

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE UAE'S RELATIONS WITH THE US AND CHINA IN THE FIELD OF CYBER SECURITY

СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ ОТНОШЕНИЙ ОАЭ с США и КИТАЕМ В СФЕРЕ КИБЕРБЕЗОПАСНОСТИ



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The purpose of the study is to determine the shift level of the foreign relations of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the field of cyber security from the US-oriented vector towards China as a new horizon. The content of the research focuses on the description of international cooperation of the Emirates with the United States (US) and China. This case-study through the comparative method of political analysis shows the extent of the trend shifting in the duration of several years. The key finding of the work demonstrates that the foreign relations of the UAE with the US and China in the field of cyber security has been balanced.

Keywords: The United Arab Emirates, cybersecurity, data, algorithms, China, the US, telecommunication technologies

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Цель представленного исследования состоит в определении смещения уровня внешних отношений Объединенных Арабских Эмиратов (ОАЭ) в сфере кибербезопасности с ориентированного на США вектора на вектор, направленный в сторону Китая как нового горизонта развития. Содержание исследования сосредоточено на описании и анализе международного сотрудничества Эмиратов с США и Китаем. Это тематическое исследование с использованием сравнительного метода политического анализа показывает, в какой степени тенденция менялась в течение нескольких лет. Ключевой вывод работы демонстрирует, что внешние отношения ОАЭ с США и Китаем в области кибербезопасности носят сбалансированный характер.

Ключевые слова: Объединенные Арабские Эмираты, кибербезопасность, данные, алгоритмы, Китай, США, телекоммуникационные технологии

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INTRODUCTION

Cyberspace is understood as the fifth domain of warfare equally critical to military operations at land, sea, in air, and space¹ in the modern world. Historically, the discoveries in military, economic, and commercial domains in history changed the scale of power of superpower states, and global and regional regimes, and so have armaments in cyberspace been changing the current world order. For example, in cyber warfare, unlike military struggles of terrestrial, marine or air forces, a country with a small population, humble military industry, and distant location can conduct a destructive attack, or even use a manipulative “trust bomb” among society as a nuclear arsenal.

As global powers in the trend, the United Arab Emirates, a tiny Gulf state rich in oil money, has been leveraging its cyber security capacities with China, abnormally overweighting towards the USA. However, Washington has been considered the major ally of Abu Dhabi in the military sphere and defense policy. To illustrate some details as an example, the UAE hosts the Gulf Air Warfare Center at Al Dhafra Air Base, where approximately 3,500 US personnel are based,

and which provides regionally focused air and missile defense training for around 2,000 participants from 10 nations every year. UAE ports also provide critical logistical support for the US Navy and collectively host more Navy ships than any other port outside the United States. The US has \$29.3 billion in active government-to-government sales cases with the UAE under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system².

The fact that a country that has been cooperating in the land, sea, and air security (the issue of space security requires more detailed research) with one superpower is re-orienting its cyber security policy to another superpower arises several questions: Has the regional actors in the Middle East been being repositioned in the cyber world? Will the alliances in the emerging cyber order be differently shaped from those of the existing three domains? Is the UAE attempting to be an independent power in foreign relations by diversifying its partners?

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Comparative analysis is a methodology within political science that is often used in the study of

1 Cyber defense. *European Defense Agency*. URL: <https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/all-activities/activities-search/cyber-defence> (accessed 23.01.2022).

2 U.S. Security Cooperation with the United Arab Emirates. *U.S. Department of State*. 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-united-arab-emirates/> (accessed 23.01.2022).



political systems, institutions, or processes. This can be done across a local, regional, national, and international scale³. The process of cyber security relations of the UAE — however, a methodological framework is required to be developed to conceptualize the discourse of sensitive facts — presents an exemplary point to be discussed.

Zohreh Dehdashti Shahrokh's and Seyed Mojtaba Miri's five operations (selection; description; juxtaposition; re-description; rectification and theory formation), a revised and expanded version of Jonathan Z. Smith's four-fold model (description, comparison, description, and rectification)⁴ are used to frame the above-mentioned concept in except of rectification.

Three key elements of cyber space (data, algorithms, communication systems) are selected and the relations of the UAE with two actors (China and the USA) are described, including juxtaposition. In conclusion, the findings are re-described, and a theoretical view is summarized.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE UAE CYBERSECURITY STRATEGY

First, the economy of the UAE has developed at a rapid rate in the recent years and one of the consequences has been an increase on internet

penetration and increasing dependence of critical infrastructure on advanced electronic systems which could be vulnerable to cyber-attacks⁵. According to a recent Citrix research, 82 % of IT decision-makers in banks and financial service institutions (FSIs) in the United Arab Emirates are under pressure to improve their security measures⁶. To keep the international financial flow stable, Abu Dhabi needs persuading investors that operations with their investment and transactions are protected from attacks of cyber thieves or strategic competitors.

Secondly, in October 2017, the UAE Government launched 'UAE Strategy for Artificial Intelligence (AI)'. This marks the post-mobile government phase which will rely on various future services, sectors, and infrastructure projects⁷. In necessity to avoid functional disruptions of sectors that the strategy covers, the government are to provide safe and sound data, algorithms, and operative systems.

Finally, and maybe the most significantly, the direct or indirect involvement of the UAE in political actions in Yemen⁸, Libya [Bakir, 2020], Syria⁹, and Ethiopia¹⁰ entails to consolidate cyber capacities as well as defending terrestrial, marine and air zones. The recent two attacks of Houthis with drones and missiles¹¹ exemplify how the UAE

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- 11 Yemen's Houthis have launched two attacks against the U.A.E. — here's why. *National Public Radio*. 2022. URL: <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/25/1075493673/yemens-houthis-have-launched-two-attacks-against-the-u-a-e-heres-why> (accessed 31.01.2022).



has changed into a target point. International Security Journal reports that “in the region, UAE has seen a 29 % increase in weekly cyber-attacks on organizations this year, whereas Saudi Arabia has shown a 1 % decrease in these attacks compared to 2020, and Kuwait with a major decrease of 49 % in cyber-attacks on organizations for the period”¹².

In response to the rising demand for secure cyber space, the updated version of the National Cybersecurity strategy was launched in 2019 by Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority (TDRA), the entity which is responsible for the ICT sector and digital transformation in the country¹³. In November 2020, the UAE Cabinet agreed to establish the UAE Cybersecurity Council with the aim of developing a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy and creating a safe and strong cyberinfrastructure in the UAE¹⁴.

THE DESCRIPTION AND JUXTAPOSITION OF THE UAE'S FOREIGN RELATIONS ON CYBERSECURITY WITH THE US AND CHINA

To implement security ambitions in the cyber sphere, the UAE government collaborates with national companies such as Injazat¹⁵ and inter-

national partners including the US, China, and Israel. Consequently, the UAE appears as one of the strong competitors among technologically advanced countries, mainly among China and the US.

In comparison to the data safety sector, US companies are actively building data centers, where the first key element for cyber security is stored and transmitted. Oracle has its second data center in the UAE up and running. The new one is in Abu Dhabi and adds more firepower to the US enterprise giant's ambitions in the region's cloud computing and data analytics space¹⁶. Furthermore, Amazon Web Services, an Amazon.com company, announced that it plans to open an infrastructure region in the United Arab Emirates in the first half of 2022. The new AWS Middle East Region will consist of three Availability Zones and become AWS's second region in the Middle East with the existing AWS Region in Bahrain, giving customers more choice and flexibility to leverage advanced technologies from the world's leading cloud¹⁷.

Relatively new to the data industry of the country, the only Chinese company Alibaba Cloud launched its data center in Dubai in 2016¹⁸. However high the ambitions were, the customer demand was not sufficient to support its second center, which is planned to be opened in 2018¹⁹. Considering the significance of data converting into sensible information, it is noticeable that critical element of

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the cyber sphere is possible to be collected in the storages of US-related companies.

Secondly, the scientific cooperation in research of cybersecurity-related domains, a branch responsible for innovation of algorithms, American University of Sharjah claims to be training UAE specialists in this field²⁰. Nevertheless, the number of UAE students choosing to study in the US has dropped due to the fall of oil prices, a decline of revenue, Trump's national policy, and increases of university opportunities at the home country. That number decreased by 167 students, or 5.7 %, last academic year²¹.

In the meantime, the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) announced the funding of six joint research projects — including the sustainability of research production and enhancement of the university's international position in the field of big data — between researchers from the UAEU and researchers from the Chinese Academy of Sciences. This research cooperation comes within the UAEU endeavor to strengthen international partnerships and activate the Memorandum of Understanding signed on February 4, 2021²². Additionally, Ling Shao's movement to Abu Dhabi found the Inception Institute of Artificial Intelligence and has increased the role of China-related scientists in the UAE [O'Meara, 2019]. Not only has he limited as a CEO of his institute, but also he was appointed as the Executive Vice President and a Provost with

the Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence before his movement to Saudi Arabia²³.

According to the Article 2 of the Agreement on Economic, Trade and Technological Cooperation Between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the United Arab Emirates, the parties exchange technological expertise in various fields including training of cadres and in any other area to be agreed upon in future²⁴. In fact, it is observable that the US position has been diminishing in the science sector, which is critical element of cyber sphere to develop codes to secure the space.

Finally, the communication technologies, the “bones” and “arteries” of cyber systems, have arisen as a focal point with the invention of 5G and the beginning of competition on 6G networks. The United Arab Emirates along with Huawei are cooperating with the ZTE and forging with the official Beijing, not actively with Washington. China is also funneling its investments in the UAE into new sectors such as information and communication technology²⁵. In an interview, Ni Jian, Chinese ambassador to the UAE, implied: “China is willing to achieve a more open, inclusive, and mutually beneficial strategy on technological cooperation and is willing to deepen its practical cooperation with the UAE in fields such as AI, 5G technology, internet, life science, and aerospace, in order to further promote the mutual ties to develop in the fast track”²⁶.

20 American University of Sharjah building UAE's data science knowledge. *Gulf News*. 2019. URL: <https://gulfnews.com/uae/education/american-university-of-sharjah-building-uaes-data-science-knowledge-1.1572872414171> (accessed 6.02.2022).

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Naturally, the steps of Abu Dhabi towards the east displease Washington and the tones of longtime ally have changed. The Biden administration is pressing the United Arab Emirates to remove Huawei Technologies Co. from its telecommunications network and take other steps to distance itself from China, raising the risk that the country's purchase of some \$23 billion in F-35 jets and drones may be at stake²⁷. The reason why the status quo of Abu Dhabi's foreign relations is re-balancing is that Washington has been ignoring the demand of regional states for high-tech systems over the years. On that condition, China has found an opportunity to replace the US in the cyberspace of the Middle East, including the United Arab Emirates.

As is stated in Forbes, "state-run telecommunications companies in the UAE — a transport and trade hub that links east and west — have awarded 5G cellular network contracts to Huawei, the Chinese company blacklisted by Washington"²⁸. Alluding to the Huawei dispute, a senior Persian Gulf official said, "The Americans need to give technological alternatives. You can't say 'don't buy their rice, but I don't produce rice'," the official added. "It is manageable now, but this issue will be more insurmountable as we move forward"²⁹.

Regardless of the warnings of Washington, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's interview about "the Chinese support of the UAE's independence in choosing its own development path"³⁰ demonstrated how much the Chinese

approach to the cooperation with the UAE is bolstering and consolidating.

RE-DESCRIPTION AS A CONCLUSION

It is apparent that the United States exploited its advantage in collecting data in the Emirates. Most of the centers are owned by the American companies, which allow to conduct analysis for political, military, economic or business purposes. The US education sector is also involved in field of training science specialists, who produce algorithms, the second most important element for cyber space. Despite the successes in the Gulf state, current trends are not moving in favor of Washington.

First, the data are possessed by private American entrepreneurs, which are not granted to be cooperating with the Federal government. Furthermore, the admission of "three former American intelligence officers hired by the United Arab Emirates to carry out sophisticated cyber-operations" exposed how state-related specialists executed "hacking crimes and to violating U.S. export laws that restrict the transfer of military technology to foreign governments"³¹. Secondly, the results of the competition in the academic sphere have been leveraging with the search of Chinese specialists for new opportunities in the Middle East and the decline of demand by the UAE students for education in the USA. The diversion of scientific power towards Beijing from Washington is lead to the blurring effect on the position of the

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data centers among the Emirates community if the raw data is coded and mined through algorithms developed by scientists.

After all, through the description and juxtaposition of the UAE relations on cybersecurity with the US and China, it turns out to be clear how intensively Chinese government, Huawei or other companies of China are flowing into the telecommunications sectors, “the bones and arteries” of cyber space. Contrasted with the disadvantage in data centers, the Beijing’s significant superiority in implementing telecommunication systems in the UAE is perceptible.

Looking back to the questions: “Has the regional actor in the Middle East been being repositioned in the cyber world? Will the alliances in emerging cyber order be differently shaped from those of existing terrestrial, marine and air domains? Is the UAE attempting to be a flexible power in foreign relations by diversifying its partners?”, it can be concluded that the US is the leading partner of the UAE, but not the only one any more in the cyber world and that the Emirates can reposition and diversify its cyber security policy by keeping the balance between superpowers to be more flexible in its foreign relations.

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