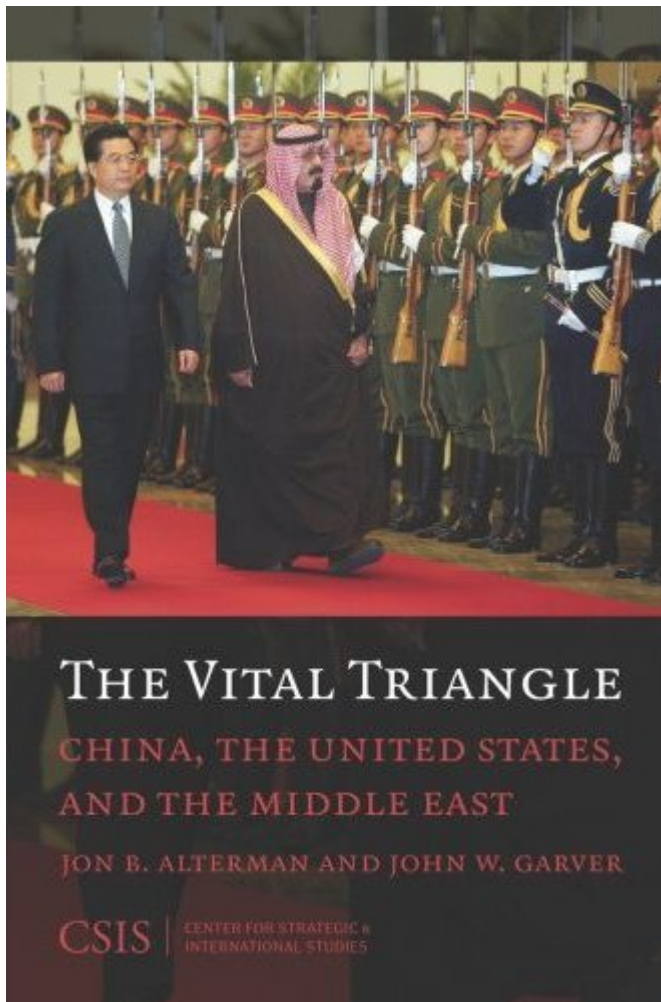


MEI BOOK REVIEW

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Jon B. Alterman & John W. Garver, *The Vital Triangle – China, United States and The Middle East*

(Washington, DC: Center for International Studies, 2008)

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As the first study of its kind, *The Vital Triangle* offers an interesting insight into the evolving Sino-US competition over the Middle East. Rather than viewing the relations bilaterally, prominent Middle East expert Jon B Alterman and

leading Sinologist John W Garver present a fascinating mosaic of the evolving triangular relationship.

The contrast between the two great powers over the Middle East could not be more pronounced. While the US is keen to retain its pre-eminence, China has emerged as a new player in the region. Aided by its growing economic clout and appetite for energy, Beijing is slowly challenging the status quo.

Since the end of the Cold War, China has carefully cultivated closer ties with major players by emphasizing its cooperative approach to international relations and its peaceful intentions. It is a fundamental shift from the heyday of Mao Zedong, when the country patronized Arab radicalism. For a long time, conservative monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, felt alienated by the position taken by China on various issues.

The end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet Union brought about a change in Chinese behaviour and as a result enhanced its leverage in the Middle East. For example, following the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, China has adopted a constructive approach towards the Middle East peace process. Its occasional rendezvous with the Islamic militant Hamas movement did not dilute the basic Chinese commitment towards a negotiated settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

At another level, the foundation of China's emerging interest in the Middle East is not different from that of the West, namely, energy security. Ever since it became a net oil importer in 1993, China has been scouting for assured sources of supply. Known for its energy reserves, the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf region, has emerged as the principle focus of Chinese interests, involvement and interactions. Through high-profiled bilateral visits and contacts, Beijing has acquired visibility in the region. Its plans for institutional relations with the Arab League as well as FTA with the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council should be viewed within this wider context.

Countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia see that Beijing is a possible counter-weight to the US and its pressure tactics. If the nuclear row brought the former closer to China, the latter felt the American heat after 17 of its citizens were involved in the September 11 attacks. Growing public anger in the Arab street against the US has compelled many conservative monarchs to look for alternate support; for them China is a source of political support, a vast energy market and above all a potential destination for partaking of their petro-dollars. Therefore the recent Chinese demand of an alternative international currency would be music to many ears in the Middle East.

Offering a fascinating picture, Alterman and Garver come with three broad conclusions. For them the US has 'strategic and enduring' interests in the Middle East. Chinese interests in the region, on the other hand, are 'significant and growing.' Therefore they conclude that the interests of the Middle East vis-à-vis these two powers are 'evolving.' Writing before the current economic downturn, they correctly conclude that Washington is 'strategically vulnerable' because it is weary of Beijing 'emerging as a potential global player' (129). They therefore counsel both countries to see the Middle East as 'a locus of cooperation' (130). Calling for 'a major shift in American thinking about China' the American scholars argue that 'Sino-American partnership in the Middle East might help shift relations onto a broadly cooperative and less conflictual course' (11).

The Vital Triangle is a timely, concise and stimulating reminder of the unfolding Sino-American drama in the Middle East and a must read for any student of the Middle East, China or wider international relations.

Note: The review originally appeared in *Pacific Affairs*, (Winter 2009/10, vol.82 and No.4) and is reproduced with the permission of the University of British Columbia.

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