

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY EDWARD HUNT

22.05.2023

In the Middle East, the US Holds China at Risk



Photograph Source: U.S. Secretary of Defense – [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

As the dominant power in the Middle East, the United States maintains a great deal of leverage over China, which is dependent on the region for its energy needs.

In the event of a conflict between China and the United States, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) could direct U.S. military forces to block energy shipments to China, thereby preventing the country from accessing resources to fuel its economy and military forces.

“God forbid there’s ever a conflict with China, but we could end up holding a lot of their economy at risk in the CENTCOM region,” General Erik Kurilla, the commander of U.S. Central Command, told Congress at a [hearing](#) in March.

For decades, the United States has been the dominant power in the Middle East. Many of the region’s countries are closely aligned with the United States, relying on U.S. military and economic assistance. Several countries host U.S. military bases, and more than 30,000 U.S. soldiers are deployed throughout the region.

“U.S. posture in the Middle East remains significant,” Defense Department official Celeste Wallander explained in a written statement to Congress.

Having fought several major wars in the region—in Afghanistan, in Iraq, against the Islamic State—the U.S. military has built an infrastructure that enables it to quickly surge U.S. forces into the area.

“DoD is ready to rapidly flow significant forces into the region and to integrate those forces with partners based on decades of military cooperation to enhance interoperability and address any contingency,” Wallander noted.

U.S. officials [value](#) the CENTCOM region for its energy resources. The area includes nearly half of the world’s known oil reserves and more than 40 percent of its natural gas. It currently produces 37 percent of the world’s oil and is home to several top oil producers in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), including Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

There are several maritime [oil transit chokepoints](#) in the region, including the Suez Canal, the Bab al-Mandab, and the Strait of Hormuz. Any disruption to these chokepoints could significantly affect countries that depend on the region’s oil.

“The central region remains among the most important regions in the world,” Kurilla noted in a written statement, citing all these factors.

Although the United States is less dependent on the region’s oil today than it has been in the past, U.S. officials insist that the Middle East remains strategically important. As long as other countries continue to depend on the region’s energy resources, U.S. officials believe that they can use the region to influence the development of these countries and perhaps even impede it.

“Seventy-two percent of all Chinese oil is imported,” Kurilla explained. “That can make them vulnerable.”

As of 2021, China was one of the world’s [largest consumers of oil](#), second only to the United States. China has become one of the world’s top producers of oil, but the country does not produce enough oil domestically to meet its needs. Today, China imports more oil than any other country in the world.

Among China’s oil imports, about half comes from the Middle East. For some time, Saudi Arabia has been China’s largest source of oil imports, only to be recently surpassed by [Russia](#).

“Energy and investment linkages between China and the MENA region appear likely to grow at least through 2030, particularly in the Persian Gulf region,” the Congressional Research Service noted in a March 2023 [report](#), referring to the Middle East and North Africa region.

During previous eras of great power competition, the United States has been willing to move against oil-dependent rivals. One precedent for the current situation is U.S. action against Japan in the months prior to U.S. entry into World War II. Months before Japan launched its attack against the United States at Pearl Harbor, the United States cut off oil exports to Japan, putting the country’s economy and military power at risk. U.S. officials made the move knowing that it might lead to war.

According to historian [David Painter](#), the U.S. move created a situation that “led directly to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and other U.S. bases in December 1941,” as Japan decided to go to war to seize oil fields in Southeast Asia.

Although U.S. officials have shown little interest in taking similar action against China, they know that China remains vulnerable to such a move. By maintaining a large U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf, the United States is preserving the option of quickly mobilizing its military forces to block energy shipments to China.

A particular focus of any U.S. military action would be the Strait of Hormuz, the region’s major oil transit chokepoint. Nearly all of China’s energy imports from the Middle East are shipped through the strait.

“Ninety-eight percent plus goes through by ship,” Kurilla said. “That makes them vulnerable.”

As U.S. officials continue looking for ways to maintain strategic advantages over China, they appear less interested in working with China to address greater problems, such as the existential threat of climate change. Bilateral communications between China and the United States on the issue of climate change are [faltering](#), despite the fact that the two countries are the world’s largest consumers of oil and emitters of greenhouse gases.

Even as climate experts [insist](#) that countries must rapidly transition away from the use of fossil fuels, U.S. officials continue to prioritize their [geopolitical planning](#), including the possibility of using oil as a weapon against China. U.S. officials believe that U.S. predominance in the Middle East provides them with powerful leverage over China, and they are not willing to give it up, regardless of the consequences for the environment and the world.

“I believe CENTCOM is literally and figuratively central to competition with China and Russia,” Kurilla said. “We’ve been there in the past... We’re there today, and we’ll be there in the future.”

This first appeared in Foreign Policy in Focus.

Edward Hunt writes about war and empire. He has a PhD in American Studies from the College of William & Mary.

MAY 19, 2023