened its technology and economic ties with

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China. Turkey is a NATO member and yet buys Russian S-400 missiles. These types of behavior patterns are not easy to explain with classical alliance theory because according to the theory states will either balance or bandwagon based on the threat or power respectively.

What has multipolarity done to the behavior of alliances in the Middle East? Is the behavior pattern of hedging and multi-alignment one that is stable or transitional? This article takes a systematic and long term approach as it does not analyze individual acts but rather focuses on the impact of diversification on the regional security structure.

2. Research Problem

The theory of alliances is mostly derived from Cold War era bipolarity and has mainly applied to Europe and East Asia. The theory views alliances as exclusive arrangements to address a common enemy. The Middle Eastern countries seem to defy the assumptions of the theory as they have multiple, sometimes conflicting, security associations without a declared strategic orientation. Studies of hedging have been carried out in Southeast Asia while Middle Eastern literature looks at the concept in descriptive or balancing terms. There is hence a lack of clarity about (i) how hedging differs between the different regional states; (ii) the instruments used in hedging in terms of defense policy; and (iii) the implications of multi-alignment in the strategic realm.

3. Research Objectives

To conceptualize hedging and multi-alignment as strategy within the context of Middle Eastern security policy.

To understand the structural and domestic factors that drive states in the region to hedge due to multipolarity.

To analyze the ways in which selected Middle Eastern countries hedge themselves militarily, economically and diplomatically.

To assess the strategic implications of multi-alignment on the effectiveness of alliances.

To provide policy suggestions for states in the region.

4. Research Questions

RQ1. What is the impact of the change in the environment from unipolarity to multipolarity on the conduct of alliances in the Middle East?

RQ2. Why does there exist variation in the degree and type of hedging undertaken by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Türkiye, and Israel?

RQ3. What are the tools utilized for implementing hedging at the level of national defense?

RQ4. What are the long-term implications of multi-alignment for the security architecture of the region?

5. Literature Review

Literature related to this research falls into four categories: the classics of alliance theory, literature on hedging, literature on multi-alignment and non-alignment, and literature on the regional order in the Middle East. The review examines how each explains alliance formation, highlights the weaknesses of each framework when used to explain alliance formation in the contemporary Middle East, and concludes with a statement of the research gap.

5.1 The theory of alliances within classical realism

One has to begin with classical realism and the neorealist theory as structural successors thereof while discussing alliance behavior. According to Waltz (1979), since the international structure is anarchic in nature and there is no authority above states, self-help becomes the only strategy available to them, where the capability distribution forces them to balance against, rather than align with, power concentrations. The theory assumes that alliances are temporary balancing mechanisms that serve to counterbalance against a more powerful entity until such time that the capability distribution alters. There is however one query that remains unanswered by the theory.

Walt (1987), in response to that critique, refines the concept of balancing into balancing against the threat and not just against power.

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According to Walt, threat consists of four components: power, geographical proximity, offensive capability, and intentions. As a result, a state might cooperate with a powerful state far away from it, but at the same time be an adversary of a smaller state close to it which poses a threat. This is particularly important in the case of the Middle East because the biggest threats were posed by regional adversaries, missiles and drones, and ideological enemies.

Snyder (1984) focuses not on why alliances occur, but on how alliances are managed. The alliance security dilemma of Snyder is based on the dilemma that results from balancing concerns of abandonment and entrapment. In case of abandonment by an ally, the state may feel compelled to commit more resources and become more loyal to the alliance; in case of entrapment due to conflicts of the ally, the state may feel the need to reduce the commitment level. This is because each effort to reassure the state about one concern increases the other concern.

Mearsheimer's (2001) version of structural theory goes even further to argue that great powers compete for domination in their regions and that competition between great powers will yield more defined alignments. Gause's (2010) more regional reading of the Persian Gulf illustrates that regime survival and ideology, rather than balance of power, was important in determining alignment. These two theories provide us with the fundamental ideas of threat, abandonment, and regime security. Yet both theories operate under the premise that alliances are exclusive arrangements directed against a common enemy. This is not a very realistic position to take in a multipolar world order, where countries have multiple partners and no defined enemy or patrons.

5.2 Hedging in international relations

The idea of hedging came up as a means of explaining behavior that was not accounted for by the notions of balancing and bandwagoning. As defined by Kuik (2008), it refers to the unwillingness of a state to commit itself to balancing and bandwagoning, along with the diversification of relations as a risk minimization mechanism. The main idea behind hedging is insurance, which means that the state has some alternative paths to choose from just in case one of the existing relations fails or something else happens.

The idea has become more precise as a result of subsequent scholarship. In their research, Lim & Cooper (2015) highlight the role of insurance and warn about not mistaking hedging for any ambiguous strategy, because an idea covering everything means explaining nothing. Korolev (2019) addresses this criticism by providing specific characteristics of hedging distinguishing it from balancing and bandwagoning. Hedging consists of two types of measures: risk-contingent measures that provide for unfavorable results and risk-reduction measures reducing the likelihood of such results via engagement. The two-fold nature of hedging provides tangible signs for researchers, such as concurrent military readiness and cooperation towards the same power.

Another dimension sheds light on why states hedge. According to Kuik (2016), the link between the requirement for domestic legitimacy and the uncertainty about the great power is essential. It is necessary to provide security, economic development, and political prestige domestically when the international environment does not offer any certainty about who will prove to be reliable. The concept of hedging allows for meeting both the needs through gaining advantage from more than one power without making any politically costly decisions. It is quite natural to refer to the regime-based approach and Gause (2010) regarding the Gulf.

Two major limitations are evident. The first one is that virtually all of the research in question is based on the example of Southeast Asia and responses to the growing influence of China, while the problem of generalizability of the concepts discussed to other regions of the world is yet to be addressed. Secondly, the Middle Eastern environment has a number of features that may affect the nature of hedging: ongoing armed conflicts, high degree of reliance on foreign states for delivery of advanced weaponry, oil-based economies, and

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inter-regional rivalries leading to imminent threat.

This issue has practical implications for research design. As hedging involves both contingency and engagement, it should be analyzed from multiple perspectives, rather than just in one policy realm. For instance, a state can increase the diversity of sources of weapons procurement while at the same time specializing in trade; or form close economic relations with one state, but rely on another for its defense needs. Separation of each dimension, whether military, economic-technological, or diplomatic, enables to distinguish areas where hedging occurs, from areas of commitment.

5.3 Multi-alignment and non-alignment

Although multi-alignment is also discussed alongside hedging, it does not have the same history as hedging. In the context of the foreign policy doctrine of India and other similar nations, it refers to engagement with various powers that are competing against each other but do not belong to any of them. This strategy emphasizes partnerships based on particular issues depending on the national interest. Multi-alignment is a more transparent strategy than hedging.

This brings to mind a point that makes multi-alignment different from non-alignment of the Cold War period. Non-alignment was largely about staying away from the two competing camps, as well as being politically independent from both of them. Multi-alignment, however, revolves around benefiting from several partners at once, including weapons, investment, technology, and politics, and treating each association as a complement, not a danger to independence.

According to Acharya (2014), by taking the notion of a "multiplex world" into account, wherein no individual nation has the ability to impose its own institutional structures, and where power is distributed across many actors, it is very expensive for a country to balance against one rival or rely on one patron, but rather is profitable to engage in a flexible manner in multiple institutions and organizations.

As far as this paper is concerned, hedging and multi-alignment are used in relation to each other but analytically separate concepts. Hedging refers to risk management rationale which underlies diversification, whereas multi-alignment refers to the outcome of the process –overlapping alliance configurations. It becomes possible thus to explore both the reasons for the diversification and type of alliances involved.

5.4 Regional order in the Middle East

Middle Eastern studies have endowed the geopolitics of alliances in the Middle East with unique features. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), the Middle East is an example of a regional security complex, marked by fierce competition between regional states and penetrated by external actors. The security interdependence between the neighbouring countries is so high that the threats posed by each state and their alliances can be understood only together.

The dynamics of domestic politics bring another dimension to the table. As pointed out by Gause (2010), Gulf monarchs give a lot of importance to regime survival and ideological threats in selecting their allies, whereas Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2014) maintain that the foreign policy of states in the region derives from the interplay of structural compulsions, state-building, identity, and leadership factors.

A third strand of work is on small states. Kamrava (2013) offers an example of how small Gulf states like Qatar have diversified their partnerships and engaged in mediation despite their structural vulnerability. Such states overcome their vulnerabilities through developing multiple partnerships and usefulness to multiple actors. Ulrichsen (2020) demonstrates how the 2017 blockade of Qatar led to diversification of external partnerships of regional actors, demonstrating that a regional crisis can trigger hedging behavior. These papers highlight the connection between vulnerability, crisis, and diversification of partnerships that is similar to what the hedging literature suggests.

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Another expectation is provided by Mearsheimer (2001) in which the struggle between great powers leads to formation of distinct blocs instead of diversification. The implication of such an expectation would mean that the increasing competition between the US and China will make the Middle Eastern countries form two opposing blocs. But the behaviour of some states, who maintain security relationships with one country while at the same time developing economic and technological relations with another state, indicates something else.

In sum, this literature highlights the fact that Middle Eastern alliance politics cannot be deciphered through the power structure of the region alone. The penetration of the region by other powers offers the states in the region multiple patrons, their regime concerns determine their choices of which patron serves what purpose, and the crises in the region test the reliability of such patrons. However, what the literature often does not attempt to do is to understand the combination of all these elements and its effects on regional security.

5.5 Gaps

There are three main gaps that have been highlighted in the review above. Firstly, classical alliance theory provides an understanding of why states align and how commitment is maintained; however, classical alliance theory was framed in the context of exclusive alliances, and has difficulty with overlapping alliances amongst rivals. Secondly, the hedging literature provides helpful concepts and measures but relies mostly on case studies in Southeast Asia and pays little attention to defense instruments such as arms procurement, basing, and technology partnerships in a conflict-prone and supply-dependent region. Thirdly, studies related to the Middle East regional order highlight diversification on the individual level such as in the Gulf states and Qatar but not in a comparative way involving multiple states.

Hedging as a tool in comparative defense strategies and how its usage can affect regional order has not been widely studied for various Middle Eastern nations. The current paper aims at filling in the research gap through the analysis of hedging applied to five regional nations and studying systemic impacts of multi-alignment.

The way in which this research is done helps tie together all three literatures discussed above. The notions of threat and abandonment come from the theory of alliances; the measures of hedging come from the discussion on Southeast Asia; while the emphasis on regime security and external penetration comes from literature on the Middle East.

6. Theoretical framework

The article brings together three theoretical approaches.

The balance-of-threat approach and the security dilemma of alliance. In response to regional state concerns for threats (missile capabilities and proxy networks of Iran, as well as non-state actors and domestic insecurity) and uncertainties about patron commitment, there arises a concern for abandonment, leading to diversification incentives.

The theory of hedging. Following Kuik (2008) and Korolev (2019), hedging is viewed as a strategy portfolio of risk contingency and risk mitigation, which maintains a state's engagement with competitive powers. This strategy is located between alignment and balancing.

Domestic legitimacy and regime security. The model assumes that regimes gauge their relations with other states on the basis of the extent to which their partners contribute to their survival, economic development, and status.

Four propositions for explanation follow from this:

P1. The lower the reliability perception of the main patron, the higher the extent of hedging.

P2. The greater the substitutability of the products of other competing powers (arms, surveillance technology, financial means, diplomacy), the higher the extent of hedging.

P3. States threatened acutely and immediately hedge less in the military sphere and more in economic and diplomatic spheres.

P4. Long-term multi-alignment leads to increased constraints of technology security.

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7. Research Methodology

7.1 Design

Qualitative and comparative multiple case design has been employed for conducting research. For testing the hypotheses using events and rationales, process tracing technique has been applied at critical junctures of the cases.

7.2 Selection of cases

Five countries were selected for a greater range in the level of hedges and threats: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Türkiye, and Israel. The inclusion of Israel in the case studies despite being low in hedges was due to the expansion of its international relations outside the United States.

7.3 Time frame and data

The time frame of 2011 to 2025 includes the regional turmoil since 2011, the Gulf crisis of 2017-2021, the Abraham Accords (2020), Saudi–Iran normalization in 2023, and the regional escalation after October 2023. The data comes from publicly available sources including official government declarations and defense white papers, procurements, weapons transfers data banks (SIPRI for instance), summit resolutions, think tank publications, and good journalism. No interviews and no classified information is used; this is considered a limitation.

7.4 Operationalization

Hedging is measured along three variables and qualitatively categorized as low, moderate, and high, according to the following indicators:

Military: variety of arms suppliers, basing arrangements, joint training and maneuvers, co-production pacts.

Economic-Technological: concentration in trade and investments, telecommunications and surveillance technology cooperation, energy and finance relations.

Diplomatic: membership in different blocs and international institutions, mediating role, alignment in contested issues.

This qualitative assessment is an analytical choice made by the author according to documented behavior.

8. Results/ Findings

8,1 Comparative overview

State	Military hedging	Economic-Technological hedging	Diplomatic hedging	Dominant pattern
Saudi Arabia	Moderate	High	High	Portfolio hedging within U.S. military protection
UAE	Moderate	High	High	Multi-alignment and selective technology
Qatar	Low moderate	Moderate	High	Mediation centered hedging
Türkiye	High	Moderate	High	Hedging for autonomy with NATO
Israel	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Primary alignment with diversification

8.2 Saudi Arabia

Although Riyadh has maintained the United States as the primary defense partner, there is diversification. The Vision 2030 transformation project needs investment, technologies, and market that China could offer in bulk. Saudi decision-makers have engaged in non-Western defense and technological engagement with China. The 2023 Beijing-mediated agreement on the restoration of diplomatic relations with Iran reflects hedging diplomacy through which the kingdom reduced the risk of a head-on clash while preserving its American partnership. It can be seen from process tracing that one of the key factors was the uncertainty regarding American reaction to the attack in 2019 on Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities, which fits into P1.

8.3 United Arab Emirates

The UAE engages in the most deliberate multi-alignment in the region. It is home to U.S. forces, it has signed onto the Abraham Accords, it develops relationships in the defense industry across Europe, Asia, and Israel, and it develops relations with China in the economic and technological sectors. However, disagreements about the technology infrastructure of China and the sophisticated

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weapons sales from America indicate how far this strategy will go, and in particular how American anxieties about technology security has limited access to some of these systems, thus proving P4.

8.4 Qatar

The small size and susceptibility to coercive pressure demonstrated by the 2017 embargo mean that Qatar's strategy must be based on diversified relations. The country has a large American military air base and also works militarily with Turkey. It maintains communications with Iran and with non-state actors. Qatar's approach to hedging is thus mostly focused on diplomacy, as expected under P3. Various subsequent security shocks, notably the Israeli attack on Doha in September 2025, have questioned the efficacy of this approach.

8.5 Türkiye

The acquisition of the Russian S-400 system by Türkiye even though it is a member of NATO and its subsequent sanctions from the U.S. and being expelled from the F-35 program represents the best example of military hedging in the dataset. Ankara complemented this move with the growth of its own domestic defense industry in a bid for autonomy and not patron switching. This makes P4 valid while the sustained presence in NATO disproves P1.

8.6 Israel

Of all the countries, Israel has hedged least in the realm of military, owing to its reliance on American backing and the tough nature of its threat environment. Israel, however, has diversified its diplomacy and economic engagements even beyond the Middle East region, including with Gulf countries and Asia. Regional wars have further strengthened Israel's dependence on American military aid.

8.7 Cross-case patterns

Four patterns emerge. First, patron reliability perceptions are the single most consistent driver of diversification (P1). Second, the strength of hedging correlates positively with the extent to which great powers provide substitutable products outside of the military realm (P2). Third, high threat levels undermine core military hedging, accounting for why Israel and, to some extent, Qatar continue to prioritize their relationship with the U.S. for their security (P3). Finally, the combination of supplier relationships generates technical and political constraints (P4).

9. Discussion

The results indicate that the nature of Middle Eastern alliance behavior under conditions of multipolarity is essentially one of layers of portfolios. The core of any given state's security portfolio – generally composed of a dominant supplier of advanced arms and deterrence – is protected by surrounding layers of diversification in terms of economic and technological interests as well as diplomatic relations. This explains why hedging strategies have not led to the predicted wholesale switch in alliances, which would result in a Chinese or Russian replacement of US dominance. Indeed, no other state offers such a package of arms and deterrence integrated into command-and-control systems. Systemic implications, on the other hand, are less clear-cut. Among the advantages of hedging are the fact that it enhances bargaining power with each patron state, reduces coercion risk, and can even enable diplomatic efforts towards de-escalation –like the recent Saudi-Iran normalization process. As far as the disadvantages go, having a region full of multi-aligned states makes it more difficult to build a cohesive air and missile defense system, especially when dealing with the problem of interoperability between different suppliers' technologies and sharing information. In the long run, such an approach will affect collective defense credibility.

Nations that cannot be assured of exclusive commitment will be hesitant to share information and technology, and enemies may probe the boundaries of overlapping relationships. Hedging thus provides autonomy through a security system that is more loosely knit and thus weaker. These findings contradict Mearsheimer's (2001) hypothesis of clear bloc formation: what we see instead is a pattern of overlapping and indistinct commitments. In addition, they expand upon the hedging literature, indicating that in a conflict-laden

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
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environment, hedging occurs primarily outside the core area of defense.

Limitations are there to this study. There are open sources used, interpretive coding, and the sample is not inclusive of states like Egypt, Iran, and Iraq whose perspectives would help. Future developments that would occur after 2025 could change some perspectives.

10. Conclusion

Multipolarity has not weakened alliances in the Middle East; rather, it has diversified and complicated them. States hedge their bets to account for uncertain patron support, gain economic and technological advantages, and ensure regime independence, although they maintain a single primary partnership since nothing can provide the same level of deterrence. This results in multi-alignment, which brings both independence in the short run and costs to integration, cooperation, and collective defense in the long run. Hence, one must take into account the complex network of partnerships when analyzing the security system in the region. Further study should explore this question by applying the comparison to other states and by using interview data to validate the theory.

11. Recommendations

For regional states

Draw red lines clearly in the critical sphere of defense, especially concerning sensitive technologies and command-and-control facilities, since diversification in others will not detract from the deterrent.

Build air and missile defense and regional warning structures that are compatible, while applying hedging to expand choices diplomatically and economically.

Enhance local defense industrial capability to minimize dependence on any one supplier.

For external powers

Recognize hedging as an indicator of doubts about dependability and deal with it by making predictable long-term commitments rather than expecting total allegiance.

Create clear technology security norms to ensure that your partner can purchase technology without any last-minute constraints.

For regional diplomacy

Encourage confidence building and crisis communication measures that will turn hedging into diplomacy and reduce regional tensions.

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For a Category Y journal, I'd also add 2023–2026 work on Gulf hedging between the US and China (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar).

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