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# The Impact of Great Powers Competition on Kurdistan

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**Summary :** Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia comes just five months after US President's visit to Riyadh. The two visits are another sign of the great conflict the world is witnessing

## Intro

Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia, coming just five months after the U.S. President's trip to Riyadh, underscores the escalating rivalry between China and the United States. These visits are further indicators of the dramatic global conflict currently unfolding, a rivalry that could ultimately reshape global power dynamics.

Meanwhile, the politics of Kurdistan primarily revolve around a narrow and repetitive circle of internal conflict. Yet, this significant global dispute could alter the security and political structure of the region, undeniably impacting all four sections of Kurdistan.

## Beyond Energy

China, one of the world's largest oil buyers, particularly from Saudi Arabia, purchases about a quarter of Saudi Arabia's total oil production. Affordable and sustainable energy is vital for China's economy, which expanded from a GDP of \$1.34 trillion in 2001 to \$17.7 trillion by 2021. China may align with the Biden administration to work towards reducing energy costs. On December 4, OPEC+ resolved to continue cutting 2 million barrels per day as agreed upon in April. This decision could prove detrimental for the United States and Europe, especially considering their intention to place more pressure on the Russian energy sector. The resurgence of oil prices in global politics has drawn leaders back to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Alongside Biden and Jinping, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited the Gulf this year. On November 18, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, participated in the Manama Forum, stating that Russia had lost its largest customer (Europe).

However, the importance of the Middle East, and specifically the GCC, to global superpowers goes beyond the energy sector. While the United States emphasized a shift of attention towards the Indo-Pacific region and away from the Middle East, countries like China fortified relationships with Middle Eastern nations. Activities and operations of the Chinese-Arab summit, established in 2004, escalated, and China granted loans to some of these countries. Moreover, China has entered a 25-year agreement with Iran and fostered relations with Turkey and Israel. All of these actions serve to underpin the power struggle shaping the world.

## Global Power Rivalry

More than a decade after Fukuyama's renowned thesis, "The End of History," which announced the triumph of the United States and liberalism globally, a fresh debate concerning the end of unipolarity has emerged. The Biden administration acknowledged in a strategic document on national security that China is a legitimate competitor to the U.S. At this year's NATO Summit, member nations emphasized that China seeks to amplify its global influence.

From an economic standpoint, while the United States maintains its position as the world's largest economy, its growth rate pales in comparison to China's. According to World Bank data, U.S. GDP growth over the past two decades has doubled, rising from \$10.58 trillion in 2001 to \$23 trillion by 2021. In contrast, China's growth has multiplied more than 15-fold. Militarily, China escalated its military spending from \$50 billion in 2001 to \$270 billion, while the U.S. boosted its military spending from \$493 billion in 2001 to \$768 billion by 2021. A report from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) stated that by 2021, global military spending would exceed \$2.1 trillion for the first time. According to the report, China, Russia, and India, three Asian powerhouses, are among the top five countries for military spending. Combined, China and the U.S. accounted for 52% of total spending.

Aside from economic and military aspects, competition has escalated between the U.S. and China in forming alliances and

developing relationships with other entities. Disputes over technological supremacy and influence in the Pacific region constitute crucial dimensions of the conflict now extending into the Middle East.

## **Kurdistan in the Equation of Global Power Competition**

One of the most critical consequences of the global power struggle is the creation of a power vacuum in the Middle East. This vacuum has prompted state movements and a new game of alliance and competition aimed at achieving a balance of power. Despite the absence of a complete power vacuum, the U.S.'s evident hesitance in the region since 2011, coupled with its shift of interests towards the Pacific Ocean, has amplified regional countries' desire to implement a more rigid policy towards the Kurds.

Turkey and Iran have heightened their military activities in the region, echoing the Kurdish situation in the bipolar world of the 1980s when oppressive policies against the Kurds peaked and led to a genocide against them. Over 6,000 people have been killed in the conflict between the PKK and Turkey since 2015, a stark contrast to the peace talks of just a few years ago. The failed "Imrali" solution proposed between Turkey and the PKK after the collapse of the Soviet Union serves as a stark example of how changes in global power balances impact the Kurdish issue.

Under the leadership of the U.S. and its global hegemony, the two wars in Iraq and the war against ISIS have paved the way for two Kurdish forces, one de jure and the other de facto, in the region. However, American hesitation and the power struggle that began during the Obama administration led to regional efforts to curb Kurdish influence.

Turkey has initiated three large-scale ground operations in western Kurdistan and now threatens a fourth. The borders of the Kurdistan region have been further diminished since 2017. Iran has conducted no fewer than three large-scale airstrikes in just the past few months. Its response to the protests in eastern Kurdistan, "Rojhelat", was brutal. Following the mid-nineties, Iran ceased attacking the eastern Kurdistan Opposition Parties and began improving relations with the Kurdistan Region.

The emergence of another wave of conflict between parties in the Kurdistan Region is a domestic issue exacerbated by global changes. Regional countries' opportunities to pit the Kurds against each other and engage them in a localized conflict have grown, while the U.S. and West's efforts to unify the Peshmerga progress at a glacial pace.

In Conclusion As the world evolves, Kurdistan is navigating a precarious phase. Xi Jinping's visit is a clear harbinger of impending changes. Key players globally and regionally are adapting to the intense rivalry between China and the U.S. This transitional period in the region has ushered in a wave of anti-Kurdish politics. However, this is not the 1980s, and if Kurdish politics persist within a closed loop, it could represent both a threat and an opportunity.

It is estimated that the Kurdish population has at least tripled since the 1980s. Their political and military capabilities have transformed, people's understanding and worldview have evolved, and most significantly, the nations surrounding the Kurds are grappling with more internal issues. The nature of politics and influence differs from the past. Every change presents opportunities and risks, but the victor will be the one who avoids repeating past mistakes!