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Edited by

Mojtaba Mahdavi and Tugrul Keskin

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Manochehr Dorraj

As the Trump administration's agenda of 'America First', demanding submission to its dictates and impositions, took the United States increasingly on a path of conflict and confrontation with much of the world, many eyes, especially in the developing world (the Global South), became fixed on China. As the second largest economy in the world and a country that in a not too distant past experienced the humiliation of colonialism and its accompanying predatory politics, many in the developing world hoped that China's 'Eastern sensibilities' and its professed guiding ideology of 'respect for sovereignty', 'non-intervention', 'peaceful rise' and 'win-win' economic ties would predispose it to be opposed to hubris, arrogance, and wars of conquest that were the hallmark of the global rise and hegemony of Western powers in the last 200 years.

China's remarkable economic transformation in the last forty years, marked by an annual rate of growth between 6 and 10 per cent (with the exception of the COVID-19 pandemic-induced rate of growth of 2.69 per cent in 2020), is the largest and the fastest rate of economic growth in recorded history. The size of China's economy has doubled every eight years for the last four decades. In the same time period, by 2008, it had brought more than 400 million people out of poverty. According to some sources this number has doubled, reaching 800 million since. This constitutes the largest poverty reduction in the world to date. The average income of a Chinese person in the same period has increased sevenfold. All of these developments have made China one of the most successful examples of development in recent history (Zakaria, 2008, p. 89). The contrast of China's economic performance with the United Sates since 1950 makes this point even more clear. In terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), in 1950, the US was responsible for 27.3 per cent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP), while China's share was only 4.5 per cent. In 1990, the US share was 20.6 per cent, and China's share was a mere 3.86 per cent. In 2018, the US share plummeted to 15 per cent while China's share rose to 18.6 per cent (Mahbubani, 2020, p. 10).

This impressive economic achievement may explain why there is so much interest among developing nations to see if they can replicate China's 'economic miracle'. The fact that China's rise so far has been for the most part peaceful, and the Chinese leadership has displayed an aversion to getting

involved in regional conflicts, accentuates the uniqueness of its rise and its current global position. Increasingly, China seems to prioritise economic ties over political commitments and entanglements. The professed Chinese leadership's line that 'we are not looking for allies', we are looking for 'partners', demonstrates China's aversion to getting involved in protracted regional conflicts, a phenomenon that Chinese leaders consider to be the American mistakes that have contributed to its gradual decline. This may explain why a prominent feature of China's global engagement is high-profile economics and low-profile politics in the last forty years.

As China's economic and political prominence on the global stage has expanded, its self-perception and political and economic posture has also evolved. If in the early period of China's global rise, the slogan that guided its foreign policy during the Deng Xiaoping presidency was 'biding our time, maintaining a low profile, and not drawing attention to ourselves', the more assertive and expansive signature initiative of the Xi Jinping presidency, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), heralded China's coming out party; an indication that China was no longer a rising power, it has risen, and it better act like it, and assume its rightful place among the community of nations. No longer, the 'largest developing nation', as the Chinese leaders were fond of referring to themselves until recently, but a great power in its own right, the second largest economy, that according to several scholars, is poised to overtake the United States as the largest economy in the world by 2035. China's economy has grown from less than 2 per cent of gross world product in 1978 to over 15 per cent in 2019. It is responsible for one-third of global growth, and currently is the world's largest exporter and trading country (Tammen, 2006, p. 57; World Economic Forum, 2019, pp. 1–5).

China's Opportunities

Arguably, the BRI is the culmination of China's impressive economic development, partially chronicled above, and the most ambitious project that Chinese leadership has initiated to expand its power and influence globally so far. According to Parag Khanna, if in the nineteenth century the world was Europeanised, and in the twentieth century it was Americanised, in the twenty-first century, in large part, led by China, the world is becoming irreversibly Asianised. Khanna asserts that the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) must consider moving away from colonial borders and redefine themselves as a part of West Asia, where most of them are geographically located. He believes the countries adjacent to the Persian Gulf are going

to play a significant role in the global primacy of Asia, as their energy and trade partners are primarily Asian countries, the most prominent among them being China. Indeed, currently China ranks as the number one trade partner for ten countries in the MENA region. As many countries of the MENA region – including some close allies of the US – have already carved a position for themselves in China's BRI, the centre of gravity of the global economy will further be shifted towards Asia in the coming years (Khanna, 2019).

According to other scholars, China is poised to win the race to dominate the G5 as well as artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and plans to create AI colonies that would advance scientific research in this field. Thus, playing a leading role in creating the technologies of the future that is going to serve as the next engine of economic growth globally (Kai-Fu Lee, 2018). China has also raced ahead of the United States on 'Patent filing and produces at least 8 times as many STEM graduates a year than the US' (Escobar, 2020).

However, the critics are not convinced of this sanguine scenario about the future prospects for China's economy, in general, and its BRI, in particular. They assert that China's proposed BRI routes in many parts of the developing nations lack the necessary prerequisites for economic success. Rather, it is alleged, the nations with which China has partnered feature political instability, little respect for the rule of law, a lack of transparency, the absence of well-trained labour forces, no entrepreneurial culture, and chronic corruption that permeates the social and political fabric. Each one of these problems pose a formidable challenge for China to overcome in order to ensure the success of the BRI. Critics also regard the BRI as a debt trap for many nations who would sign up to it. They contend that it is a 'neo-colonial scheme' to exploit the weaker nations, and it would generate new forms of dependencies that would have detrimental long-term impact on the host countries. Finally, the critics argue, as it stands currently, the BRI is a unidirectional initiative that starts from Beijing and it is primarily designed to benefit China. As such, it would be difficult for the host nations to embrace the 'China dream' as their own.

The BRI however, is not as of yet a completed project. It is a project in the making. Chinese leaders may not have an exact idea about the fine details of its implementation or its final destination. They learn from their mistakes through a process of trial and error and modify and adjust their tactics and policies as they go along. Despite its shortcomings and flaws, early indications justify optimism about its possible profound transformative, and for the most part, mutually beneficial future prospects.

The ancient Chinese were the masters of trade and commerce through the Silk Road, long before the rise of capitalism in the West. Their relations with

the MENA region date back to over 2,100 years. In contrast, the Western powers encroachment on the region was negligible until the seventeenth century. In some ways the Chinese have a more elaborate history of trade, commercial, and cultural ties with the region than their Western counterparts. They encountered political instability, violence, and corruption along the way and managed to work through them before. And through their success in trade, the Chinese managed to build the most powerful empire in East Asia that endured and flourished for centuries before it succumbed to Western colonialism (Frankopan, 2018). Therefore, if the past is any indication of the future, the Chinese know the way, and they are traders par excellence, the brief interlude of Maoism and the preoccupation with the export of the revolution notwithstanding. As such, in this longer historical perspective, the Chinese are regarded by some scholars to be 'accidental revolutionaries' (Bianchi, 2019). The BRI is simply allowing the Chinese people and their leadership to rediscover and rekindle their ancient gift and flair for commerce collectively and emerge once again as the major players in the world of trade.

While the initial capital investment for the BRI was $1 trillion that encompassed sixty-seven countries in three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe), currently, it encompasses five continents with Latin America and Antarctica joining in. In 2019, Italy and Switzerland became the first European nations to formally join the BRI along with Vietnam, Cambodia, and several other countries in East Asia who had been watching and deliberating from the side lines for a fair few years. By 2019, the BRI had attracted some 131 nations to sign a memorandum of understanding that they intend to join, and eighty have formally signed up to it, pledging their support and partnership. By 2019, China was the number one trade partner for 130 countries in the world. In 2015, nine hundred deals related to the BRI were underway worth $890 billion. In that year, 44 per cent of China's engineering projects were in the BRI countries. By 2016, 52 per cent of China's engineering projects were in the BRI partner nations. ('Our bulldozers, our rules', 2016; Ferdinand, 2016, p. 950). In 2019, the infrastructure-related contracts of Chinese companies with their BRI partners was valued at $128 billion. In 2017, the inner BRI trade was valued at a whopping $1.7 trillion and it surpassed $2 trillion in 2018. It is anticipated that the BRI-related investment would expand to between $5 and $8 trillion by 2030 (Macaes, 2019). The evolution of the name of the project since its inception in 2013, from The New Silk Road and the New Maritime Silk Road to One Belt, One Road, to Belt and Road reveals an attempt by Chinese leaders to be all-inclusive as several regions and countries that were not on the path of the original plan, namely in Latin America, demanded to be included. While the BRI is yet to be fully implemented, these developments are evidence of early success.

While the timing for the launching of this initiative is primarily linked to internal developments in China (its rapid modernisation and economic growth and its excessive production capacity and the need for new markets), internationally it could not have been chosen any better. Its inauguration on the cusp of the West's 2008 great recession and ensuing struggle to recover was timely indeed. The global economy was in dire need of infusion of new investments to restart the engine of economic growth. With the US budget deficit in 2020 reaching an all-time high of $25.5 trillion in contrast to China's $535 billion surplus, (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020), China is clearly in a better position to invest and jump-start the engine of economic growth globally. The torch to revamp and boost the global economy has now been passed to Beijing. This however, is not the only grand opportunity for China.

As China unfolds its ambitious global project, the BRI, it is important to be mindful that despite much of the attention of the mainstream media on the economic dimensions of this initiative, as impressive as they have been so far, as outlined above, the BRI is not and should not be just about trade and commerce. Potentially, it could be a transformative force, pregnant with changes that would go far beyond economics; encompassing political, social, and cultural realms with intended and unintended consequences that would alter the lives of ordinary people. Investment in infrastructure, roads, railways, transportation, communication, and broadband, can create jobs and social welfare and usher in prosperity. The BRI's larger transformative power however, may lie in the realm of bringing connectivity between the people of different faiths and cultures. On its path are Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, and people of other faiths and denominations. Brought together through the transfer of technology and knowledge, the spread of ideas and cultures could potentially foster coexistence and cooperation and could become a catalyst for a new political realm marked by multi-polarity and a new configuration of power globally (Bianchi, 2019).

The BRI and China's eastern cultural heritage and sensibilities, that stands on the shoulders of a grand civilisation, and its recent history of struggle against colonial rule provide it with a unique opportunity to recast and reconfigure global politics through a new 'moral imagination' that does not see the political domain as one of conquest and dominance, but as the realm of interdependence and inter-connections that can and should foster mutually beneficial outcomes, thus ushering in mutual respect for our diversity in a shrinking planet (Ling, 2020) . The zero-sum game of dominance and subjugation of other people, and their treatment as inferior, the mentality that 'I win only if you lose' belongs to another age. Our interdependent world demands win-win strategies, creating realms of co-prosperity and coexistence. In fact,

there are numerous examples of cross-cultural pollinations, interfaith dialogues, and tolerance for diversity from the time of the ancient Silk Road that can, and should, serve as the source of inspiration in our time (Frankopan, 2018; Bianchi, 2019).

Because, unlike the West, China's global rise so far has been peaceful, Beijing has a unique opportunity to look beyond commerce and commercial gain, as legitimate goals they may be, and put the international relations on a new trajectory and lead by example, providing an alternative to the power politics of old that has been accompanied with war and bloodshed. Can China seize this opportunity and its moment in history, and turn the BRI to a vehicle not only for its own economic gain, but also for remaking the world on the basis of a new and more humane foundation?

China's Challenges

These are China's opportunities, but what about China's challenges? The sudden eruption of the coronavirus that was first detected in the Wuhan region of China in December 2019 and from there spread to the rest of the world has revealed that the rise of China is neither inexorable nor a linear forward march. As of 1 April 2021, there were 130,186,559 cases of COVID-19 infection globally, and 2,840,296 deaths. In the United States alone by this date, more than 555,000 people had perished because of the pandemic. President Xi Jinping has characterised the pandemic as a 'historic crisis', attempting to mobilise the Chinese population to remain vigilant in fighting the disease and cooperating with the authorities to contain it. While China managed to contain the spread of the disease in a short period of time, the rest of the world was not as lucky, as the virus rampaged lives and livelihood throughout the world. Due to vaccine nationalism and many countries refusing to share their vaccine with other nations, there is a vaccine immunity gap. By 1 April 2021, still some thirty countries in the world, many of them in Africa, had not yet started vaccinating their people. Because the pandemic is global, without providing the vaccines globally, and creating mass immunity, the pandemic cannot be tamed and new coronavirus mutations would continue to spread, creating health and economic crises in many parts of the world, including in the nations that have signed onto the BRI.

The short-term impact of COVID-19 was to diminish China's rate of annual economic growth in 2020 to just 2.69 per cent. Many foreign companies, including some from the United States, closed shops and operations in China. The number of tourists dwindled significantly and the cost of caring for the

infected added to the pandemic-induced economic crisis and the handling of the pandemic by the Chinese state as the early epicentre of the virus came under criticism.

Due to global economic slow-down, BRI-related trade shrank substantially. To cope with this new reality, and the negative consequences of the Trump administration's trade war and the ensuing attempt at economic decoupling, Beijing was led to focus on developing its vast domestic consumer market and further invest in building its infrastructure and technological capacity in order to reduce reliance on US technology. These developments revealed that there are unforeseen circumstances that could temporarily damage or derail the fragile BRI.

As the main source of supply chains in the global market, the threat to the Chinese labour force and economic slow-down had a clear negative global ripple effect. In the United States, for example, the stock market experienced a steep decline of 3,000 points between 24 and 27 February 2020. A major slump in the price of oil at about the same time, in anticipation of declining energy demand in China, led to an economic downturn in many oil-producing nations, including those in the MENA region. The crippling fear associated with COVID-19 compelled people around the world to venture out less, travel less, and consume less. Economies like the United States, for which consumer purchasing accounts for 70 per cent of its total value, suffered severely, thus effecting US–China trade ties as well as the larger global economy. Poor management of the pandemic by the Trump administration further compounded economic problems.

The early indications are that the negative impact of the trade war between the Trump administration and China, despite a temporary deal signed in 2019, may continue under the Biden administration. The US–China conflict is structural and is rooted in a competition for global supremacy. It is unlikely that the United States is going to sit by passively and watch China rise at its own expense (Allison, 2017). In February of 2020, in his address to the Munich Security Conference, the US Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, declared China to be 'the greatest threat' economically and militarily to the United States and the global order and tried to marshal the support of its European allies in containment of China. While they may differ on means, tactics, and policies, the Democratic Party in the United States that now controls the White House and the US Congress is no less committed to containing the rise of China economically and politically as its Republican counterpart. The confrontational tone of the meeting between US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and the National Security Advisor Jacke Sullivan with Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councillor Wang Yi and Yang Jiechi, Director of the Central Foreign Affairs

Commission of the Chinese Communist Party in Alaska on 18 March 2021, followed by delisting some of the Chinese companies and curtailing their access to US markets are indicative of a hardening attitude in Washington towards Beijing that crosses the partisan divide.

Besides unforeseen consequences surrounding the spread of COVID-19 and the escalation of trade wars with the United States, additional challenges lie in wait for China. As China's investments around the world increase, including in the politically polarised MENA region, for how long can China remain a friend to all and ally to none? How long can China afford to stay above the fray in regional conflicts? Should China decide to change course and assume a more proactive political posture what would be the possible fallout and how would it affect China's rise and the future of the BRI?

How should China meet the political challenges of managing its own rapid growth in domestic and global power? The successful implementation of the BRI requires building not just financial institutions of governance as China has done so far. This includes the BRICS and The Asian Bank for Investment and Infrastructure, but also political ones, beyond existing China-initiated institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). What international institutions of governance is China going to initiate to manage the BRI effectively? How is China going to move from an initiative that so far has been unidirectional with its epicentre in Beijing, to one that is multidirectional, in which the partner nations of the BRI will buy into the 'China dream' and see it as their own dream, as equal stakeholders in a multipolar world. Only then can they feel as active and engaged participants in using the BRI to transform their own societies rather than the passive recipients of Chinese manufactured goods and commerce, designed to primarily benefit China economically. Only then can China transform from a global economic leader, to a global political leader and shed the mantel given to it by some Western scholars as 'partial' or a mere 'mercantilist' power (Shambaugh, 2013). As the ancient sages of both the East and the West have taught us, the true enduring power is 'legitimate' power that is perceived by those who are its recipients as benign and compassionate. To carry the mantel of global leadership as a legitimate power, China must also rise to the political challenges of reform at home and abroad, thus transforming global governance by basing it on a more just and humane foundation.

It used to be the case that early in its global rise, China was content to chip away at America's influence among nations that had frayed relations with the United States. Iran, Sudan, and Venezuela were clear examples. As it became economically more powerful and as it was further integrated into the global economy, China began to expand substantially its trade and commercial relations with such traditional US allies as the Cooperation Council for the Arab

States of the Gulf (formerly, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)), Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Turkey, Algeria, and Morocco. The Chinese volume of trade with the twenty-two Arab nations (many of which have pledged to be active partners in the BRI) is projected to increase to $600 billion by 2024 (Sun & Zubair, 2015, pp. 903–921).

The political ramifications of this trend are going to be impactful and profound and it would cast a long shadow on the Chinese leadership's assessment of the future of US–China bilateral trade ties. The value of bilateral trade ties between China and US in 2017 amounted to $527 billion. In 2018, this amount increased to $558 billion. But due to a trade war, in 2019, this amount dwindled to $452 billion ('U.S. trade with China tops $555 billion through December 2019', 2019).

The volume of China's expanding trade with the Arab world alone means that as the BRI expands, China in the future would have many more trade partners and US–China trade may not be as indispensable as it has been in the past. If this scenario materialises in the near future, it may also mean that with the 'decoupling' and the diminishing volumes of US–China trade, US leverage on China would also diminish.

Conclusion

Since the Democrats agree with the Republicans that US bilateral trade terms with China need to be modified substantially, it remains to be seen what would be the impact of lingering US–China economic tensions and trade wars, in general, and how it would affect the BRI, in particular, under Biden's presidency? Would US–China rivalry culminate in a full-fledged new Cold War or would it merely give rise to a new relationship based on 'competitive coexistence' (Erickson, 2019)? Would China remain content with a status quo in which it does not directly challenge US hegemony but nevertheless continues to steadily and incrementally gain economically at its expense? Or would a more politically assertive China emerge to safeguard its economic interests and its expanding power in the global system? These are broad questions, the answers to which will leave an indelible mark not only on the future of the BRI but also on the parameters that define the vicissitudes of the global transition of power currently underway.

The BRI has opened up a significant gateway to China's global ambitions for economic power and influence. While economically it is driven by the neoliberal preference for the market economy and the mercantilist logic of economic gains, it remains to be seen whether China can rise to the political challenges

that lie ahead domestically and globally. Can China use the platform that the BRI provides to chart a new path of global governance in which power politics of dominance and imposition are abandoned in favour of new forms of political partnerships that foster genuine cooperation, mutual respect, and co-prosperity?

Clearly, China stands at a crossroads and this is its historical moment to seize and transform global politics. In the years and decades ahead, we would be witness to the drama of the continued rise of China and the evolution of the BRI as an important pillar of this rise. The way that the BRI is implemented and the role of China's leadership in this implementation will reveal much about the new world that we will inherit.

The able editors of this comprehensive volume have assembled valuable contributions by some of the leading experts in the field who shed light on the complexities and the nuances of China's multifaceted expanding ties with the regions and the opportunities and the challenges that await all sides. By providing a synthesis of theoretical observations on the nature of China's engagement with case study of key countries and regions that are China's partner in Belt and Road Initiative; this book offers students, scholars and policy makers alike much food for thought and valuable insights, enabling them to put the rapid changes surrounding China's global rise and the regional transformation in context.

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Notes on Contributors

Rigas Arvanitis
is a sociologist, economist and Director of Research at the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), and Institut Francilien Recherche Innovation Société in Paris, France.

Dara Conduit
is an Associate Research Fellow of the Middle East Studies Forum at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship & Globalization, Deakin University, Australia.

Mahesh Ranjan Debata
is an Associate Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

Manochehr Dorraj
is Professor of International Affairs at Texas Christian University, USA. He has published extensively on China–Middle East Relations. He is the author, co-author, editor, and co-editor of seven books and more than eighty articles and book chapters.

Andrea Ghiselli
is Assistant Professor at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, Shanghai, China. He is also a Junior Research Fellow at the Torino World Affairs Institute where he manages the website of the ChinaMed Project (www.chinamed.it).

Sari Hanafi
is a professor at the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies, American University of Beirut, Lebanon. He is Vice President (for National Associations) of the International Sociological Association, and Editor of *Idafat: The Arab Journal of Sociology* http://www.caus.org.lb/Home/electronic_magazine_list.php?CategoryID=42.

Habibul Haque Khondker
is Professor in Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE). His research interests include sociological theory, social theory and social policy, and migration.

Tugrul Keskin
teaches at Cappadocia University in Turkey. He has held the position of Professor of Global Studies and the director of the Center for Global Governance and Political Economy at Shanghai University. Keskin was the graduate director at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Maltepe University in Turkey. His research and teaching interests include international and global studies, social and political theory, African society and politics, the sociology of human rights, Islamic movements, and the sociology of the Middle East. He is the founder and moderator of the Sociology of Islam mailing list, the founder and editor of the *Sociology of Islam* journal (published by Brill), and the Middle East and North Africa region editor for *Critical Sociology* (published by SAGE). His current research involves Modern Uyghur nationalism, China and the Middle East, and the relationship between US foreign policy and think tanks in the post-Cold War era. His publications include *Middle East Studies after September 11: Neo-Orientalism, American Hegemony and Academia* (Brill, 2018), and *U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East: From American Missionaries to the Islamic State* (Routledge, 2018).

Xiaoyue Li
is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies at the University of Michigan, USA. His academic interests include modern Middle East and Africa, colonial Egypt, the invigoration and melancholy of the global Left, and the (de)construction of the Third World.

Mojtaba Mahdavi
is Professor of Political Science and the ECMC Chair in Islamic Studies at the University of Alberta. He is the author and editor of numerous works on contemporary social movements and democratisation in the Middle East and North Africa; the political economy, comparative politics and international relations of the Middle East and North Africa; and modern Islamic political thought. He is the editor of *The Myth of 'Middle East Exceptionalism': Unfinished MENA Social Movements* (Syracuse University Press, 2022), and the co-editor of *Towards the Dignity of Difference*: *Neither 'End of History' nor 'Clash of Civilizations'* (Routledge 2012), the guest editor of Contemporary Social Movements in the Middle East and Beyond, a special issue of the *Sociology of Islam* (2014), and the guest editor of The Many Faces of Contemporary Post-Islamism, a special issue of *Religions* (2020). He is currently completing the following book projects: *Towards a Progressive Post-Islamism: Neo-Shariati Discourse in Post-revolutionary Iran*; and *Ali Shariati and Beyond: Imagining Ethical Democratic Socialism in Muslim Contexts*.

Michael McCall
is a PhD candidate of political science at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, USA. He holds graduate degrees in Political Science and International Relations from the American University of Beirut and Leiden University, and currently serves as an editorial assistant for *Sociology of Islam* (published by Brill).

Jordi Quero Arias
is Associate Professor of International Relations at the University Pompeu Fabra and researcher in the Middle East Department at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB), Spain.

Mher Sahakyan
is the Founder and Director of the China–Eurasia Council for Political and Strategic Research Foundation, Armenia. He is the 2020–2021 Asia-Global Fellow at the Asia Global Institute, University of Hong Kong and Assistant Professor at the Russian–Armenian University as well as a lecturer at the Yerevan State University and National Academy of Sciences of Armenia.

Saeed Shafqat
is Professor and Director of the Centre for Public Policy and Governance (CPPG), Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan.

Yossra M. Taha
is an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Political Science, Cairo University, Egypt.

Introduction

Mojtaba Mahdavi and Tugrul Keskin

0.1 Background

The rise of multiple non-Western global actors, including the so-called 'BRICS' countries, and particularly China, have contributed to the emergence of a 'multiplex world'. This term was coined by Acharya (2020; 2019) to showcase the crisis of the liberal international order and to highlight a relative decline in the US hard and soft powers and a gradual shift towards a post-American order (Acharya, 2018). The 'multiplex world' refers to 'decentering of power and authority: a world without the hegemony of a single power or a single set of values', as well as different layers of global, regional, and local governance, 'the growing importance of regions' and 'a growing voice for the new actors' (Acharya, 2019, p. 12).

The US has not always defended 'liberal multilateralism' and the West has been 'selective and self-serving' in democracy promotion around the world. The liberal international order has often functioned as a 'club of the West, rather than a provider of universal public goods'. It is, however, equally significant to note that not all the new emerging state and non-state actors/powers are committed to greater justice and 'progressive values'. In other words, there is no 'necessary correlation between multiplexity and greater justice and equality' as some of the rising powers in the emerging multiplex world are 'parochial in defending their interests and values' (Acharya, 2019, p. 13).

Nonetheless, a positive consequence of the emergence of a multiplex world and a decline in the liberal international order might mean that 'the fate of human rights and democracy will be driven more by domestic than international factors'. Moreover, a multiplex world may facilitate greater cooperation among multiple actors to resolve 'common transnational challenges, such as climate change' and could provide a greater possibility for a shared leadership, fragmented and 'complex forms of global governance' where new regional actors and institutions are involved. This includes the African Union, the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) – a multilateral currency swap arrangement among the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – and China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), among others. Furthermore, in a multiplex world, rather than the old form of non-alignment during the Cold War, we may witness 'multi-alignment or

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cross-cutting alignments' among states, protecting the collective interests of the regions and the world. And yet, one relevant legacy and lasting lesson of the non-alignment norm for the Global South 'is not to take sides in great power competition, such as that between the US and China' (Acharya, 2019, pp. 13–14).

The key question is therefore what do China, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Asia relations look like in a multiplex world? The current China–MENA–Asia relations should be examined in a larger context of China's vision of the global order. There is nothing new about China's dissatisfaction about the current world order. In his report to the 16th Party Congress in November 2002, then president Jiang Zemin argued 'old international political and economic order is unfair and has to be changed fundamentally' ('Jiang Zemin delivers report to the 16th CPC National Congress', 2002). Similarly, President Xi Jinping's remarks at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 made it clear that China is determined to reinforce its 'national strength' and 'international influence' ('CPC opens 19th National Congress', 2017). Nonetheless, we must keep in mind that 'the Chinese phenomenon became possible thanks to globalization'. It is in the current neoliberal global order that China has become 'the world's largest economy, if measuring production output with purchasing power', or at least the second largest economy soon to become the first (Kolodko, 2020, p. 3). Hence, China neither intends to overthrow the existing global order nor does it plan to rule the world. Beijing, as Rolland (2020, p. 6) suggests, would be fine with 'subverting portions' of the current system, and realising a 'partial, loose and malleable hegemony' of the world.

The rise of the neoliberal economy since the early 1980s has led to the emergence of a vibrant and sizable middle class in China. This new demographic of 350 to 400 million people, which began to consume more and demand more resources, continues to shape Chinese foreign policy towards oil-producing countries in the MENA region. One of the first signs of these changes can be seen in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or the New Silk Road introduced by current President Xi Jinping. As shown by Bianchi (2019), the New Silk Road continues to transform the global politics in general, and the MENA and Asian politics in particular.

Over the past few years China has played an even more active role in the MENA region by forging 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships' with major MENA states including Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. President Xi Jinping visited Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE, making China one of the largest economic and trade partners with these MENA countries. Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's visit to China in February

2019 speaks to China's growing need for energy resources as well as to its need for a security partnership with Saudi Arabia as a special partner in the MENA region. The same is true of the Sino–Iran relationship represented in President Rouhani's visit to China in 2018, and more importantly, a twenty-five year Iran–China strategic partnership agreement, signed in March 2021 in Tehran.

China has signed documents on Belt and Road cooperation with nineteen MENA countries, has established a regional technological cooperation, or a 'Digital Silk Road' as part of the BRI, and is working with the MENA countries in fighting the global pandemic and deploying vaccines ('Wang Yi proposes a five-point initiative on achieving security and stability in the Middle East', 2021). Moreover, China's Health Silk Road (HSR) project, which was proposed to the World Health Organization in 2017, aims at improving public health governance and may improve the BRI and strengthen China's soft power and its regional and global economic and political influence.

Additionally, Chinese social and cultural activities began to appear more visibly within MENA universities and educational institutions. Chinese Hanban Institutes, for example, have opened and financed Confucius Institutions in Turkey, Israel, Iran, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, the UAE, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Morocco. Such institutions facilitate Chinese cultural and language classes, promoting mutual understanding between China and the MENA region. International publics, however, seem quite divided about the success of China's soft power, and the effectiveness of its public and cultural diplomacy in MENA and Asia (Nye, 2019; Wike, 2018). For example, while the twenty-five year Iran–China strategic partnership agreement could be 'a game-changer' in the region and boost bilateral trade to $600 billion (Saikal, 2021), it did not appeal to the Iranian public. Some sections of Iran's civil society reacted against the Tehran–Beijing agreement, expressing grave concern over the nature and scope of such relations between the two governments and a greater Chinese influence in the MENA region (Ma Hastim, 2020).

In sum, the contemporary Sino–MENA–Asia relations and the New Silk Road/BRI in an emerging multiplex world are in the making with no clear-cut trajectory or conclusion. However, 'two matters seem clear already'. First, the Muslim public and MENA–Asia civil society forces 'will reject any appearance of tutelage from China just as vigorously as they resisted earlier efforts of domination' by other colonial/external powers. Secondly, 'China's leaders will have to fashion a patchwork of loose and pragmatic arrangements with foreign partners in all directions. An expansive imperial or tributary system is beyond Beijing's capabilities' (Bianchi, 2019, p. 3).

0.2 The Structure of the Book

This edited volume critically examines a complex, multi-dimensional, and a Janus-faced relationship between China, the MENA region, and Asia in a 'multiplex world'. It problematises what the MENA region and Asia means to China in the age of neoliberalism. It challenges both extremes of 'Sinophobia' and 'Sinophilia' by examining the real 'pragmatist' China, or 'New pragmatism with Chinese characteristics' (Kolodko, 2020). It explores what are the real or perceived pillars of Sino–MENA relations. It also sheds light on how MENA can benefit from its relations with China while keeping a clear distance from the harms of neoliberal authoritarianism. This book, in sum, examines the changing dynamics of modern and contemporary relations between China, MENA, and Asia since 1978.

This edited volume comprises a foreword and thirteen chapters in four parts. Manochehr Dorraj in his foreword examines opportunities and challenges associated with China's BRI in the MENA region and beyond. It argues the way the BRI, as a principal pillar of Chinese rise, is implemented will reveal much about the new world order in general and the future state of Sino–MENA–Asia relations.

More specifically, Dorraj argues that China faces unprecedented opportunities and formidable challenges in the twenty-first century. Its mercurial economic rise in the last forty years culminating in its ambitious global Belt and Road Initiative has provided it with a great venue to expand its economic and trade ties globally. But the spread of the COVID-19 virus, a trade war with, and 'decoupling' from, the United States, and the spectre of a new Cold War has presented it with new challenges. He analyses both the magnitude of opportunities and the challenges that the BRI faces and expounds its potential transformative impact globally.

The first part of this edited volume examines 'China–MENA Relations at Large' and includes two chapters. In Chapter 1, titled 'The Triple Pillar of Sino–MENA Relations in the Age of Neoliberalism', Mojtaba Mahdavi problematises the idea of China as a 'model of development' for the Middle East and North African countries. The chapter critically examines three pillars of Sino–Middle East relations: 'energy, trade, and investment', China's 'non-interventionist policy/maintaining stability' in the MENA region, and the discourse of the 'Chinese Model of Development' and/or the 'Beijing Consensus' in Sino–Middle East relations. The chapter concludes that MENA countries should certainly learn lessons from China and the West, but in the end, they should produce their own distinct paths to a just, comprehensive, and sustainable development: paths

that require an active citizenry, an engaged civil society, and a socio-economic model that ensures social justice and political freedom.

Chapter 2 is titled 'China's Mental Maps of the Middle East and North Africa: Critical Discourse Analysis of the Contemporary PRC Leadership's Geopolitical Images'. In this chapter Jordi Quero Arias argues that current China–MENA relations are marked by how Beijing conceptualises the limits and idiosyncrasy of the MENA region. He problematises China's geopolitical imaginaries/cartographies and discursive constructions of the Middle East and North Africa and explores the following four geopolitical mental maps of the MENA region manifested in the speeches and analyses of the Chinese leadership: the 'Arab countries' (stressing the idea of cooperation and friendship), the 'Middle East' (signalling a securitised region), the 'Eurasian continent' (highlighting collective revitalisation and common history), and 'developing countries' (underscoring shared non-colonial identities). The chapter explores two possible explanations that might delineate the reasons for privileging one mental map over the rest, and sheds light on how these geopolitical imaginaries translate into a pragmatist policy under President Xi Jinping.

The second part, titled 'The Belt and Road Initiative: Challenges and Opportunities' comprises of three chapters. Chapter 3, authored by Dara Conduit and titled 'Is Growing the Iran–China Relationship as Easy as Building a Belt and Road?', problematises China's BRI project in the particular case of Iran. She asks whether the BRI's new economic imperatives will be sufficient to significantly expand the Iran–China relationship. The chapter demonstrates the complexity of the Sino–Iran bilateral relationship and Central Asian geopolitical dynamics as well as the two states' divergent tactics in international politics. As such, she argues that while Sino–Iran relations may enjoy a geographic advantage, the relationship contains many historical, political, and geographical barriers that could prevent the bilateral relationship from reaching its full potential. The most significant of these barriers is China's relationship with the United States.

In Chapter 4, titled 'The Belt and Road Initiative: Central Asia, the Middle East and South Asia', Mahesh Ranjan Debata explores the inconsistency in China's grand strategy on three regions of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia since the BRI was started. The chapter suggests that the BRI's dream run in Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia has slowed down and may continue to do so, due to the shift in US Middle East policy under President Trump and the rise of an assertive India that refused to be part of the BRI.

In Chapter 5, titled 'The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: Building National Consensus, Curbing Terrorism, and Managing Regional Rivalries in Balochistan', Saeed Shafqat explores opportunities and challenges for

maintaining and improving sustainable economic relations between China and Pakistan. He sheds light on Pakistan's domestic politics, security threats, the historical and politico-cultural dynamics of Indo–Pakistan relations, and the impact of the CPEC on regional state rivalries and geostrategic contestation.

The third part of this volume, which includes four chapters is titled 'China's Soft Power and Hard Power in the MENA Region'. In Chapter 6, Habibul Haque Khondker problematises Confucianism as China's soft power in the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf region. In 'Confucius in the UAE: Chinese Soft Power in the GCC', Khondker explores the deployment of China's soft power in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region through the spread of the Confucius Institute and other softer aspects of the Chinese culture such as promotion of Chinese popular culture and celebration of the Chinese New Year in the region. The chapter examines the possibilities and the limitations of such state-driven initiatives in promoting soft power.

Xiaoyue Li in Chapter 7, titled 'China–Egypt Relations: Constructing Images and Perceptions in the Belt and Road Initiative', explores the grassroots level of power operation and perception in people's everyday lives. Through media coverage and interview, the author focuses on the two way cultural traffic between Chinese and Egyptians. The chapter suggests that national images are less determined by policymakers, as commonly understood in studies of international relations, but more significantly, they are shaped by multiple actors who live and witness within the changing conditions and practices of political and economic partnership.

Chapter 8, co-authored by Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvanitis, is titled 'Smoothing the Waters: Science and Research Collaboration between China and the Arab World'. The authors make a case for science and research collaboration as another aspect of soft power. Based on bibliometric data and literature review, they argue that in spite of the increasing number of publications co-authored by Chinese and Arab scholars, scientific collaboration between the two regions is low. Neither China nor Arab countries have initiated common projects, and most co-authored research projects are funded by European and American partners.

In Chapter 9, titled 'China and the MENA Region in a Decentred World', Andrea Ghiselli highlights some elements of hard power in China's foreign policy in the evolving decentred world. He looks at Chinese military operations, peacekeeping, and anti-piracy operations in the MENA region to demonstrate the recent shift in China's approach to regional security dynamics since the 2011 NATO military operation in Libya.

In the fourth and final part, titled 'Sino–Middle East Regional Dynamics: Energy and Beyond', four chapters examine the place of energy

and other factors in Sino–MENA relations. Chapter 10, co-authored by Michael McCall and Tugrul Keskin, is titled 'Sino–Turkish Relations in the New Era: From Political Conflict to Economic Cooperation'. The chapter examines the extent to which Sino–Turkey relations fall into a category of a 'strategic cooperative relationship', that is, they remain contentious where national interests on both sides collide. It sheds light on the complexity of Sino–Turkey relations towards the Middle East, Central Asia, the status of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and the Taiwan dilemma. It also problematises their bilateral military relations, economy and trade, and the BRI. The chapter, in sum, demonstrates the willingness of elites for further cooperation as well as some structural obstacles to expand their bilateral relations.

In Chapter 11, titled 'Sino–Egyptian Relations and the New Regional Dynamics of the Middle East', Yossra M. Taha examines the new regional dynamics in the Middle East after the Arab Spring and how these changes reflect on Sino–Egyptian relations. The chapter analyses two major treaties concluded between China and Egypt in order to help assess the nature of current Sino–Egyptian relations. The chapter also sheds light on future prospects for the development of Sino–Egyptian relations.

In Chapter 12, titled 'China's Policy on the Iranian Nuclear Issue: Cooperation and Disagreements with Russia and the United States', Mher Sahakyan provides a historical background to Sino–Iran nuclear cooperation, followed by contextualising China's policy towards Iran's nuclear issue in the UN Security Council. The chapter suggests that China's policy of preventing nuclear proliferation in the Middle East serves its grand strategy of maintaining stability in the MENA region, which is the main source of energy for the Chinese economy.

Chapter 13 is titled 'Chinese Engagement with the MENA Region: Exploring Sino–MENA Event Data'. Based on dyadic event data, Michael McCall demonstrates that the role of energy production alone appears to have little significance as a determining factor in China's Middle East policy. Other variables, like total trade values, serve as better predictors. A closer look at event data suggests that outlier cases like Iran may provide a better insight into the current and future foreign policy priorities of China in the Middle East.

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PART 1

China–MENA Relations at Large

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CHAPTER 1

The Triple Pillar of Sino–MENA Relations in the Age of Neoliberalism

Mojtaba Mahdavi

1.1 Introduction

The current US–China rivalry and the geopolitical competition over the future of global order maybe characterised as a new Cold War, that is, 'Cold War Two' (Kolodko, 2020, p. 5), or a Cold Peace. While President Xi Jinping celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China with the largest military parade in the Beijing history in 2019, the US threatened to launch a new trade and tariff war against China (Osnos, 2020; Venard, 2019). In April 2020, the US Congress introduced a bill to deter China's 'threat' by 'allocating more than $6 billion for air and missile defence systems and new military construction in partner countries' (Gould, 2020). The cyberwarfare, the campaign against the Chinese telecommunications company of Huawei and specifically its 5G technologies, the tension over the outbreak of COVID-19 global pandemic, and the trade and tariff war between the US and China demonstrate a larger crisis in the neoliberal global order and a decline in the American global hegemony. Using Antonio's Gramsci's analogy, such competition and crisis indicate that while 'the old is dying', the new order has yet to be born (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276; Babic, 2020). China, an emerging global power and the second largest world economy, is playing a profound role in this global interregnum, shaping the new global order. Interestingly, the rise of China and the 'new Asian age' is a result of a neoliberal global order under US hegemony in which China's enormous cheap labour boosted Beijing's economic and political power (Arrighi, 2008).

While it is true that President Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), provides a structural and material base for the consolidation of Chinese rising power under President Xi, or 'Xiism' (Mulvad, 2019), the BRI, or the New Silk Road initiative should be examined in the larger context of the emerging 'multiplex world', a concept coined by Amitav Acharya (2020; 2019) to describe 'a world without the hegemony of a single power or a single set of values', in which multiple regions and new actors play a much greater role in the global order (Acharya, 2019, p. 12). Hence, Chinese

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relations with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) should be viewed in 'the emerging webs of relations as a coevolution of multiple megaregions in the making' (Bianchi, 2019, p. 2). This chapter examines the dynamics and new developments in Sino–MENA relations in the context of the global and regional competitions between the old and new major powers in the current neoliberal order.

The perception that the Chinese leadership has of the world involves China at the centre ringed by four concentric circles of the 'innermost ring' (territories controlled or claimed by China, waters in the East China and South China seas, Taiwan), the second ring (neighbouring countries from Russia to Vietnam), and the third ring (six regions of Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and, Northeast Asia). The rest of the world including the MENA region, Africa, Europe, and America belongs to farthest fourth ring which China has become concerned with mainly since the late 1990s in pursuit of power and influence but particularly for markets and investment opportunities and energy resources, among other things (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, pp. 3–7).

More recently, however, a gradual shift in US foreign policy from the Middle East towards the Far East has reinforced Sino–MENA relations. While China increasingly needs MENA resources to secure its future hegemonic position, the MENA may need China as an alternative global partner. Visits by President Xi Jinping to Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, and Beijing's 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' agreements with major MENA states such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt should be examined in this context.

Equally important is the rise of right-wing populism and protectionist deglobalisation trends in the West, which will likely increase China's economic, political, and military presence in the MENA region and could have a twofold impact on MENA societies. First, China's increasing presence in the region could benefit MENA at the following fronts: (a) providing a counterbalance for a long-standing US political hegemony by strengthening a 'multiplex' world order, empowering the BRICS, and building mutual relations along the BRI track; (b) offering an alternative and/or complementary role to the Western-dominated international financial institutions through institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB); (c) fostering an innovative 'knowledge economy'; and (d) improving the renewable and clean energy in the region. Second, China's increasing presence, however, could contribute to the deterioration of civil rights and democratic movements in the MENA region. More specifically, the real or perceived discourse of the 'Beijing consensus' or the 'Chinese model of development', which has been employed by

some MENA autocratic regimes, might consolidate the state of 'neoliberalism without democracy' and autocratic capitalism in the region.

The 'Chinese model of development' or the 'Beijing consensus' is often celebrated for being a pragmatic alternative path to the neoliberal Washington consensus in the region. It is also known for giving priority to economic development over political democracy. However, the China example, it is argued, reintroduces neoliberalism with a new face to the MENA region and is being welcomed by some MENA autocratic states. The real question, therefore, is to what extent will the Chinese economic and political paradigm reinforce a neoliberal economy, social inequality, and authoritarianism in the region? To what degree could China contribute to a sustainable and just development in the MENA region?

1.2 The Chinese 'Cat Theory': Beyond Sinophilia and Sinophobia

China is more than a country or civilisation. It is an *idea*, a – real or perceived – discourse, a pathway. This idea has been introduced in at least two different ways: The first approach introduces the idea of China as a higher and/or alternative model of development and progress to the Western paradigm of the Enlightenment. Drawing from the tradition of Voltaire (1694–1778), Leibniz (1646–1716), Christian Wolff (1679–1754), and Francois Quesnay (1694–1774), contemporary scholars such as Daniel Bell (2008), among others admire China's Confucianist tradition as a potential pathway to remedy our moral and political decay and to lessen the worldwide massive economic inequality. The Confucian social hierarchy, it is argued, may *contribute* to economic equality. In today's China, Bell argues, 'new Confucianism' offers a compelling alternative to Western liberalism.

The second approach to the idea of China has some roots in the tradition of Montesquieu (1689–1755), and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), among others. One of the contemporary advocates of this Sinophobic tradition is Samuel Huntington, whose work, *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), presents China and Confucianism as antithetical – and *inferior* – to the Western higher values and institutions of liberalism, democracy, and human rights. This chapter suggests that neither of the two approaches of Sinophilia and Sinophobia could capture the complexity and reality of today's China. The *real* China, I argue, is somewhere between the two poles. *Pragmatism* signifies today's China, and Deng Xiaoping's famous 'cat theory' best represents contemporary China. Chinese reformist leader Deng Xiaoping (r. 1978–1989) once argued: 'It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white; as long as it catches

mice, it's a good cat' ('In quotes: Deng Xiaoping', 2014). The theory essentially suggests that the ultimate policy goal for China is development, and it does not matter if it can be achieved by planned or market economics. This theory, I argue, has a much broader implication for the study of what China represents today, and sheds light on Sino–MENA relations. More specifically, Sino–MENA relations should be understood in the light of Chinese pragmatism. This approach challenges both a romanticised illusionary idea of China as a universal and superior alternative to the dominant economic-political neoliberal order, and a Sinophobic discourse, which demonises, essentialises, and denounces China as *the* beacon of autocracy, hierarchy, and nothing else. There has been a long and rich history of interactions between China as a great civilisation and other MENA civilisations, which cannot be reduced to either Sinophilia or Sinophobia.

Although China is a relatively new major economic partner and political actor in the postcolonial MENA region, China and today's MENA nations have been great partners for several centuries (Olimat, 2013). The current BRI, known as the New Silk Road, is named after the four thousand mile Silk Road that existed from 130 BCE to 1453 CE and which linked the MENA region and China, and is just one clear example of such a long history of economic and cultural interactions between the two regions.

While some scholars have argued that Chinese foreign policy under President Xi's leadership has shifted from *taoguang yanghui* (maintaining a low profile) to *fenfa youwei* (striving for achievement) (Fravel, 2012), others view his initiatives as an extension of 'the peaceful developments foreign policies' embraced by his predecessors (Ferchen, 2016). Yet, there is no doubt that the BRI, launched in 2013 aiming at connecting major Eurasian economies, through the Silk Road Economic Belt, overland routes and the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road is Xi's signature foreign policy initiative. It seeks to promote connectivity mainly through the development of transportation infrastructure that supports the increased exchange of goods and services, an attempt to revive the pre-modern Silk Road. It boosts China's economic, political, and geostrategic goals including its soft power.

What does MENA mean for today's China as a major economic and political power? Although 'Beijing essentially remains a regional power with a global presence' (Scobell & Nader, 2016, p. 9), China and MENA are not 'strange bedfellows' (Hayoun, 2013, p. 89), and economic and political ties between the two are growing in the emerging multiplex world. In the following section, I propose that Deng's pragmatic 'cat theory' may be extended and applied to China's MENA policy. The chapter problematises and sheds light on the three pillars of Sino–MENA relations in light of Chinese pragmatism.

1.3 Sino–MENA Today: A Triple-Pillar Relationship

Pragmatism is a keyword to describe Chinese domestic and foreign policy post-1978 and remains a guiding principle to examine contemporary Sino–MENA relations. This 'new pragmatism with Chinese characteristics', or 'New Silk Road instead of exporting revolution' (Kolodko, 2020), are based on three major pillars: the first pillar pertains to a broad category of 'energy, trade, investment, arms deal, security and geostrategic significance'. The second pillar is centred around the Chinese policy of 'non-intervention', respecting sovereignty of the MENA states. The third pillar is pertinent to the so-called 'Chinese model of development' and what it means for the MENA states and civil societies.

As for the first pillar, China was oil self-sufficient until 1993. However, with Chinese economic modernisation policy and the growth of the Chinese middle class, the country needed more energy for industrialisation. Guided by a new strategy of 'going out' and a 'peaceful rise' or 'peaceful development' – the official policy of Chinese President Hu Jintao (2002–2012) – China strengthened its economic ties with the MENA region. The strategy of a 'peaceful rise' compelled China to diversify its energy sources and to reinforce its economic ties, trades, and investment plans with the oil-producing countries in the MENA region.

China's never-ending economic growth has led to an increasing thirst for petroleum and natural gas, making the MENA region's energy resources the country's top foreign and security concern. For Beijing, both Central Asia and the MENA region are geostrategic crossroads of the world with a significant strategic depth and vast national resources. Hence, China has secured cordial relations with its immediate Central Asian neighbours, established the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001, and initiated the BRI in 2013. Equally important is how MENA is viewed as a strategic extension of China's homeland and peripheries. Fearful of growing sympathy and possible cooperation between Chinese Muslim Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region and MENA Muslims, Beijing's pragmatism explains strong Sino–MENA relations to serve China's security and to prevent MENA sympathy and support for Muslim Uyghurs (Scobell, 2017, pp. 9–23).

China has managed to maintain friendly relations with all MENA states. Pragmatism has helped China to make business and expand trade with competing MENA states, maintaining a unique position as the largest economic partner. The MENA region has been the largest oil supplier to China since the mid-1990s. China currently imports some 44 per cent of its crude oil and 33 per cent of its natural gas from the Middle East, and this may reach to 70 per cent over the next few years. China remains the largest partner and importer of Saudi

Arabia's and Iran's crude oil. President Xi Jinping made a two-day visit to Saudi Arabia in January 2016, stressing that 'Saudi Arabia stands at a key junction along the Belt and Road Initiative' ('Lifting China–Saudi ties to comprehensive strategic partnership an irresistible trend', 2016, para. 4). King Salman of Saudi Arabia met with President Xi Jinping in China in May 2017, signing US $65 billion investment deals (Wong, 2017). Likewise, after President Xi's visit to Iran in 2016, the two countries planned to expand their trade to $600 billion over the next ten years (Wyke, 2016). China also ranks as the largest trading partner of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Yemen (European Commission on Trade, 2018). Furthermore, China's export to the region is expanding. In 2014, for example, China's export to the Middle East reached $300 billon. Moreover, China has increased its direct foreign investment as well as building infrastructures in the region. For instance, China spent $11 billion in a highway project in Algiers, Algeria. In fact, 'Algeria has served as the bridge to further Chinese ties with Africa' (Olimat, 2014, p. 35).

The China–Iran partnership, argue Ehteshami and Horesh (2020), remains 'a marriage of convenience glued by pragmatic interests'. Given Iran–US hostility including the comprehensive economic sanctions against Iran, and the China–US global rivalry, current Sino–Iran relations seem particularly important. 'Of all the major powers in Asia', argues Garver (2016, p. 182), 'Iran offers the best prospect of being a partner with China in the construction of a new international order in Asia when the era of multi-polarity arrives and the US role in Asia is much reduced'. Iran's 'Look East' policy and Beijing's view of Iran as a major regional power has brought these two states closer. The March 2021 twenty-five year Iran–China Strategic Partnership agreement highlights the mutual – although unequal – partnership between Tehran and Beijing. Given its strategic location connecting Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Calabrese argues that Iran is an indispensable part of China's BRI. Moreover, Beijing's 'Going Out Policy' of encouraging Chinese companies to invest overseas coupled with US pressure on Western firms to abandon their energy investments in Iran contributed to China's emergence as the primary foreign player in Iran's oil sector. China Petroleum and Chemical Corp (Sinopec) signed a contract to develop the Yadavaran oilfield, and China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) signed contracts for Azadegan oil fields. Moreover, Iran's geostrategic location also impacts China's energy security, as Iran straddles the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf – two of the world's richest oil and gas zones – and has the Strait of Hormuz under its control, which impacts the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf suppliers to Asian markets. Other examples of Sino–Iranian economic partnerships include the expansion of Iran's maritime shipping capacity by China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC) and China

State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC) and the construction and expansion of the Tehran underground subway system by CITIC Group Corporation, China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO), and Changchun Railway Vehicles Corporation (CRV). Hence, 'China's relations with Iran, are driven primarily by economic and strategic considerations. The cornerstone of the economic partnership between China and Iran is energy trade' (Calabrese, 2017, pp. 174–191). Moreover, for China, Iran counterbalances excessive American influence and is in support of China's expanding interests in the region (Garver, 2011, p. 77). Iran is seen as bridgehead safeguarding the security of China's western frontier, serving as China's first 'firewall' against potential Western expansion (Wenmu, 2013, pp. 33–34). Furthermore, Iran's unique location as the only East–West and North–South intersection for Central Asian trade, and the most convenient non-Russian access route to open water makes it a nodal point in the BRI and a major long-term independent source of energy for China. This is evident in the remarks of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei during his meeting with President Xi in January 2016: 'Iran is the most reliable country in the region for energy since its energy policies will never be affected by foreigners' (quoted from Ching & Gallo, 2016).

The MENA energy sources, in sum, remain the main driving force for China's pragmatist policy towards the region. The investment and other forms of trades are largely in the service of Chinese energy policy. Nonetheless, the MENA region could benefit from the BRI in general and the Chinese investment policy through such institutions as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and Chinese support for improving renewable and clean energy in the region. For example, Cole (2016) sheds some lights on the complexity of Sino–MENA green energy investment and solar power, which is one avenue through which China has created a new relationship with MENA. China under President Xi Jinping has pursued a 'Go out!' policy in which Chinese firms create factories abroad to 'benefit from cheap labor and from local low-tariff trade blocs' in such countries as the UAE and Morocco. This has changed 'China's relationship to the region from being one of buying hydrocarbons to a much more intensive set of interactions, including acting as employer for local labor' (Cole, 2016, pp. 59–60).

The second pillar of China's MENA policy is respecting the political status quo, stability, and state sovereignty through the doctrine of 'non-interventionism'. This pillar, too, should be understood in light of the Chinese pragmatist doctrine of 'peaceful rise' and a political strategy of 'offend no one'. The implementation of this pillar involves cooperation with competing regional powers and parties such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey. It led to China abstaining in the UN Security Council vote on the Libyan no-fly zone

resolution in 2011, but it also led China to continue its arms trade with Saudi Arabia in spite of Saudi's intervention and war crimes in Yemen. China has pursued the same non-interventionist policy in the civil (proxy) war in Syria, recognising the Syrian regime's sovereignty and undermining the regime's massive crimes against humanity.

China has demonstrated a more proactive policy by vetoing a UN Security Council resolution to impose sanctions on Syria. The Chinese arms trade with the MENA states, the recent presence of Chinese naval warships in the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea, and a gradual shift from a traditional 'anti-piracy' operation in Somalia towards a more proactive presence in the region are indicative of growing Chinese military and political presence in the region. It is important to note that 'Chinese military spending is merely a third of US expenditure, ca. 230 billion dollars a year' (Kolodko, 2020, p. 7), but it is growing quickly.

Nonetheless, recent Chinese activities do not indicate a shift in China's non-interventionist policy. While Beijing still remains a regional power and cautiously pursues its pragmatic doctrine of 'non-interventionism', the failure of the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the post-invasion crisis in Libya in 2011, and the Syrian catastrophe provided a context and an opportunity for China to become more active in the MENA region. Furthermore, China's lack of colonial history in MENA has contributed to its greater presence in the region. In fact, all MENA states welcome the Chinese non-intervention policy for their own particular reasons. MENA's unique geostrategic location – a trade hub linking three continents – is of great interest to China, and a respect for state sovereignty and the non-intervention policy seem to work for both sides.

The third pillar of Sino–MENA relations is particularly important. It projects China as an 'idea', a discourse, a model, or a pathway to development. What does today's China as a model, a path, or a paradigm offer to the MENA region? 'The Chinese model of development' is a contested concept, which has been defined and problematised in multiple ways: first, the Chinese model of development has been described as 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics', referring to Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, which incorporated elements of market economy into the Chinese socialist system. This is the Chinese official account of the Chinese model of development, echoed by the current President Xi, among other top Chinese leaders. Interestingly, the official Chinese discourse has never declared the Chinese 'path' as a universal model for other countries. It has been introduced and theorised as a distinct path suited to the Chinese condition.

The second interpretation of the Chinese model of development was introduced by Joshua Cooper Ramo, who coined a new concept of the 'Beijing consensus' in 2004 to theorise the Chinese model as an alternative to the 'Washington consensus', a neoliberal, market-oriented system promoted by the West. The Beijing consensus, Ramo (2004) argued, is a pragmatic and particularly Chinese economic path, which holds several characteristics (Elen, 2016). It promotes and facilitates constant innovation, focusses more on sustainability and equality and less on a country's GDP, and finally, it is neither power hungry nor hegemonic; it is a research and value-oriented economic system.

The last, and probably the most controversial, characterisation of the Chinese model of development is introduced by David Harvey. In a sharp contrast from the official account of Chinese authorities, Harvey characterises the Chinese model as 'neoliberalism "with Chinese characteristics"' (Harvey, 2005, pp. 120–151). This model refers to the post-1978 economic reform under Deng Xiaoping, in which China has constructed 'a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control' (Harvey, 2005, p. 120). In his reference to the massacre of students in Tiananmen Square in 1989, Harvey argues that this model 'clearly indicated that neoliberalization in the economy was not to be accompanied by any progress in the fields of human, civil, or democratic rights' (Harvey, 2005, p. 123). China did not take the '"shock therapy" path of instant privatization' endorsed by the IMF and the World Bank to 'avert the economic disasters' of Russia and Central Europe in the 1990s. China took its own particular path towards 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' or 'privatization with Chinese characteristics', constructed a form of 'state-manipulated market economy that delivered spectacular economic growth (averaging close to 10 per cent a year) and rising standards of living for a significant proportion of the population for more than twenty years'. Harvey then reminds us that this path also 'led to environmental degradation, social inequality, and eventually something that looks uncomfortably like the reconstitution of capitalist class power' (Harvey, 2005, p. 122).

Almost two decades after his analysis, Harvey's critical observation seems valid and relevant in today's context. He argues,

> In so far as neoliberalism requires a large, easily exploited, and relatively powerless labour force, then China certainly qualifies as a neoliberal economy, albeit 'with Chinese characteristics'. The accumulation of wealth seems to have proceeded in part via a combination of corruption, hidden

> ruses, and overt appropriation of rights and assets that were once held in common.
>
> HARVEY, 2005, p. 144[1]

He then continues,

> While there are several aspects of Communist Party policy that were designed to frustrate capitalist class formation, the party has also acceded to the massive proletarianization of China's workforce, the breaking of the 'iron rice bowl', the evisceration of social protections, the imposition of user fees, the creation of a flexible labour market regime, and the privatization of assets formerly held in common. It has created a social system where capitalist enterprises can both form and function freely.
>
> HARVEY, 2005, p. 150

China, in sum, 'has definitely moved towards neoliberalization and the reconstitution of class power, albeit "with distinctly Chinese characteristics"' (Harvey, 2005, p. 151).

In his short 2020 article, titled 'Anti-Capitalist Politics in the Time of COVID-19', Harvey seems to remain critical on China's neoliberalism, arguing that China as the world's second largest economy has 'effectively bailed out global capitalism in the aftermath of [the] 2007–8' economic crisis. In reference to the global pandemic, he then adds that 'COVID-19 is Nature's revenge for over forty years of Nature's gross and abusive mistreatment at the hands of a violent and unregulated *neo-liberal* extractivism' (Harvey, 2020).

While it is vital to clearly and categorically condemn Sinophobia and racial categorisation of Chinese culture which appeared in increased targeting of hundreds of Asian-Americans for the global pandemic, or in the comments of former US president Donald Trump and his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, labelling the global pandemic as the 'China virus' and the 'Wuhan virus' ('Trump defends calling coronavirus the "Chinese virus"', 2020), it is equally

1 For Harvey, 'the gap between rural and urban incomes has been increasing rapidly. While affluent urban dwellers drive BMWs, rural farmers are lucky to eat meat once a week. Even more emphatic has been the increasing inequality *within* both the rural and the urban sectors. Regional inequalities have also deepened' (Harvey, 2005, p. 145).

Another source for amassing wealth arises out of the super exploitation of labour power, particularly of young women migrants from rural areas. Wage levels in China are extremely low, and conditions of labour are sufficiently unregulated, despotic, and exploitative. Even worse, 'much of the capital accumulated by private and foreign firms comes from unpaid labour' (Harvey, 2005, p. 148).

important to acknowledge that such a mega global crisis is partly rooted in the systemic abuse of the environment and the 'economicalisation' of nature by implementing market-driven neoliberal policies. The global pandemic largely depends upon the 'cracks and vulnerabilities' in the neoliberal 'hegemonic economic model' (Harvey, 2020).

The Chinese path to development therefore represents a particular form of a capitalist economy, or 'Sino-capitalism' (McNally, 2012).[2] What soared after 1989 in China was another kind of 'state capitalism' as 'what collapsed in 1989 was Soviet State capitalism, not socialism'. More specifically, China's development strategy represents a 'hybrid state capitalism' not socialism. It embraces 'a state-supervised mix of state and private capitalism focused on exports'. It deals 'with global capitalists, providing cheap labor, government support, and a growing domestic market. In exchange, foreign capitalists would partner with Chinese state or private capitalists, share technology, and integrate Chinese output into global wholesale and retail trade systems'. What is missing in this hybrid state capitalism seems a 'democratization of workplace' to materialise a more just and humane society in the twenty-first century. (Wolff, 2020; 2019).

The Chinese model of development, in sum, is an amalgamation of neoliberalism with elements of mercantilism, authoritarianism, and planned economy. It has managed to offer development without democracy. This particular feature seems to be welcomed by autocratic regimes in the MENA region who are interested in the political stability of their regimes and pursuing a neoliberal autocratic model of development. Although the Chinese authorities never claimed that their economic path is universal, the MENA autocracies have constantly looked into the Chinese 'model' to consolidate their neoliberal autocracy.

1.4 Whither the MENA Paths of Development? A Civil Society Approach

What is China's vision for a new world order and does its vision help MENA's sustainable development and democracy? The intellectual foundations or ideological underpinnings of China's vision for a new world order, argues Rolland, are inspired by 'traditional Chinese thought and past historical experiences', and reflect a desire for 'partial hegemony, loosely exercised over large portions of the "Global South" – a space that would be free from Western influence and

2 According to Klein (2014, p. 351), 'what has changed in China in recent years – and what is of paramount concern to the ruling party – is that the country's elites, the wealthy winners in China's embrace of full-throttle capitalism, are distressed by the costs of industrialization'.

purged of liberal ideals' (Rolland, 2020, p. 2). Since the 1990s, and more forcefully after 2013, Beijing has developed and employed the concept of *Huayuquan,* or *guoji huayuquan*, meaning 'speaking rights/international speaking rights', or 'discourse power/international discourse power' to reflect China's desires to have the right to speak, influence, and shape the global norms and order.

Beijing's growing material power has been complemented by its discursive power represented in several concepts or slogans to promote China's *huayuquan*. These slogans include Deng Xiaoping's idea of 'Five principles of peaceful coexistence' in 1988; Jiang Zemin's concept of 'good neighbourliness' in 1989; the idea of 'win-win cooperation', which was passed at the16th CCP Central Committee in 2005; the 'common interests/harmonious world' introduced to the 17th CCP Congress in 2007; the 'China's story/China's voice' in 2012; and numerous slogans introduced by President Xi Jinping's in 2013. Examples of Xi's slogans encapsulate a four-part approach to guide diplomacy towards small and medium powers: 'amity, sincerity, mutual benefits, and inclusiveness'; a 'community of common destiny/community of shared future for mankind', or 'four virtues: speak in good faith, value comradeship, raise justice, cultivate righteousness'. In 2014, Xi introduced slogans such as 'common, comprehensive, cooperative, sustainable', 'China path', 'China wisdom', and 'Cultural self-confidence'. In 2015, President Xi's idea of 'two guides' suggested that China should guide the international community to shape a more 'just' and 'secure' global order. At the 18th CCP Central Committee in 2015 he introduced ideas of 'innovation, coordination, green development, openness, and sharing'; in 2017 he came with concepts of 'building world peace, contributor to global development, protector of international order'; in 2018 his keywords were 'equality, mutual understanding, dialogue, and tolerance', and in 2019 he introduced ideas of 'frank consultation, sincere communication, in-depth exchange, mutual learning' (Rolland, 2020, pp. 15–16, 60–64). Evidently, China under President Xi has profoundly enhanced its discursive power, providing its own 'alternative' vision of a more 'reasonable' international order.

Nonetheless, the key question is to what extent the Chinese vision of the global order differs radically from the exiting neoliberal one where China is actively involved. Moreover, it is unclear how a neoliberal order with Chinese characteristics would serve justice, peace, inclusiveness, and mutual cooperation. For example, contemporary China's neoliberal path to development seems to contradict Beijing's official discourse of 'peaceful rise' or 'peaceful development' as the neoliberal model represents a form of *structural violence* to the environment and to the dignity of domestic and global subalterns. Also, as shown in the 26 April 2021 report of the Stockholm International Peace

Research Institute (SIPRI), Beijing's boost in its military budget does not seem to represent a new emerging peaceful order. 'China's military expenditure, the second highest in the world, is estimated to have totalled $252 billion in 2020. This represents an increase of 1.9 per cent over 2019 and 76 per cent over the decade 2011–20'. The report suggests that China's military spending 'has risen for 26 consecutive years, the longest series of uninterrupted increases by any country in the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database' ('World military spending rises to almost $2 trillion in 2020', 2021).

Beijing's current treatment of Muslim Uyghurs which violates their cultural and political rights, and its repression of the 2019–20 pro-democracy uprisings in Hong Kong hardly represents inclusiveness, dialogue, and mutual benefits. Moreover, Beijing's discourse of 'Chinese exceptionalism' has helped the ruling elites to justify the rule of the one-party system in the name of promoting 'a hierarchical, virtuous, harmonious domestic order' at home, and the claim of 'inherent peacefulness' to consolidate Beijing's global power. Is Beijing's 'hierarchical order promoted domestically', one might ask, 'the preferred model for the new international order'? (Rolland, 2020, pp. 25–26) Does this model facilitate creating a more just and democratic sociopolitical order in the MENA region? The Global South in general, and the MENA and Asia regions in particular, need to invent their own indigenous inclusive, democratic and egalitarian models of development and democracy while remaining wide open to learn from China and others in this emerging multiplex world order.

Theoretically, Sino–MENA relations could be approached in three distinct ways. First, a 'Sino-centred approach' always underlines China's economic and political interests in the region. In this approach, China as an idea and/or a perceived model is often romanticised, and the MENA region remains the residual category – the 'other' – and a passive recipient of material and ideal charities. The second approach, represented by the MENA autocratic regimes is a 'MENA state-centred approach', which constructs and *manipulates* the 'Chinese model of development' to promote and justify the idea of development without democracy, or neoliberal authoritarianism. The third approach, I suggest, takes a civil society perspective that considers the long-term interests of MENA social forces. The first two approaches are state-centric, undermining the interests of civil society, and overlooking the pitfalls and problems of the Chinese model of development. More specifically, the Chinese model of development and its vision for a new order entail multiple shortcomings. First, and foremost, is the autocratic nature of Chinese top-down modernisation. This is evident in several cases including state-sponsored cultural domination, forced assimilation, and autocratic nation-building of the Muslim minority Uyghurs in Xinjiang region, undermining their ethno-cultural identity and forcefully integrating

them into a top-down state-sponsored homogenous Chinese national identity (Mauk, 2021; Bovingdon, 2010; Scott, 1985).

Several features of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, or 'Eastern Turkestan' as it is called by most Uyghurs, make it vital to China's economic and political security. The region possesses almost one-third of China's natural gas and oil, and substantial deposits of gold, uranium, and other metals. Moreover, given its favourable climate, the region is viewed as a 'cotton basket', that is, as highly attractive for cotton cultivation. The vast uninhabited land of the region also offers a potential solution to overpopulation in the heart of China. And its geopolitical location makes it a 'strategic gateway' to the markets of Central Asia and the Middle East (Downs, 2004). Hence, Beijing has viewed Uyghur unrest and protest in Xinjiang as a major national security concern, especially in the post-9/11 era when the Chinese official narrative of the Uyghur's 'counter-revolution' became replaced by 'war on terrorism and religious extremism' (Rodríguez-Merino, 2019).

Uyghurs are forced to study the Chinese language and the official Han Chinese doctrine as part of political 're-education', argues Roberts (2020), in mass detention centres or what are officially called 'vocational education and training centres'. Moreover, under the 'transformation' programme of China's rural Uyghur population, thousands of Uyghur workers are relocated to new residential factories, depopulating rural towns which were once overwhelmingly Uyghur.

Most Muslim-majority states including the MENA autocratic states have remained silent over the gross violation of human rights of Uyghurs, mostly because of strong economic ties and political support that Beijing can offer on the international stage. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation along with several Muslim-majority states even blocked a Western motion at the UN in 2019 calling for China to allow journalists access to Xinjiang province.[3] In 2019 during a visit to China, Mohammed Bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and the de facto ruler of the kingdom, appeared to publically back his hosts over their treatment of the Uyghurs. Likewise, Iran has remained largely silent about China's policy towards the Uyghurs mainly because Beijing

3 In 2019 twenty-two mostly Western countries in a joint statement to the High Commissioner of the UN Human Rights Council criticised China for what they defined as 'disturbing reports of large-scale arbitrary detentions' and 'widespread surveillance and restrictions', a day later thirty-seven other countries, nearly half of them were Muslim-majority nations, including Pakistan, Qatar, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia jumped to Beijing's defence.

remains Tehran's major trading partner during the US imposition of harsh economic sanctions against Iran.

Beijing's autocratic policy towards the Uyghurs does not offer an inclusive and pluralistic model of coexistence for the MENA societies where there are multiple religious and ethnic minorities in several MENA nations. Moreover, the MENA autocratic regimes welcome Beijing's restricted policy in cyberspace and domestic internet industry as it would serve the policy of autocratic modernisation and advanced technology without political freedom. For example, Yalla, (lit., 'let's go' in Arabic) is a Chinese-founded app with headquarters in Dubai, it is among the most popular chat and gaming apps in the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf region, Egypt, Jordan, and Algeria, but also supports seven other regional languages such as Urdu and Turkish. What is interesting is that 'the basic rule for the platform is known as "PRP": no politics, no religion, no porn' and violating this rule means 'losing one's account' (Yang & Kerr, 2021). The critical point here is that the depoliticisation of civil society is welcomed by modernising autocrats. But as Sen (1999) shows, sociopolitical freedom, pluralism, and democracy are central to the success of sustainable and just development in the Global South.

In this context we may understand why some sections of Iranian civil society and pro-democracy forces hold a relatively negative perception of China's growing influence in Iran. The public was not very enthusiastic about Iran joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) after its full membership was approved in September 2021. Some even reacted against the 2021 Sino–Iran twenty-five year strategic partnership agreement (Ma Hastim, 2020). In their view, while there is not much transparency about the scope of China's influence in Iran, the hardliner faction of the regime advocates the 'Look East' policy at the expense of balanced relations with both the West (US) and the East (China) to consolidate its autocratic power. The recent history of MENA, however, has shown the unsustainability of autocratic and top-down modernisation, secularisation, or nation-building in MENA societies. The 1979 Iranian revolution, the 2009 pro-democracy Green Movement in Iran, the 2010–2011 Arab Spring and the aftermath, and the 2013 Gezi Park Movement in Turkey have all demonstrated MENA civil society's resistance and strong reaction to the idea and policy of 'economic development without democracy' (Mahdavi, 2019).

The second and related shortcoming of Beijing's model concerns how today's China has responded to people's democratic demands and basic rights. Beijing's policy towards the 2019–2020 pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong and its cosy and complex relations with the Myanmar junta and the February 2021 anti-democratic military coup in the country offer little to

no lesson to build a more inclusive and democratic MENA region. The 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests, which were triggered by a controversial extradition bill endorsed by Beijing, set off a chain of protests in February 2019 opposing the bill as an infringement of civil liberties in Hong Kong and its judicial sovereignty and for exposing its citizens to the legal system of mainland China. The proposed bill was viewed as a violation of liberty, and the counter-hegemonic protest and resistance came amid growing concerns about the future of democracy and the rule of law in Hong Kong (Garrett, 2014).

The case of Myanmar is equally important. When Myanmar was under pressure by several countries over its genocidal treatment of the Muslim Rohingya minority in Rakhine, Beijing backed the military regime and the de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi's narrative that the genocidal allegations and the gross violation of the Muslim Rohingya's human rights were 'overblown and the authorities were responding to a terrorist threat' (McLaughlin, 2021). More recently, Beijing also did block the UN Security Council resolution against the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar (Myanmar coup, 2021). While these so-called 'pragmatic' policies driven by Beijing's economic and security concerns are welcomed by the MENA autocratic regimes, the MENA social forces and civil societies will suffer if, or when, their states pursue the same model.

The third shortcoming pertains to Beijing's neoliberal model of development. Neoliberalism produces extreme social inequality, reduces human agents into 'market actors', and empowers capital, not citizens (Brown, 2015b). Brown argues that 'neoliberalism, is a particular form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms and is quietly undoing basic elements of democracy. These elements include vocabularies and principles of justice, political cultures, habits of citizenship, practices of rule, and above all, democratic imaginaries' (2015a, p. 17). The catastrophe is 'normative economization of political life' (2015a, p. 201).

Social inequality results in a gradual decline of democratic aspirations in civil society; it gives rise to populist authoritarian trends and pushes democratic ideas and institutions at bay (Mahdavi, 2017, p. 284). While the MENA region needs an active, inclusive and empowered civil society to build a just, inclusive, and sustainable development and democracy, the neoliberal model of development undermines social justice, societal empowerment, and a sustainable and inclusive model of development.

We may now ask whether MENA civil societies can benefit from the Sino–MENA relations and if so how? Drawing from a civil society approach, I suggest a threefold remark to draw this section to a close. First, China is neither the saviour of the MENA from the ill effects of the postcolonial order, nor is it an evil force. The real China today pursues Deng's pragmatist 'cat theory'

in domestic and foreign policy. Chinese pragmatism explains the triple pillar of Sino–MENA relations. China needs energy from the MENA region and is actively involved in trade and investment. However, should the MENA states act proactively and strategically, the MENA civil society could benefit from China's New Silk Road or the BRI, China's relatively low interest loans and investment plans, and Chinese interest in fostering an innovative 'knowledge economy' and improving renewable and clean energy in the region.

More specifically, both China and most MENA states as well as some MENA economic sectors welcome Chinese economic involvement in the region. However, the export of Chinese cheap products to the region sometimes works to the detriment of local MENA industries and products, and MENA civil society may suffer from such trade and economic ties. Chinese impact on MENA is complex and requires active involvement and interactions of the MENA civil societies with the Chinese government and Chinese companies. The MENA states should rely on their civil society forces and use their negotiation skills to protect the interests of their local industries.

Second, China is neither a decisive counter-hegemonic force, nor yet a world hegemon. Nonetheless, Chinese participation in the MENA region, along with other members of the BRICS, could consolidate a multipolar and multiplex world system and challenge the US hegemony and its unilateral interventionism. This may well benefit the MENA social forces to pursue their home-grown progressive sociopolitical changes. In this context, Chinese respect for state sovereignty and stability and their 'non-interventionist' policy are particularly important in the age of neoliberal interventionism. It is clear that MENA autocratic regimes welcome Chinese support of existing status quos. Nonetheless, this policy has more or less benefited the MENA civil societies. The Western NATO-sponsored wars, interventions, and crippling economic sanctions have ruined a number of MENA civil societies. It is true that China's non-interventionist policy may benefit the autocratic regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, or that close Chinese ties with Saudi Arabia may contribute to the Saudi's military intervention in Yemen but it is also true that MENA civil societies suffered from Western-sponsored military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya and from economic sanctions in Iraq and Iran. Chinese pro-stability is a pragmatist policy in the service of Chinese economic interest but it may also protect MENA civil societies from the American unilateral militarism. MENA civil societies need peace and prosperity in order to challenge their autocratic regimes from *within*.

Third, the real or perceived and constructed 'Chinese model of development' could have mixed results for the future prosperity of MENA civil societies. This discourse has been clearly employed and manipulated by the

MENA autocratic states, consolidating the state of 'neoliberalism without democracy', economic development without democracy, and autocratic capitalism in the region. The solution to MENA problems, I argue, is neither neoliberalism of the 'Washington consensus' nor neoliberalism of the 'Beijing consensus', as they may represent two sides of the same coin! The MENA region needs its own distinct path to development and democracy: a path that requires an active citizenry, a civil society engagement, and a socio-economic model ensuring social justice and political freedom. MENA countries should certainly learn lessons from China and the West, but in the end, they should produce their own distinct paths to a just, comprehensive, and sustainable development. The MENA quest for a just and inclusive development is not an invitation for isolation and/or regressive and reactionary particularism. As Gramsci reminds us, 'it is one thing to be particular, another thing to preach particularism' (1975, p. 6).

1.5 Conclusion

'How would you characterise China's current Middle East policy?' asked a reporter of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi on 24 March 2021. In his response, Wang Yi argued that,

> [...] for the region to emerge from chaos and enjoy stability, it must break free from the shadows of big-power geopolitical rivalry and *independently* explore development paths *suited to its regional realities*. It must stay impervious to external pressure and interference, and follow an inclusive and reconciliatory approach to build a security architecture that accommodates the legitimate concerns of all sides.
>
> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021; emphasis added

Wang Yi then proposed a 'five-point initiative' on achieving security and stability in the Middle East. The first point is 'advocating mutual respect', which entails looking at the Middle East countries as 'partners for cooperation, development and peace, instead of perceiving the region through the lens of geo-competition'. It also requires respecting and supporting the 'Middle East countries in exploring their own paths of development', their own plans in pursuing regional political settlements and promoting 'dialogue among civilizations to achieve peaceful coexistence'. Second is 'upholding equity and justice', in cases such as the Palestinian question by reaffirming the two-state solution at the UN Security Council and welcoming 'Palestinian and Israeli

representatives to China for direct negotiations'. Third is 'achieving non-proliferation' in the Iranian nuclear issue by resuming compliance with the JCPOA, lifting the US unilateral sanctions on Iran, and resuming Iran's reciprocal compliance with its nuclear commitments. Furthermore, 'the international community should support efforts by regional countries in establishing a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction'. Fourth, 'jointly fostering collective security' by promoting regional security and stability, encouraging equal dialogue and consultation, and combating terrorism to ensure 'the safety of oil facilities and shipping lanes, and building step by step a framework for a collective, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security in the Middle East'. The fifth and final point is 'accelerating development cooperation' as enduring peace and security 'requires development, cooperation, and integration'. This includes defeating the COVID-19, rebuilding post-conflict countries, and supporting greater diversity in the economic growth of oil-producing countries by hosting the China–Arab Reform and Development Forum and the Middle East Security Forum. ('Wang Yi proposes a five-point initiative on achieving security and stability in the Middle East', 2021).

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's remarks are complemented by the remarks of Zhong Jianhua, China's Special Representative on African Affairs, arguing that 'China is neither bad nor good. China is a combination of these things' (Africa Research Institute, 2013, p. 34). It is the MENA countries that need to interact and engage actively with China and other BRICS countries and at the same time pursue their own independent paths to development and democracy.

It is equally important to note that while the asymmetrical economic power relations between China and the MENA region may well lead to Chinese economic supremacy, the MENA region could benefit from its economic ties with China if it acts proactively and plans strategically. Countries pursue their own interests and the more powerful they are, the better they impose their agendas. China is no exception. The MENA region should also pursue its own interest. The West as well as the BRICS countries actively pursue their own interests and MENA should do the same. One practical solution to pursue such a path maybe to take a position of 'negative equilibrium' towards all major powers including the US and China in order to prevent new forms of colonialism and dependency. In the new and emerging era of the 'multiplex world', a post-Cold War and a post-American order, a new and novel form of negative equilibrium requires for MENA to proactively maintain its relations with both the East and the West, benefiting from the global experiences and achievements and at the same time develop its own independent paths of democratic development. Drawing from

the dependency theory and/or the world system theory, Ian Taylor (2015; 2014) argues that Sino–African relations may lead to 'diversifying dependency' or 'dependency redux' in which China and other emerging non-Western powers such as the BRICS countries may reproduce the state of dependency and under-development in Africa. The same can be argued about Sino–MENA relations. While MENA countries could certainly benefit from China's investment and other economic projects, China's economic and political partnership with the region does not automatically lead to MENA development. What MENA can learn from China is to do what China did, that is, to independently explore development paths suited to its own regional realities. MENA is not a single, homogeneous region and thus there will and should be multiple MENA paths suited to the socio-cultural and political realities of each MENA nation towards a just and inclusive development.

In other words, a civil society approach to development implies that MENA societies need to discover new ways, indigenous approaches, and 'alternative modernities' that are attentive to local traditions and global (American, Chinese, etc.) development models. The MENA region needs to discover 'a third way' or a '*glocal*' approach. Such a bottom-up approach benefits from both global and local experiences and yet maintains its 'decolonial horizons', to use Mingolo's (2015) concept, that is, to develop models of sustainable, inclusive, and egalitarian development and democracy. In the existing neoliberal global structure, the MENA region in particular, and the Global South in general, need to exercise an 'epistemic disobedience' (Mingolo, 2015), delinking from the hegemonic order without falling into a trap of regressive nativism. Such authentic grassroots models of development require thinking and acting independently. It also requires greater inclusion of ordinary people into politics by adopting a more egalitarian, pro-social justice discourse in the age of neoliberal hegemony.

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CHAPTER 2

China's Mental Maps of the Middle East and North Africa

Critical Discourse Analysis of the Contemporary PRC Leadership's Geopolitical Image

Jordi Quero Arias

2.1 Introduction: Approaching Mental Maps through Critical Discourse Analysis

The study of mental maps is not necessarily a novelty in the international relations (IR) discipline. In recent years, a proliferation of foreign policy analysis scholarship on decision makers' mental maps and similar notions has reintroduced the topic into the core of the broader IR research agenda (Battersby & Montello, 2009; Bialasiewicz et al., 2007; Casey & Wright, 2011; Criekemans & Duran, 2011; O'Loughlin & Grant, 1990; Thomas, 2011). This literature has generally focussed on broader theoretical advancements on how *mental maps* are constructed and consolidated, and it generally uses Western countries as bottom-line case studies. However, despite initial attempts by Sprout and Sprout with their notion of psycho milieu (Sprout & Sprout, 1968) and similar endeavours by Henrikson (1980) and da Vinha (2012; 2011), there is no agreement in the academic community on how to term this reality. As outlined by da Vinha (2012), the polysemy of labels includes notions like geopolitical images (O'Loughlin & Grant, 1990), meta-geographies (Lewis & Wigen, 1997), geopolitical codes (Dijkink, 1998), geopolitical imaginary (Latham, 2001), geopolitical imagination (Agnew, 2003), imaginative geographies (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007), or cognitive geopolitics (Criekemans, 2009).

This chapter aims to contribute to this academic discussion by examining the mental maps of the main Chinese foreign policy decision makers in relation to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Drawing on the scholarship outlined above, this chapter conceives mental maps – also referred to here as geopolitical cartographies – as socially constructed spatial imaginaries, which are generally associated with specific sets of codes and ideas. Beyond the individual cognitive process, the creation of mental maps, their consolidation, and their association with some concrete repeated codes occurs through social representational practices like public discourses and other speech acts.

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This chapter argues that the People's Republic of China (PRC) uses a plurality of labels to refer to the region, otherwise referred as the MENA region.[1] There was not one single mental map or geopolitical cartography used by the leadership of the Xi Jinping period to refer to the focussed region. Rather, this chapter identifies at least four major geopolitical maps used by Chinese officials to approach the MENA region, namely the 'Arab countries/states', the 'Middle East', the 'Eurasian continent', and the broader category of 'developing countries'. These mental maps are not constrained by topographical concerns, as some of them include different states not linked by geographical elements per se. It is additionally claimed that each mental map has a specific narrative associated with it, with concrete repeated locutions (signifiers and interdiscursive elements). While the geopolitical cartographies 'Arab countries/states' and the 'Eurasian continent' are generally associated with cooperation, development, and a shared future, notions like the 'Middle East' have been securitised amid stressing conflictual elements in associated speech acts.

To grasp the mental maps of the Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping, this chapter draws on conceptual frameworks offered by critical discourse analysis, especially drawing upon contributions by Milliken (1999), Wodak (2015), and Hansen (2006). It analyses fifty-four different primary sources by the Chinese government (official policy documents, public speeches, and interviews mainly by President Xi, his Vice President and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) dealing with the reality elsewhere labelled as the MENA region. This chapter has opted to assign a number to each one of the primary sources mentioned and to use footnotes when referring to them to facilitate the reading. Addendum 1 contains the relation of primary sources with their assigned number and other bibliographic details. It also uses *nominalisation techniques* (Wodak, 2015) by grasping different concrete names and labels used by PRC's leadership in speeches and interviews to talk about the MENA region, its peoples, and its sociopolitical realities.[2] Once those are detected, the chapter elaborates on the adjectives and adverbs generally used together with them (*predicative analysis*) and seeks whether or not those are repeated over time and among different speakers or not (*intertextuality* and *intercursivity*).

1 This chapter uses the notion of Middle East and North Africa as it has generally been used by the Anglo-Saxon and French scholarship, yet it acknowledges its condition of socially constructed *geopolitical invention* as well (Bilgin, 2004).

2 This is key in order to understand how 'predications of a noun construct the thing(s) named as a particular sort of thing, with particular features and capacities' (Miliken, 1999, p. 232). In this chapter, italics have been used to stress the predicative dimension of the analysis carried out.

2.2 Overlapping Geopolitical Cartographies in the PRC Leadership's Mental Maps of the MENA Region

The main argument of this chapter is that Chinese officials use a plurality of mental maps or geopolitical cartographies, living side by side, to refer to the MENA region. It identifies four major geopolitical maps used by Chinese officials to approach the region, namely the 'Arab countries/states', the 'Middle East', the 'Eurasian continent', and the broader category of 'developing countries' (see figure 2.1). As can be observed just by the labels, these mental maps are not necessarily constrained by topographical concerns, as some of them encompass units not linked by geography. Rather, this chapter demonstrates that the mental maps of Chinese officials are far more based on an encounter-of-peoples approach than on pure Cartesian delimitations of geographical spaces. Each one of these mental maps has a specific narrative associated with it, with concrete repeated signifiers. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity are also strong in the cases examined: Chinese officials repeatedly use the same formulas, producing what might be labelled as an 'intertextuality cascade'. Top level decision makers (such as the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs) fix the nominative and predicative elements of the speech (its main signifiers), and the lower levels of the Chinese government receive and repeat these formulas.[3] All of this enables the chapter to describe the main features associated to each one of these geopolitical mental categories (see figure 2.1).

2.2.1 *Mental Map 1: The 'Arab countries/states'*

The primordial geopolitical cartography used by Chinese officials to refer to the reality elsewhere called MENA is related to the notions of 'Arab countries' or 'Arab states'. In some few cases, expressions like 'the Arab people(s)' or 'the Arab World' are alternatively used as synonyms (Documents 2, 50, and 34).

The primary sources are analysed to demonstrate how all these concepts encompass 'all twenty-two Arab countries' (Document 53), equating them with the list of member-states of the League of Arab States.[4] Additionally, the list of who is in and who is out of this image is confirmed by the fact that the notions of 'Arab countries' and 'Arab states' are commonly used in public speeches and

3 As some of the examples demonstrate below, this cascade effect can be even observed between the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, where the latter constantly includes intertextual elements from the former's speech acts.

4 Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Djibouti, Comoros, and Somalia.

official documents taking shape in the framework of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASF) and its parallel initiatives[5] whose membership and participation is restricted to China plus the Arab League members.

By focusing on *Arabness*, or the condition of being Arab, the boundaries of these imagined cartographies are not geographical in essence. Rather, the construction of 'Arab countries/states' revolves around two different cognitive process: firstly, an identification of the counterpart in identity baselines ('the Arab people'); and secondly, a characterisation of international political subjects (i.e., the states) according to the demographic majority and the self-defined nature of the ruling institutions ('the Arab countries', where the majority of the population considers itself Arab and where the government labels their state as such). Consequently, this mental map is not made up of contiguous territories, nor is it founded on Cartesian considerations. From a Chinese perspective, this is the product of human geographies that put at its centre the encounter of two different civilisations notwithstanding physical-terrestrial concerns.

It is also worth noting that, despite recognising the plurality of the twenty-two different realities, 'the Arab countries/states' construction is treated as one single, homogenous unit with its all-embracing common features as one 'culture' or 'people' (Document 53). The space for inner differences within the countries composing the image is blurred and a single characterisation of the totality is indiscriminately applied to all units. China's discourse presents the relation of China with the 'Arab countries' in bilateral terms, using expressions as '*bilateral* friendship between China and Arab and Middle East countries' (Document 50) or '*both* sides' (Document 53), denoting their understanding of the others as one entity. The discourses occasionally show some essentialist approaches towards the 'Arab countries/states' as a whole. The Chinese imaginary presents them as 'characterised by *religious* and *cultural diversities*, *time-honoured culture* and *history*, *unique* resource endowment, and great potential for development' (Document 53) and 'the Arabs' as 'industrious and resourceful people, who created brilliant *civilisations* and contributed greatly to the advancement of mankind'(Document 50).

Three major ideas are generally connected to the notion through speech acts. The first feature to underline is the importance of history and, more precisely, of common friendly history with China, as a justification for current cooperative relations. Generally, the idea that 'China is a friend of the Arab

5 Namely, the China-Arab City Forum, the China-Arab Joint Chamber of Commerce, the China-Arab States Expo, and the China-Arab States Economic and Trade Forum, among others.

people' (Documents 50, 32 and 34) is stressed, even by using sentences like 'brothers, friends, and partners no matter what happens on the world arena' (Document 53). From a predicate analysis perspective, it is interesting to see how discourses make constant use of phrases like '*close* friends', (Document 50) '*strong'* and '*ideal* partners', (Document 50) or '*traditional* friendship' (Documents 50 and 53). In the Chinese imagination this is presented as 'time-honoured ties of friendship, forged by the 2,000-year-old Silk Road', (Document 34) which

> [...] date[s] back to ancient times. [...] In the long stretches of history, peace, and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, learning from each other, mutual benefits and win-win cooperation have always been the theme of exchanges between China and Arab countries.
>
> Document 53

As with many other policy reasonings based on historical records, this presentation only spotlights positive, cooperative, and peaceful historical encounters between China and the region under focus while neglecting past conflicts or violence.

A second idea recurrently associated with the 'Arab countries' is that they occupy a special place in Chinese foreign policy and as a consequence of not only their traditional friendly relations but also of their current converging interests and approaches towards the world. For China, the 'Arab countries/states' enjoy a 'unique', 'important', 'strategic place' and 'rising status' (Document 50) in Chinese foreign policy, particularly when 'cooperation in all fields has been *constantly* deepened' in the last sixty years (Document 53). At its core, the discourse situates the existence of '*common* interests' (Documents 50 and 53), '*common* aspirations' (Document 50), '*mutual* understanding' (Documents 50 and 53), '*mutual* respect' (Document 53), and '*mutual* need for cooperation' (Document 50). Understanding and respect are associated with similar conceptualisations of sovereignty, equality, and the principle of non-interference. The discourse stresses not only how 'both sides have *broad consensus* on safeguarding state sovereignty and territorial integrity [and] defending *national dignity*' (Documents 53 and 34), but also how they have 'always *respected* each other's social systems and development path, no matter what differences exist in ideology' (Document 53), as well as how '*both* sides *respect* each other's core interests and major concerns, supporting each other's *justifiable* demands and *reasonable* positions' (Document 53), and ultimately how they share an aspiration of 'building a *new* type of international relations' (Document 53) based on sovereign independence and territorial integrity. All

these ideas can be seen in how Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi justified in an interview with Al Jazeera the 'very promising future' of their relations:

> First, we enjoy traditional friendship; second, we are all developing countries with broad common interests; and third, we do not have any geopolitical conflict. As one of my Arab friends once said, China is the only major country that has never interfered in the Arab world. This is exactly our policy and our diplomatic philosophy, which we take pride in.
>
> Document 50

Thirdly, the ideas of non-interference and respect for domestic issues shaped the Chinese understanding of the ongoing changes in the Middle East – as suggested by Mojtaba Mahdavi in the first chapter of this edited volume under the logics of the second pillar of the Sino–Middle East relationship. Even if few sources dealing with the 'Arab countries/states' actually address the issue,[6] the ones that do are clearly willing to underline China's non-interference position. Chinese officials start by acknowledging that 'Arab states know this region the best' (Document 50) before advancing any examination of the events taking place since 2011. They express their confidence that 'the *people* of Arab states will surmount the *current difficulties* and usher in a new future for the region' (Document 50), talking about 'difficulties' (without providing any further detail of what they mean) and strangely enough distancing from a pure state-centric approach. Any solution needs to originate from 'Arab states, to come together and help and support each other to *jointly revitalise* the Arab world' (Document 50) where China 'will be your best friend and more reliable partner' (Document 50). The idea of revitalisation seems to appeal to superficial sketchy transformations to be implemented while neglecting any space in their discourse for profound political, economic, and social changes or justice.

All in all, the Chinese discursive construction around the 'Arab countries/states' emphasises the convergence of 'goals', 'interests', 'history', 'identity',[7] 'respect', and 'friendship' as a base to justify joint policies aiming at 'common development and prosperity' (Documents 34, 50, 53) and 'mutually beneficial cooperation for win-win results' (Document 53; see figure 2.1). The stress on,

6 The only major exception to this general principle has to do with the narrative put forward to analyse the so-called *hotspot issues*, many of them having their origins in the post-2011 context (see the section below).

7 This precise point is complemented by the below description of parallelisms and analogies in the Chinese discourse toward the *developing countries*, which include the 'Arab countries/states'.

FIGURE 2.1 Chinese discursive construction around the 'Arab countries/states' (substrate matrix)

and constant repetition of, adjectives 'common', 'mutual', and 'shared' might be able to silence divergences and disputes and reinforce a highly-positive narrative towards the region.[8] This characterisation represents a sort of broad and common subtract for any official Chinese approximation towards the MENA region. Hence, many of its predicative elements and signifiers outlined permeate into the alternative, and largely overlapping notions of the Chinese geopolitical imagination analysed below. In other words, there is a high level of interdiscursivity of this group of signifiers among different geopolitical maps' discourses.

2.2.2 *Mental Map 2: The 'Middle East' and Its 'hotspots'*

The notion 'Middle East' is also used by Chinese authorities, yet this geopolitical cartography is importantly characterised in a different manner. As a starting point, the geographical/membership boundaries of this notion are far more blurred. While in some occasions different primary sources used this notion as a synonym of 'Arab countries' (Documents 2 and 50), generally any discursive analysis would demonstrate how the concept seems to go beyond the former's limits. It clearly encompasses new countries like the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel. Some other primary sources include Morocco and Algeria (Document 34), forcing us to think that there is room to include Tunisia and Libya as well. It is difficult to fully clarify whether this geopolitical imaginary includes countries like Mauritania, Sudan, or even Turkey, while it seems out of order to consider Djibouti, Somalia, and Comoros. Hence, the Chinese 'Middle East' construction might get closer in terms of membership to what mainly American scholars and policymakers call the MENA region.

8 There might be room to explore to what extent this is common in the Chinese approaches toward other states, especially those characterised as *developing countries*. It might be in accordance with a global narrative of China toward the international system by which they claim their 'hope that all countries are our partners'. See Document 50.

There are two clear features associated with this geopolitical imaginary. Firstly, the notion is permanently linked to peace, security, and stability considerations (Documents 14, 17, 22, 25, and 53). The label has gone under a severe *securitisation* process in the Chinese imaginary.[9] Expressions like 'the conflicts in the Middle East' (Document 17 and 26), 'regional instability' (Document 17), 'the turmoil in the Middle East' (Document 17), 'the gun smoke in the Middle East' (Document 17), 'the Middle East is mined in aggravating tension' (Document 3), or 'the *vicious* cycle of *incessant* turbulences in the Middle East' (predicatively stressing the continuity of violence) are just some of the clearest examples in that respect. It is also the one preferred when talking about nuclearisation (specially in regard to the 'Iranian nuclear issue' see Documents 3, 10, 11, 14, 22, 24, 27, 35, 41, 47, 48, and 52) and the need for creating a weapons of mass destruction free zone (Documents 32 and 53), international and regional terrorism (documents 17 and 26), or the negotiations between Israel and Palestine categorised as the 'Middle East peace process' (Documents 17, 25, and 53).

This is coupled with the second element, namely, a strong essentialist construction that emphasises the ethnic, religious, sectarian, and cultural groups/identities. These notions are repeatedly used in the Chinese analysis of violence in the region. In doing so, they reduce all political and socio-economic problems at the core of historical and contemporary conflicts – as well as terrorism – to merely primary identity related disputes. Their discursive construction emphasises that 'regional instability and development gaps breed terrorism, while *ethnic diversity* and *religious conflict* allow radical ideologies to *resurface*' (Document 17) ('resurface' refers to inherent conditions that have always been there), hence providing an essentialist explanation to violence. Furthermore, they are categorised as the 'root causes' of the conflicts differentiating them from alternative, more superficial in their view, (political) explanations (Documents 17 and 42). Here, the ever-present state-centric approach is abandoned in favour of analysis integrating sub-national identities of the individuals.

9 This is not to say that the discursive practices used by the Chinese authorities are necessarily originated by themselves. There might be room to argue that China replicates in many ways a discursive construction put forward by many alternative international actors when dealing with the focus region. It is difficult to reach any conclusion on whether *securitisation* is a mere endogenous process or if it responds to many exogenous conditioners and the existence of preeminent signifiers used, for instance, in multilateral organisations, for instance, in which China might have been socialised.

This analysis can be detangled from a different but highly connected discursive construction around the notion of *hotspots*. 'Hotspot' is the label used to characterise international conflictual junctures including Ukraine, Sudan, the South China Sea, Syria, Yemen, Libya, or strategic questions such as the nuclear issues of Iran and the Korean peninsula. A common narrative, with repeated signifiers, is used by the Chinese officials in all the cases with limited space for nuance. Conflictual circumstances are dealt with as a separated independent discursive construction. The rest of the constructions analysed in this chapter stress to a greater extent cooperative and friendly elements of interstate relations. In general, there is a notable absence of room for recognising the potentiality of conflict, as this would go against the largely affirmative and constructive Chinese macro-narrative. Articulating a separate discursive construction permits tackling conflictive issues in an ad hoc manner without fully visualizing any paradox which might represent its general positive-like macro-narrative.

From a Chinese perspective, hotspots and strategic/hot issues are regional questions in nature, emanating fundamentally from domestic conflicts that harm potential development (Documents 2, 22, 27, 29, 35, and 53). The hotspots discursive construction includes repeated formulas about how to find a solution to these situations. This is the self-defined '*uniquely* Chinese approach for settling hotspots and hot issues [...] drawing wisdom and inspiration from China's traditional culture' (Document 22), the 'Chinese wisdom' (Document 41), or the 'Chinese Way' based on '*sustainable*', '*incremental*', and '*fundamental solutions*' (Document 29). In some occasions, it is also linked with the '*profound* traditional Chinese medicine' and its focus on a 'multi-pronged approach', 'analysis', 'impartiality', and stress on the 'root causes' (Documents 22 and 42). Fundamentally, the discourse revolves around the three principles for settling hotspot issues:

> No country should interfere in other countries' internal affairs or impose its own will on others; countries concerned should act in an *impartial* and *objective* manner and refrain from seeking *selfish* interests; and *political* solutions, no use of force should be sought in addressing hotspot issues.
>
> Documents 21, 5, 13, 14, 17, 28, 29, 30, 36, 41, and 52

Thus, firstly, we observe a reiteration of the principle of non-interference. The discourse construction always includes formulas accentuating that China 'respect[s] the views and aspirations of the people in the countries concerned' (Document 29), as hotspot issues are 'their own problems' (Document 50). Secondly, conflictive issues can be only solved by '*political* solutions'

(Documents2, 13, 14, 17, 22, 27, 28, 29, 30, 36, 41, 52, and 53), and '*political* dialogue process' (Document 19), as any 'military solution [...], even if it may appear to work at one point, cannot fundamentally resolve the problem' (Document 13). Additionally, it emphasises the need to 'go beyond *selfish* interests of their party or group' (Documents 50, 28, and 36), and have '*serious* talks [as] there will be no grievance that cannot be resolved' (Documents 50, 28, and 52). The emphasis on the political nature of any solution, based on sincere and concrete actions (Document 28), is in contrast with the generally depoliticised nature of the Chinese macro-narrative presented above.

A central element in the hotspots discourse is the self-representation of China as a responsible global actor. With different articulations, the primary sources underline President Xi Jinping's idea that 'the international community wants to hear China's voice and see China's solutions' (Document 44) (strong intertextuality). Together with other 'major countries' like the United States and other members of the UN Security Council (Documents 47, 48, and 49), China needs to collaborate in solving regional hotspot issues, as it is a responsible and constructive member of the international community, actively involved in its well-functioning (Documents 31, 34, 35, 37, and 42). Also, accepting that 'the resolution of hotspot issues can create a more enabling environment for China's development' (Document 10), in this case Chinese framing practice is highly related with its self-perceived identity as responsible superpower and its self-representation of a constructive and just global actor, showing a clear connection between foreign policy and identity construction (Hansen, 2006).

A quick review of the Syrian example would further clarify some of the points made above, as the Chinese narrative on this case fulfils most of the elements pointed out earlier. The 'Syrian issue' or the 'Syrian crisis' (Documents 10, 13, 14, 17, 20, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 50) is presented as a 'highly complex issue' (Documents 36 and 13) or an issue of '*intricate* complexity' (Document 29) dividing 'the Syrian *people*' (Documents 28, 50, and 52) or the '*local* people' (Document 50) between the government and the opposition. Essentialist elements are present, as in occasions the discourse appeals to the need of 'a balance [...] between the interests of the various *ethnicities*, *religions* and *sects*' (Documents 28, and 30) (hence clouding political demands into primary identity clashes), as 'they are brothers and sisters in the first place' (Document 28). Any solution must necessarily be achieved through a Syrian-led political transition process (Documents 13, 14, 17, 28, 29, 30, 36, 41, 50, and 52), which is '*inclusive* [...] and involves all parties to the conflict' (Document 17) including 'all those that do not engage in violent extremism and terrorist activities [...] and are willing to lay down their arms' (Document 13). In this political process, 'all parties [must]

[…] act in the *overall* interests of the *future* and *destiny* of their country and of their people' (Documents 25 and 28), 'going beyond the *selfish* interests of their own party or group', (Documents 50, 28, and 36) skipping '*intransigence*' (Document 13), with no 'preconditions or predetermined results' (Document 17), but acknowledging the Syrian people's 'aspiration for *change* and at the same time ensur[ing] stability and order […] as well as relative continuity and effectiveness of Syria's governmental institutions' (Document 28). The international community 'should not stand by and do nothing, nor should it intervene arbitrarily' (Document 17, 28, and 29). Meanwhile, China will continue to 'play a constructive role in facilitating peace talks' (Document 13) resulting in '*objective* and *balanced*' solutions (Document 14) (an example of self-representation of their own global responsible identity).

2.2.3 *Mental Map 3: The 'Eurasian continent'*

The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiatives, previously known as the One Belt, One Road initiative and now as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is the major policy framework put forward in September 2013 through which China encounters many of the countries analysed in this chapter. Even if officially the initiative 'will be open to all nations and is not limited by geography' (The State Council 2015), at this stage it includes our focussed countries Iran, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the UAE, and Yemen.

This policy is based on the mental geopolitical cartography labelled by the Chinese authorities as the 'Eurasian continent'. This cartography is approached by using the same substrate matrix as the one in the case of the 'Arab countries/states' (see figure 2.1). Hence, ideas like '*joint* endeavour' (Documents 50 and 53), '*win-win* cooperation' (Documents 1, 14, 18, 19, 22, and 50), '*mutual* understanding' (Document 50), '*mutual* learning and respect' (Documents 50, 24, and 51), '*common* development and prosperity' (Documents 1, 7, 28, 46, 50, 51, 43, and 53), '*common* interests' (Document 50), and '*mutual* beneficial projects' (Documents 5, 11, 14, 51, and 53) are repeatedly present. The preferred – and extensively repeated – formula by Chinese officials is the one that defines the BRI after three axioms, namely '*extensive* consultation, *joint* contribution, and *shared* benefits' (Documents 1, 3, 5, 11, 14, 19, 22, 24, and 51). Relations among the states involved are recurrently described as friendly (Documents 27, 50, and 51), to the point that Foreign Minister Wang Yi claimed that 'the Belt and Road has seen an *ever-expanding circle of friends*' (Document 1) in light of President Xi Jinping's policy approach 'let our *circle of friends* grow bigger and bigger' (example of intertextuality, see Document 44).

In addition to these elements, the BRI has four distinctive narrative elements, some of them shared with the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia's (CICA). The first is the continuous stress on the historical elements underpinning the BRI. It is worth mentioning how in this narrative the contemporary is linked with the traditional Silk Road as 'it embodies the spirit of ancient Silk Road, which has a history of over 2,000 years and was used by the *people of many countries* for *friendly* exchange and commerce' whose spirit needs to be renewed and brought up to date (Documents 22 and 27). According to this narrative, the Silk Road historically 'brought *peace*, *tranquility*, and *prosperity* to *both* sides' (Document 50), and this is the reason why it must be updated (Document 27). Ultimately, it will contribute to 'building a *community* of *common* destiny' (Document 19), as the BRI 'will surely bring *new*, *historic* development opportunities to countries in the region' (Document 50).

The second innovative element is the idea of the need to *revitalise* the 'Eurasian continent'. The BRI-related speeches frequently refer to the need for the 'revitalization of countries along the routes' (Document 11) and the 'rejuvenation of Asia as whole' (Document 27). Critical discourse analysis shows that Chinese officials believe that the 'Eurasian continent' suffers some problems that ultimately affect their development. Even if there is no clear verbalisation on what those problems are (silenced element in the narrative),[10] the solution to such problem is the BRI, which will 'catalyse the *revitalisation* of the Eurasian continent as a whole' (Documents 14 and 21) by '[bringing] *new* hope, *new* prospects, and *new impetus* to the economic development of the region and beyond' (Document 51).

Thirdly, the BRI narrative draws on the idea of sovereign equality among the members included in the project. It remarks the co-ownership of the project by all the countries along the route. Thus, 'the Initiative was put forward by China, but its benefits will flow across the world' (Document 1); China 'does not intend to seek dominance over regional affairs [with the BRI] but to offer more development opportunities to other countries' (Document 18). The BRI is presented as a 'public good China provides to the world' (Documents 21 and 51), and 'not [as] a tool of geopolitics [which] must not be viewed with the outdated Cold War mentality'[11] nor as China's construction of its 'sphere of

10 Even if there is no strong evidence in support, one possibility to take into serious consideration is the lack of *stability* in the region which, in the Chinese view, might harm potential development.

11 Curiously enough, the BRI is also presented 'not [as] China's solo, but a symphony performed by all relevant countries'. See Document 22.

influence' or its 'backyard', (Document 43) as stated by President Xi Jinping. The importance of sovereign equality is also tangible in the Chinese emphasis on how the initiative means in no way an imposition of any specific economic (nor political) model to the participants, but rather it is based on '*equal-footed* and *friendly* exchanges on governance issues' (Document 50) and 'self-development capacity' (Document 51). This is a materialisation of the 'Chinese model of development', defined as a pragmatic alternative to Western-coined neoliberalism.

Finally, the idea of *connectivity* is constantly repeated (Documents 1,2, 3, 5, 10, 11, 14, 22, 27, 38, 39, and 51). According to the official narrative, there are three key areas in which the BRI initiative will have an impact: connectivity, production capacity cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges (Documents 5, 11, and 27). The BRI is presented as a peaceful initiative, which will increase *synergies* among member countries (Documents 2, 3, 14, 50, and 51) in general but also between the Chinese development strategy and the countries along the route (Document 14) such that efforts of various BRI members might become more '*complementary*' (Documents 1, 3, and 51).

2.2.4 *Mental Map 4: The 'developing countries' Category*

Table 2.1 below clearly demonstrates the Chinese geopolitical cartographies towards the MENA region and their associated narratives. The fourth label that is alternatively used for the MENA region is 'developing countries'. Even if this mental map might seem not to suit all countries of the MENA region (such as Israel, for example, which is a developed country) from the perspective of the Chinese official narrative all countries of the MENA region are considered to be 'developing countries'. China's primary sources constantly present China as part of the developing world ('China remains a member of the developing world' (Document 1); it constantly talks about 'the *rest* of the developing world' (Documents 1, 4, 5, and 40), or '*other* developing countries'). Additionally, the 'developing countries' are presented as the centre of Chinese foreign policy: for instance, with claims like 'the development of the world is the foundation of China's diplomacy' (Document 1, and 3) or 'developing countries constitutes the basis of China's overall diplomacy'(Document 15). Also, these nuances in terms of self-presentation of a shared identity, China's narrative towards these countries follows the dialectical pattern presented in the substrate matrix (see figure 2.1) stressing *common/shared/mutual* history, respect, goals, and interests and their aim of achieving *common/mutual* development, prosperity, understanding, and cooperation.

On some occasions, the 'developing countries' mental map and its narrative are watered down by a geopolitical cartography labelled as 'Africa/African

countries'. Obviously, this imaginary only encompasses those countries in the African continent, then overlapping with alternative imaginaries presented above. Broadly speaking, the narrative and its signifiers are pretty similar to the ones used for the 'developing countries', including the use of the substrate matrix.[12] A 'long-standing *traditional* friendship' (Documents 15, 4, 14, and 15) allows China to talk about 'African brothers' (Documents 4 and 15). Through cooperation – 'win-win cooperation', 'people-to-people and cultural exchanges' (Documents 4 and 23), and 'equal-footed cooperation' (Documents 15) –, China cooperates with the development of 'African countries'. Accordingly, 'the Chinese dream and the African dream very well synergize with each other' (Document 15), and they have a 'shared destiny' (Documents 22 and 23).

The most significant distinctive element has to do with how China, through different speech acts, differentiates itself from Western powers and historical Western attitudes and policies in the African continent. China stresses its historical commitment to African countries in their 'just struggle to oppose hegemony, colonialism, and to gain national independence and liberation' (Document 15). Additionally, they claim that 'China will never follow the same path taken by traditional powers in its relations with Africa' (Document 15), but rather that China should uphold *justice* in politics for Africa and help it speed up development and *rejuvenation*. China should, according to the narrative, neither follow the old path of *Western colonisers* nor sacrifice the ecological environment and long term interest of African countries but instead seek *mutual* benefit, *reciprocity* and *win-win cooperation* (Document 23).

There is a clear connection between self-representation narratives and the construction of the identity of an actor through foreign policy (Hansen, 2006).

2.3 Conclusions

This chapter has outlined the four major mental maps used by the leadership of the People's Republic of China's to refer to the MENA region, according to the broad range of primary sources examined. Even if Chinese officials make an uneven but highly targeted use of each term, prioritising some notions at the expense of others in concrete contexts and with particular audiences, certain mental maps and their narratives might be gaining ground. There are

12 This is even clearly stated when saying that 'Africa, being the home of the biggest number of developing countries'. See Document 15.

Geopolitical Cartography	Associated Policy	Centre of the Discursive Construction	Key Signifiers
1. 'Arab countries/states'	CASF and parallel framework	Cooperation, Development	Substract Matrix
2. "Middle East"	*Hotspots* Policy	Peace, Security and Stability	a. Securitization-like signifiers b. Essentialist elements c. *Hotspots* discourse d. International Responsibility
3. "Eurasian Continent"	"Belt and Road" Initiative and CICA	Cooperation, Prosperity, Stability	a. Common history, identity b. Connectiviy c. Revitalisation d. Equality (Sovereign)
4. "Developing Countries"	FOCAC ["Belt and Road" Initiative (?)]	Cooperation, Development	a. Shared Identity b. Self-path development c. Non-colonial identity self-construction

TABLE 2.1 Main Chinese geopolitical cartographies towards the MENA region and their associated narratives

two possible explanations that might delineate the reasons for privileging one mental map over time.

The first possible explanation is an ongoing bureaucratic competition over which term and narrative must prevail. Narratives are evolutionary elements that encapsulate a set of beliefs and the priorities of those using them. It is difficult to accept that, despite institutional homogenising tendencies, the entirety of China's ruling Communist Party and its governmental apparatus share a common understanding of the region that has been the focus of this chapter. Competition over the prevalence of one mental map over another might have power-like and budgetary implications that could partially explain clashes over narratives. For instance, the success of highly securitised conceptions of geopolitical cartographies might justify budgetary increases to the military, while less securitised-centred narratives might do the same in favour of cooperation agencies. Additionally, any modification of narrative path-dependencies could endanger some bureaucratic divisions that formerly enjoyed the privileges associated with political centrality. The notion of 'Western Asia' and its homonymous division at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs might have incentives to prevent any displacement from this traditional geopolitical cartography to any alternative.

The second explanation is that the Chinese leadership has been subjected to a process of international socialisation in that matter. The increase of China's participation in the institutions of the global order in the last quarter

of a century has made Beijing face alternative mental maps and narratives, different from those it has originally used. As a member of the international community, China participates – actively and passively – in the construction and evolution of common global actors' narratives that define every issue at stake and its limits. It is feasible, then, that China has been socialised to global concepts used by other international actors, interiorising them to the point that its leadership starts opting for their use against original labels. This is especially possible if we accept the idea that pragmatism is at the core of Chinese foreign policy. The popularisation of the 'Middle East' mental map and its construction, especially by President Xi and his cabinet in the last few years, might be the result of this global socialisation.

Most likely, both explanations might be valid to different degrees; yet further research is necessary to make any strong claim in this respect.[13]

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PART 2

The Belt and Road Initiative: Challenges and Opportunities

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CHAPTER 3

Is Growing the Iran–China Relationship as Easy as Building a Belt and Road?

Dara Conduit

3.1 Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly 'One Belt, One Road', has been widely interpreted as a game-changing economic venture that will rewrite the trajectories of power and influence across the Middle East. Made up of an overland 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and a '21st-Century Maritime Silk Road', the project's 2015 blueprint promised to,

> instil vigour and vitality into the ancient Silk Road, connect Asian, European and African countries more closely and promote mutually beneficial cooperation to a new high and in new forms
>
> National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) People's Republic of China, 2015

With the promise of substantial infrastructure investment and trade deals, Middle Eastern leaders responded eagerly to the project. Iran, which sits at the geographical centre of the overland Silk Road Economic Belt, was widely expected to be one of the project's main beneficiaries (Park & Glenn, 2015). One Chinese state newspaper described Iran as the initiative's 'fulcrum' (cited in Sharafedin, 2016).

Iran and China have enjoyed one of the most durable relationships in the contemporary Middle East. Formed in the years after China's international opening and solidified following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the relationship developed on a foundation of anti-hegemonic balancing and pragmatism. The two powers worked together in an effort to disrupt superpower ambitions in the Middle East, with the relationship acting as a bargaining chip during times of international pressure. However, the closeness of the relationship has not precluded China from demonstrating discomfort at some of Iran's most controversial international behaviour, particularly when Iranian provocations risked inflicting a tangible cost on China or the China–US relationship. Historically, this has proven a significant obstacle to the full realisation of the relationship.

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Given that Iran's key strength in the BRI plan lays in its geographic location, this chapter examines the Silk Road Economic Belt during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021) to understand how enhanced overland trade may influence Iran–China relations. Indeed, Iran's centrality to the success of the Silk Road Economic Belt has the potential to recalibrate the Iran–China relationship by increasing China's perception of the Islamic Republic's value. However, the inevitability of the relationship's expansion has often been taken for granted. Park and Glen (2015, p. 2) identified Iran as a 'critical part of this [i.e., China's] plan due to its strategic location with access to key waterways' and argued that the 'symbiotic' relationship was guaranteed by China's energy security needs and Iran's need for a 'major commercial and political partner'. Dorraj (2016, p. 206) pointed to China's political 'clean slate' in the Middle East. This chapter therefore asks whether the BRI's new economic imperatives will be sufficient to significantly expand the Iran–China relationship. It argues that while Iran–China relations may enjoy a geographic advantage, the relationship contains many historical, political, and geographical barriers that could prevent the bilateral relationship from reaching its full potential.

3.2 Background

The Iran–China relationship developed in the final decade of Iran's last monarch Mohammed Reza Shah. The Chinese Communist Party Chairman Hua Guo-feng travelled to Iran to meet the Shah in August 1978, months before the latter's overthrow (Times Wire Services, 1978). China saw Iran as a possible barrier to Soviet expansion in the Gulf. The seriousness with which China took the relationship was underlined by the historical significance of Guo-feng's visit, which was the first of a Chinese head of state to a non-Communist country. Bloodworth (1979) wrote the following year: 'Iran was the spindle on which China's strategic calculations turned' (p. 15), although at the time Iran remained one of the United States' closest allies in the Middle East.

The overthrow of the Shah in the 1979 revolution led to a complete reconfiguration of Iran's international priorities. Iran's new leaders advocated a policy of international non-alignment, popularly known as 'Neither East nor West'. In this new configuration, Iran would distance itself from both the United States and the Soviet Union and forge an independent path in the international arena in line with its national interests. This brought China and Iran closer together ideationally in their opposition to the superpowers, but it would be a mistake to depict the relationship as anything short of pragmatic. In fact, the pragmatic 'cat theory' outlined in Chapter 1 in relation to Deng

Xiaoping's worldview equally applied to Iranian foreign policy making. The China–Iran relationship would therefore form around each state's careful calculation of its own interests. Nonetheless, China and Iran did not immediately bond after the revolution because the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 forced Iran to temporarily align with the Soviet Union for military assistance. Given that China's primary interest in the Middle East at the time centred around limiting Soviet influence, China found itself temporarily on the same side as the United States in Iraq, ultimately providing up to 10 per cent of Iraqi arms imports during the nine-year conflict (Hyer, 1992, p. 1103; van Vranken Hickey, 1990, p. 15).

By 1983, however, the Iran–Soviet relationship had broken down, creating an opening for China to rebuild its bilateral relations with Iran. China became Iran's largest source of military wares in the Iran–Iraq war (Hyer, 1992), which set the foundation for the trade relationship that would develop in the years to come. Indeed, Hyer (1992, p. 1104) concluded that the arms relationship also became so significant to China that 'China's [arms] export market would not have developed so rapidly had it not been for the Iran–Iraq War' (p. 1104). The bilateral economic relationship continued to grow across hydrocarbons, minerals, and manufactured goods throughout the 1990s and 2000s, with China becoming Iran's largest trade partner. Bilateral trade increased by a factor of almost eight in the 6 years to 2008, with China also becoming Iran's largest non-oil importer as a major importer of gas condensate, minerals, and base metals.

The relationship frequently succeeded in achieving China and Iran's shared goal of providing insulation from international pressure. The outcome of the Iran–Iraq war may have been poorer for Iran had China not supported its military campaign. China also advocated on behalf of Iran in the international arena, including during UN Security Council discussions on ending the war (Garver, 2006, p. 87). This role bought China significant 'political capital' with Iran in the years to come (Garver, 2006, p. 101). China would later act as a buffer to international pressure during the Clinton administration's dual containment policy that targeted both Iran and Iraq, and again throughout the Iranian nuclear standoff the following decade. Indeed, this shift appeared to be translating into foreign policy doctrine under the banner of Iran's 'Look to the East' in the early years of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005–2013), although this was never formalised. Nonetheless, at the height of nuclear sanctions, the Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) noted 'the Islamic Republic's increasing dependence on its relationship with China' (para 1). By July 2012, China was buying 54 per cent of Iran's oil exports. After further sanctions made oil exports difficult, China helped fill Iran's export void by importing Iranian

iron ore. By 2014, Iran had become China's fifth largest supplier of iron ore, buying 90 per cent of Iranian iron ore set aside for export ('Iran fifth major iron ore exporter to China', 2014).

Iran too provided rhetorical support for China during periods of international isolation, finding unity in the shared principle of international non-interference. Iran offered significant support for China following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, which took place days before the death of the Islamic Republic's founding leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. As China came under increasing international pressure on its human rights record, an Iranian official criticised 'naked interference in China's domestic politics' (cited in Garver, 2006, p. 103). The Chinese Premier Li Peng visited Iran two years later, declaring that the hegemonic behaviour and bullying by powerful states 'is the biggest threat against the peace and security of the world' (Islamic Republic News Agency, 1991). Although Iran's support for China was more rhetorical than it was practical, the closeness of the relationship had symbolic utility given how poor US–Iran relations were at the time.

There remained sharp limitations, however, on China's support for Iran. Although China was willing to establish an anti-hegemonic relationship with Iran that protected both states from international pressure, the relationship was underwritten by pragmatism. China would not tolerate a situation in which it would be drawn into direct conflict with a hegemon, particularly the US. China has, therefore, sought to either rein in or overpower Iran at several key junctures in order to mitigate international consequences. This pattern was first seen in 1987 when Iran fired a Chinese-made Silkworm anti-ship missile at a US-escorted oil tanker during the Iran–Iraq tanker war. Although an estimated 190 ships from thirty-one countries were attacked by Iran during this period, the use of powerful Chinese weaponry in this case to target US interests represented an overstep for China, who sought to rein in Iran's behaviour (Cordesman & Wagner, 2003; Crist, 2009). The tanker war in the Persian Gulf continued, but Iran never used a Silkworm missile again, a development which Garver (2006, p. 89) attributes to intervention by China to prevent the emergence of direct US–China conflict. This pattern was also evident during the nuclear standoff, when China eventually supported international sanctions against Iran and urged Iran to engage productively in negotiations (MacAskill, 2010; US Embassy Beijing, 2009). Although the Iran–China relationship survived the perceived duplicity, it did highlight that China had developed a paternal role in the relationship, which it would periodically enforce in order to tame Iran and preserve its crucial economic relationship with the US.

3.3 BRI and the Coming of Age of the Iran–China Relationship

BRI represented a new era of Chinese involvement in the Middle East, in which China took steps towards becoming a great power in the region. BRI did not emerge out of a vacuum, and instead reflected President Xi's pragmatic and ambitious vision for China's future. China was a rising power with significant oil, gas, and other resource needs. BRI would become the blueprint for China to secure its future as a great power, pushing it to develop interests across South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The Middle East would be a key BRI focal point because of its substantial hydrocarbon reserves, and its mature oil and gas export markets.

Within two years of the release of the BRI blueprint, the Chinese navy had become a regular fixture at ports across the Persian Gulf and its special forces had undertaken joint military exercises with Saudi Arabia. Its first overseas airbase was opened in Djibouti in 2017. Through these actions, China signalled that it no longer intended to sit on the sidelines of Middle East politics. The Silk Road Economic Belt would become central to this effort, consistent with China's long-standing energy security goals, which aimed to diversify hydrocarbon trade routes and reduce China's reliance on maritime transit (Lanteigne, 2008).

Iran welcomed China's BRI project with open arms, declaring its willingness to cooperate with China on the project (Mehr News Agency, 2012). Although China would need to balance any burgeoning relationship with Iran with its others interests in the Middle East including Saudi Arabia, Iran's enthusiasm was returned by Chinese officials. The Chinese president Xi Jinping declared that Iran and China were 'natural partners' on the BRI (CCTV.com English, 2016), and Pang Sen, the Chinese Ambassador to Iran, wrote an article published on the Islamic Republic News Agency website in which he declared:

> The Belt and Road initiative will create a historic opportunity to deepen and broaden our cooperation and development. Particularly in the fields with established advantages such as transportation, telecommunication infrastructure, energy and resources, trade and investment, early harvests could be expected. I believe the Belt and Road initiative will bring a brighter prospect of cooperation between the two countries, and start a new chapter of friendship between the two peoples.
>
> SEN, 2015, para. 1

In January of the following year, China and Iran signed seventeen economic accords. The two states pledged to increase bilateral trade to US$600 billion

within ten years, although Scott noted that such a pledge should be 'taken with a pinch of salt … [because] the two countries seem inclined to exaggerate what is achievable' (Scott, 2016). Nonetheless, Iran and China continued to enthusiastically develop economic connections. Months after President Xi's visit, the two countries signed a US$550 million deal to develop a large oil terminal on Qeshm Island in the Persian Gulf ('Iran, China to launch oil export terminal in Qeshm Island', 2016), and the Chinese firm Sinopec finalised a pre-nuclear sanctions deal to develop the Yadavaran oilfield ('China's Sinopec to develop Yadavaran oilfield', 2016). In the first quarter of the 2017 Iranian financial year, Iran manufactured 61,239 Chinese cars, representing 35.2 per cent year-on-year growth ('Two French carmakers moving ahead at full speed', 2017). BRI therefore seemed to represent the key for transition in the Iran–China relationship, in which Iran's rising strategic value would lead to a strengthening of the bilateral relationship and enable the two states to overcome the relationship's historic limitations.

BRI's strong start was facilitated by several political developments in Iran that coalesced to solidify Iran's key role in the development of the Silk Road Economic Belt. The June 2013 election of the moderate President Hassan Rouhani increased Iran's political capital by reducing the friction in Iran's international relations and taking steps towards rebuilding the country's economy. Rouhani was elected on the promise of prudence and hope, pledging to bring Iran out of international isolation by ending the decades-long nuclear standoff with the international community (Akbarzadeh & Conduit, 2015). China's Foreign Ministry immediately extended its congratulations to Rouhani, with a spokeswomen declaring that 'China will seize this opportunity to promote the development of bilateral cooperation' (China congratulates Hassan Rouhani on Iranian presidency, 2013). The Chinese Minister of Culture Cai Wu attended Rouhani's inauguration as the special envoy of the Chinese President ('Xi's special envoy to attend Iranian presidential inauguration', 2013). President Rouhani himself implied that he would not seek to echo the provocative language and behaviour that had characterised the two-term presidency of his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He triumphantly pledged that,

> This victory is a victory of wisdom, a victory of moderation, a victory of growth and awareness and a victory of commitment over extremism and ill-temper.
>
> HOSSEINIAN, 2013

China and Iran quickly took tangible steps towards expanding their relationship. Iranian oil exports to China increased by 50 per cent in the first half of

2014, the two countries undertook joint naval exercises, and Iran sent a delegation of oil officials to China in April 2015.

The 2015 nuclear deal gave further momentum to the expanding Iran–China relationship. President Xi's visit to Tehran in January 2016 took place a week after sanctions were formally lifted. He became the first world leader to visit Iran after the nuclear deal was fully finalised (Perlez, 2016). President Xi's visit sent a clear message that China was serious about leveraging Iran's economic potential now that it had been released from the international sanctions regime. The Iranian oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh declared that 'Those who were our friend during sanctions will receive our friendship to the same proportion' (Park & Glenn, 2015). This message was echoed by President Rouhani, who said:

> The Islamic Republic of Iran will not forget its friends, who maintained suitable relations with the Iranian nation under the difficult sanctions, in the new era. And we are sure that our relations with China are such that no other power would be able to affect the good relations between the two countries.
>
> ROUHANI, 2015, para 1

Indeed, it became clear that China was positioning itself to benefit from the substantial international assistance that Iran would require for rebuilding and modernising its economy.

Hassan Rouhani's re-election in 2017 was further good news for the relationship. The foreign policy of Rouhani's main competitor, Ebrahim Raesi, would have differed significantly from that of his moderate competitor. As a staunch nationalist, Raesi might have overseen the annulment of the nuclear deal, representing a significant concern for China. Further, Raesi criticised Rouhani's productive relationship with China, blaming burgeoning Chinese imports for the failure of Iran's economy to improve as quickly as hoped after the sanctions era (Kazimov, 2017). Although cheap Chinese goods have long been a populist political issue in Iran, China would no doubt be relieved that Rouhani was re-elected for a second term, ensuring a level of foreign policy continuity for another four years. President Xi sent a message of congratulations to Rouhani the day after the election, recalling the 'sound development momentum' that had developed in the China–Iran relations during his first presidential term (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2017). He added: 'Attaching great importance to developing China–Iran relations, I am willing to join hands with you to push forward the development of China–Iran comprehensive strategic partnership' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's

Republic of China, 2017, para. 2). During President Rouhani's visit to China in June 2018, President Xi told state media that the two countries had successfully implemented the goals set during his 2016 visit to Iran ('China–Iran to set up pragmatic cooperation', 2018).

It was in this political context that Iran and China began to explore the logistics of the Silk Road Economic Belt. Much has been made of Iran's geographic advantage; its location between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, and its land access to Turkey and Europe is a source of significant appeal to China. Iran offers better access to the Gulf than neighbouring Pakistan, as an overland route between China and the Gwador Port requires traversing the mountainous and topologically vulnerable Gilgit-Baltistan province, as well as enduring vulnerabilities related to the active insurgencies in both the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces. In November 2018, Baluch separatists attacked the Chinese consulate in Karachi, leaving seven dead, including the three gunmen. Earlier that year, a Chinese worker in Karachi was killed in what Pakistani police described as a 'targeted attack' (Reuters, 2018, para 1). Iran offers a geographically simpler overland route, stable governance, a consistent rail gauge, and significant hydrocarbon and economic incentives.

Rail routes emerged as a focal point of the Silk Road Economic Belt, dubbed by Rastogi and Arvis (2014, p. 36) as 'the backbone of Central Asian activity'. China and Iran have made much of their overland successes thus far. In February 2016, the first freight train completed the journey from China's Yiwu city in Zhejiang province to Tehran, to much fanfare. Speaking at the train's welcome ceremony, the Iranian Road and Urbanism Minister Mohsen Pour-Aqaei triumphantly declared that the trip had taken only 14 days, a significant improvement on the 44 days that it takes Chinese goods to arrive in Iran by sea ('First train from China to Iran stimulates Silk Road revival', 2016). He declared that 'To revive the Silk Road Economic Belt, the launch of the train is an important move' ('First train from China to Iran stimulates Silk Road revival', 2016, para. 6). The Xinhuanet article dubbed the journey 'a milestone in reviving the "Silk Road", which has opened a new chapter of win-win cooperation between China and Iran' (para. 1). Neither country disclosed whether the route would be commercially viable, although given that the train is scheduled to make the journey only once a month, maritime trade routes will remain the trade norm for some time. Nonetheless, trains began to arrive in Iran from other Chinese cities too. A freight train from Yinchuan arrived in Iran that September, while a service carrying 1,150 tonnes of sunflower seeds departed Bayannur in Inner Mongolia for Iran the following May ('New Iran–China rail freight connection', 2018). A glowing article in Iranian state media later announced that China would spend US$1.5 billion to electrify the east–west Mashhad–Tehran railway

line, US$845 million to connect Tehran with Hamadan and Sanandaj and would invest US$700 million to build a rail link between Shiraz and Bushehr ('China's Silk Road fires up Iran's rail revolution', 2018).

While overland commercial trade has been proven possible between Iran and China, viability remains a key question. The route used for the initial journey traversed the Kazakh Steppe and Turkmenistan without stopping in major cities, which will reduce both the commercial competitiveness of the route and its development impact. Trains are forced to undergo a break-of-gauge twice during the journey because Central Asia's ageing rail network uses the Soviet-era 1.52-metre track gauge, whereas Iran and China use the international standard 1.435-metre gauge. Changing gauge is a slow and costly process that causes large cargo bottlenecks at borders across Central Asia, putting significant limitations on trade volumes and commercial competitiveness. These existing networks are unlikely to change gauge given that Russia, which is Central Asia's major trade and security partner, also uses the 1.52-metre tracks. Indeed, Russia could represent a significant challenge to the Silk Road Economic Belt if it perceives that Iran or China are encroaching too heavily on its own interests in the former Soviet Central Asian republics.

The success of Silk Road Economic Belt rail routes between China and Iran therefore hinges on either the construction of new single-gauge railways or further infrastructure upgrades at gauge break points in order to increase efficiency. For its part, China's railway authority proposed a high-speed train route from Urumqi in Xinjiang to Tehran, which would use the standard 1.435-gauge track standard used by China, Iran, and much of the rest of the world. The chief engineer of China Railway Corp, He Huawu, argued that the new tracks could be installed throughout the region without political problems since it uses the global standard gauge for high-speed rail (Yanpeng, 2015). At the time of writing in 2019, however, few steps appeared to have been taken towards the goal, perhaps highlighting the many challenges inherent in such a project. The train would pass through four Central Asian republics, including the capitals of Almaty, Bishkek, Tashkent, and Ashgabat, which could create significant political and security challenges in both negotiating and implementing the project and ensuring the long-term security of the line. Indeed, Kazakhstan was the only Central Asian state that did not receive a 'warning' or poorer grading on the 2017 Fragile States index (Peace, 2017), while the 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan among the twenty-five worst countries in the world for corruption (Transparency International, 2017). In this context of pervasive corruption, nepotism, and insecurity, a stable overland trade route between Iran and China may be ambitious.

The Silk Road Economic Belt also risks exacerbating existing tensions in the region, which could stand in the way of the Iran–China relationship. Although the BRI has a clear development mandate, which aims to promote regional stability, it is not clear that Iran shares China's broader regional goals. The deputy head for international transportation of the Iranian Railways company, Hossein Ashoori, declared that,

> Iran's goal is not really Central Asia. [...] Our goal in the Silk Road plan is first to connect Iran's market to China's via railway for our domestic consumption and second to send Iranian and Chinese products to European markets.
>
> BOZORGMEHR, 2016

In this regard, Iran–China trade may be developed without consideration for the transit countries. Previous initiatives suggest that this could be a risky undertaking. Tension has already emerged in Tajikistan over Chinese-built roads that now charge tolls to poverty-stricken locals, while China's use of its own nationals to build infrastructure in Central Asia has also caused friction (Qishaaq Ovozi, 2015). In January 2019, hundreds in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek staged a protest against China ('Hundreds protest in Bishkek against Chinese migrants', 2019), while Chinese businesspeople reported frustration related to the difficulty of doing business across the region (Huang, 2017). However, perhaps the greatest risk is that linked to the economic structure of the BRI, which provides large loans to local countries to carry out development and infrastructure projects. The size and conditions of such loans are already causing difficulties in other parts of the world. In Sri Lanka, for example, the large loans taken on by the state have become a source of domestic political tension, prompting large protests against development projects that indebt government and provide little tangible benefits to local populations (Limaye, 2017). Many Chinese projects in Central Asia are following a similar trajectory. In this regard, the Silk Road Economic Belt between Iran and China faced significant geographical and geopolitical challenges.

Nonetheless, the greatest political barrier to the expansion of the BRI may stem not from Central Asian politics or geography, but from a feature intrinsic to the Iran–China relationship. Indeed, at the time of writing, BRI's failure to bear significant fruit in Iran would pale in comparison to other BRI projects such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, which on paper seemed more geographically and politically complex for China. But as already discussed, China has long quietly baulked at the worst excesses of Iranian foreign policy, especially in cases where Iran's behaviour threatened to drag China into a

broader conflict. Although the election of President Rouhani, the realisation of the nuclear deal, and the burgeoning bilateral trade and rail relationships may have insulated the two countries from some of this tension, there was evidence that this historic pattern continued to define the relationship.

This sense first reappeared following the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in June 2016 in Tashkent. Iran had long expressed its desire to join the SCO, which is a regional security body dominated by Russia and China. Iran was granted SCO observer status in 2005 and has applied to become a full member on several occasions since 2008. Iranian hardliners have long been enthusiastic about SCO membership, as the organisation is viewed by many such as the former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad 'as a geopolitical counterweight to the USA' (Akbarzadeh, 2015, p. 88). Ahmadinejad noted that the SCO could rival US power, explaining that,

> in addition to the preservation of peace in the region, SCO can play an effective role in the promotion of international peace and security and dealing with threats as well as resisting unlawful interventions of global hegemony.
>
> DIZBONI, 2010, p. 12

Although this is consistent with Russia's vision for the SCO as a 'NATO of the East', China has long taken a more measured tone, hoping that the SCO would serve as a benign platform for regional integration (Kaczmarski, 2015, p. 150). Some observers have suggested that the refusal of the SCO to admit Iran reflects concerns that such a decision would open the door to the admission of other Middle Eastern states such as Turkey, but the SCO's admittance of India and Pakistan in 2017 removed any sense that the organisation desired an exclusively Central Asia focus. Instead it is likely that Iran's motives sparked unease in China, with an article in the state-owned *Ta Kung Pao* arguing against Iran's admission on the grounds that it may give the United States an opportunity to enhance pressure on China (Chun-yu, 2008). Nonetheless, Iran's applications were repeatedly rejected on the grounds that a state subject to international sanctions could not be admitted as a member (Jiao & Xiaokun, 2010). China did not mention its broader concerns.

By the time the 2016 Tashkent summit was held, however, the Iranian nuclear deal had been resolved and sanctions had been lifted, raising expectations that Iran would be admitted to the regional body. The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, had indicated Russia's support, declaring the day before the summit that 'We believe that after Iran's nuclear problem was solved and United Nations sanctions lifted, there have been no obstacles left' to Iran's SCO

membership bid (Dyomkin & Solovyov, 2016). Yet Iran's membership application was rejected. The SCO did not provide reasoning for the decision, but Beijing is thought to have blocked Iran's admission, given that China is the only other serious power broker in the body. This suggests that even though Beijing–Tehran ties were politically and practically closer than ever, Beijing's long-held concerns about Iran's proclivity for international provocations had not been assuaged. It was willing to stand in the way of Iran's efforts at projecting power through another regional body. In 2017, a senior Chinese diplomat publicly declared that 'China welcomes and supports Iran's wish to become a formal member of the SCO', raising hopes that Iran might finally achieve its long-sought after SCO membership ('China says will support Iran's full membership in SCO', 2017). But the 2017 and 2018 SCO summits also closed without comment about Iran's membership status. Reading between the lines would suggest that China had once again baulked at the application.

Ultimately, however, it would be the election of US president Donald Trump that saw Beijing's long-held concerns about Iran's international behaviour became a reality, dwarfing any geopolitical challenges related to the Silk Road Economic Belt. The sense that external forces would create challenges in the Iran–China relationship first emerged in February 2017, when Chinese nationals were formally sanctioned by the United States in response to Iranian provocations. In January 2017, Iran had tested a medium-range ballistic missile. It was at least the fifth missile test that Iran had undertaken since the nuclear deal was reached (Ali, 2017). In February 2017, the new US administration sanctioned twenty-five individuals and companies linked to Iran's missile programme. The sanctions included two Chinese companies and three Chinese nationals (Martina, 2017). China slammed the decision, with Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Hua Chunying complaining:

> China is opposed to the blind use of unilateral sanctions particularly when it damages the interests of third parties. I think the sanctions are unhelpful in enhancing mutual trust and unhelpful for international efforts on this issue.
>
> Middle East Monitor, 2017

Indeed, it was clear that the Trump administration was willing to inflict a cost on China for Iran's internationally inflammatory behaviour, representing the materialisation of China's long-held fears. This went further in April 2018, when the US Department of Justice announced that it was investigating whether the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei had violated US sanctions, a week after all US firms were banned from trading with Chinese telecommunications

equipment manufacturer ZTE Corp, also because of the latter's interactions with Iran (Freifeld & Auchard, 2018). Although the ZTE Corp ban was soon lifted, it proved enormously costly: ZTE Corp posted an overall loss of US$1 billion for the 2018 fiscal year (Jiang, 2019). Indeed, while Iran–US relations were predictably poor under President Trump, the China–US relationship had also taken a nosedive. Any further deterioration of the China–US relationship would have resulted in significant economic repercussions for Chinese businesses.

The situation became significantly more complicated after President Trump announced in May 2018 that the US would be withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal and re-imposing autonomous sanctions on Iran. Although the remaining P5+1 pledged to uphold the deal and protect firms operating in Iran, US influence over the banking, finance, and insurance markets meant that Iran would quickly witness the withdrawal of large numbers of international firms, with a significant economic impact. The China–Iran relationship found itself again at the fork in the road: would China embrace the opportunity promised by being one of the few states willing to trade with Iran (as it had done prior to 2015), or would Iran's international pariah status, which had now directly impacted Chinese businesses, prompt China to withdraw too?

Iran for its part hoped that it would be the former. The website of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei published a page titled 'Six reasons to prefer the East to the West', which argued that the East could offer Iran benefits in terms of balance-of-trade, access to large markets, technological potential, and secure relationships (Khamenei, 2018). In February 2019, Iran doubled down on this message, sending a selection of its top leaders to China for a delegation, including Foreign Minister Zarif, parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani, the ministers for petroleum and finance, and the Governor of the Central Bank of Iran Abdolnaser Hemmati. The seniority of the delegation underlined Iran's understanding of the significance of Chinese investment to its future.

China announced after the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal that 'we will continue with our normal and transparent practical cooperation with Iran on the basis of not violating our international obligations' (Noack, 2019). China was on a more solid footing than the previous time given that the US decision was also opposed by Russia and the European Union. Chinese companies were admittedly also better protected from international finance markets than their European competitors, with an article in the *Washington Post* declaring that the Bayannur–Tehran train voyage noted above, which departed soon after the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal, sent a 'message to Trump: We'll keep trading anyway' (Noack, 2018). There seemed some reason for hope: in November 2018 it was announced that the Chinese National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) would

take over investment in the Stage II development of the South Pars gas field after sanctions forced the withdrawal of the French petroleum company Total. The field is crucial to the future of Iran's LNG production.

But the geopolitical environment in 2018 would prove very different to that a decade prior. The deteriorating China–US relationship had prompted many to diagnose an emerging 'trade war', creating significant nervousness among policymakers and the business community in both the US and China, that would soon outweigh the opportunities presented by the Iranian market. In October 2018, China's Bank of Kunlun, which handles Chinese transactions from Iran, announced that it would be no longer handling Iran payments (Aizhi & Zhang, 2018). The following month, CNPC followed Total's lead, suspending its investment in the South Pars gas field, purportedly following US pressure. By 2019, bilateral trade was worth just under $19 billion, the lowest figures in a decade and far below the lofty predictions that the two states had made in the heady early days of the BRI (Fulton, 2020). Indeed, at the time of writing in mid-2019, the US very much remained present in the China–Iran relationship, and it seemed that the precariousness of China–US relations would ultimately shape Iran's future. Over four decades of the China–Iran relationship, China had gone to significant lengths to shield its connections to the US from any fallout related to Iran. The Trump administration had drawn a clear line between Beijing and Tehran, and the US–China relationship. The Chinese economy would require a prioritisation of the bilateral relationship with the US, likely at the expense of expanding the China–Iran relationship through the Silk Road Economic Belt.

3.4 Conclusion

The Silk Road Economic Belt represented a new opportunity for the expansion of Iran–China ties. The two countries had enjoyed a strong relationship for decades based on pragmatism, shared anti-hegemonic goals, and the desire to shield themselves from international pressure. It was an effective arrangement that frequently paid off for each party. However, China also demonstrated concerns about Iran's international behaviour, and although China supported anti-hegemonic activities in principle, it opposed acts that might spark conflict at its own expense. In this regard, while the relationship had a broad foundation, it also had a fateful limitation, in the sense that China would periodically publicly challenge Iran's positions.

BRI looked as if it had the potential to foment an expansion of the Iran–China relationship by strengthening Iran's political capital and tempting China

to overlook its international activities. The relationship gained momentum in Iran's newfound moderation in the international arena, which was supported by the election of President Rouhani in 2013 and 2017, and the 2015 nuclear deal. To this end, the two countries energetically pursued new economic contracts and military ties in order to rebuild the ancient Silk Road. Although the projects would face significant geopolitical and geographical challenges in traversing Central Asia, the two countries appeared nonetheless committed to the project.

In the end, however, the imperatives of the Silk Road Economic Belt were not sufficient to fundamentally change the relationship. Although trade ties continued to grow, the deterioration of the China–US relationship saw Chinese nationals directly sanctioned by the Trump administration, as well as the punishment of Chinese companies. Indeed, while the US's 2018 withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal could have represented a significant opportunity for the BRI, consideration of the US would once again obstruct the China–Iran relationship. While it seemed that the BRI and President Rouhani would finally lead to the enforcement of prudence in Iran's international affairs and the maturation of the Iran–China relationship, this has not been sufficient. It is apparent that China will continue to treat its bilateral relationship with Iran in the shadow of its ties to the US.

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CHAPTER 4

Belt and Road Initiative: Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia

Mahesh Ranjan Debata

4.1 Introduction

The transition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) from an out-and-out socialist economy to a neoliberal one in the late 1970s and early 1980s under the ambit of Deng Xiaoping's 'Economics at the Centre Strategy', had prompted the communist nation to devise a number of strategies, policies, and programmes to usher in all-round economic development of the country. However, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), comprising the Silk Road Economic Belt (SERB) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route, has been the most significant strategy Beijing has adopted so far, which is often tipped to be the strategic economic initiative of the century. The BRI has footprints over 126 countries across five continents (Asia, Europe, Africa, North America, and South America) with a total land area of 50 million sq kms, accounts for 40 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP), and involves two-thirds of the world's total population. Capital investments for the BRI are estimated to range between US$1 trillion and US$8 trillion until 2049, which is much more than the investment attracted by the US-funded Marshall Plan in 1948 (estimated at about US$140 billion in current prices) (Linn & Zucker, 2019). Several funding mechanisms and sponsoring financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Silk Road Fund (NSRF) and financial institutions such as the China Development Bank (CDB), the New Development Bank (NDB,) the Export–Import Bank of China (EXIM), China's Sovereign Wealth Fund (SWF), and the China Investment Corporation have extended a fairly liberal hand to carry forward this strategy. In addition, China's foreign exchange reserves and the State Administration of Foreign Exchange have pumped trillions of dollars to make the BRI one of its kind.

The Chinese central government have added a few more feathers to the proverbial cap of the BRI in the form of Digital Silk Road, Polar Silk Road, Green Silk Road, Educational Silk Road, and Space Silk Road. Leaders from nearly forty countries including presidents of Russia and the Philippines, in addition to some 5,000 guests from 150 countries, as well as ninety international

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organisations had graced the second BRI Forum held in Beijing (25–27 April 2019). According to Luo Zhaohui, the ambassador of China to India, who has recently become the Vice Foreign Minister of PRC, over 100 multilateral and bilateral cooperation documents were agreed between China, participating countries, and international organisations. A list of 283 concrete deliverables was put together. Chinese and foreign enterprises reached cooperation agreements worth more than $64 billion (Zhaohui, 2019).

In line with sentiments that predict an 'Asian century', this Chinese grand strategy looked at the Eurasian region (Central Asia, West Asia, and South Asia) as its first major focus. The resource rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East have been the subject of special mentions under China's 'neighbourhood first' policy, notwithstanding the focus shifting towards, South Asia, especially Pakistan, in the last four years. The BRI is believed to be a major factor to realise the process of Eurasian economic integration, which is poised to become one of the most significant global economic trends in the twenty-first century (Linn & Zucker, 2019). In the post-Cold War period, Central Asia has become the cornerstone of China's strategic and economic statecraft, where the communist giant has considerable strategic, security, and economic (energy) stakes. China has already invested well over $250 billion worth of infrastructure projects in Central Asia under the ambit of the BRI, many of which are designed to create overland connectivity with Europe. Similarly, the Middle East, which is rich in natural resources with almost 50 per cent of the world's oil and natural gas, has high growth potential and thus is felt to be crucial for the BRI. Further, the Chinese central government expanded the BRI to South Asia, the so-called 'priority zone' where lies its vital strategic interests and a formidable force in the form of India.

Against this background, this chapter, while delineating the BRI in its quintessential form as deciphered by the Chinese central government as well as the perspective given by others, argues that China's focus on three of its neighbourhood regions (Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia) in the past five years or so shows some sorts of inconsistency in pursuing this grand strategy. This paper argues that the BRI's dream run, be it in Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, or any other part of the globe, has slowed down and may continue to do so because of the dynamic shift in global politics at the present juncture. China–US confrontation over various issues of global importance and India's continuous resistance to the BRI are two important factors that have posed serious challenges to the BRI. This grandiose transnational network, connectivity, and infrastructure project of China faces an uphill task in the Asia Pacific region that has become the cradle of global geopolitics in recent times. The 'Chinese dream' to become a US-like global superpower by

2049, both economically and militarily, through a trillion-dollar economic and security umbrella spreading across the world, has become a cause of consternation between the number 1 and number 2 economies of the world, that is, the US and China, respectively. Further, in this global geopolitical ballgame, Australia, Japan, and India have joined hands with the US by creating a forceful quartet aimed at stopping the Chinese juggernaut. India is the only country in the world to openly and vehemently oppose the BRI. India's opposition is shown in (a) a conspicuous absence from the first BRI Forum meeting held in May 2017; (b) rejecting an invitation to the second Forum; and (c) not endorsing a BRI at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in June 2019. A number of primary and secondary sources of information were used to corroborate the main focus of this chapter. The documents published and released by the Chinese government, Indian government, and US government were thoroughly studied and this author's personal interactions with several Chinese government officials, as well as academics from India, the United States, Europe, China, Central Asia, and the Middle East, have been analysed within this chapter. In addition, online resources and other secondary sources were used to bring clarity to the arguments made in this chapter.

4.2 Two Different Narratives: The Chinese Perspective

This chapter finds two different narratives at the heart of the entire gamut of issues concerning the BRI: (a) the Chinese perspective and (b) the 'Other' perspective. In this section the former is discussed. In the subsequent section the latter perspective is discussed.

The Chinese perspective faithfully reflects President Xi Jinping's vision of the BRI, a signature strategy based on the 'Chinese model of development', stated in Kazakhstan on 7 September 2013 while delivering a speech at Nazarbayev University, and further at the BRI Forum meetings in May 2017 and April 2019, respectively. The document titled Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, issued by the China National Development and Reform Commission (2015) and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs,set out the overall rationale behind the BRI on 28 March 2015. According to Zhang Gaoli, Vice Premier and head of the high-level group assigned with piloting the BRI, the objectives of the BRI include: (a) enhancing policy coordination across the Asian continent; (b) trade liberalisation; (c) financial integration; (d) connectivity on the BRI routes; and (e) cultural exchange through the typical Chinese soft power strategy of people-to-people contact. In this context, the Chinese government had

put enormous efforts to mobilise lawmakers, policy decision makers, bureaucrats, scholars, journalists, businessmen, and common people of the countries being covered under the BRI through seminars, conferences, symposia, and workshops. This author had the opportunity to participate and speak on the theme 'Silk Road Economic Cooperation: Opportunities for India' at the International Conference on The Silk Road Economic Belt: An Opportunity to Work, Share, Prosper and Succeed Together, on June 26–27, 2014, organised by the State Council Information Office of China, at Urumqi, Xinjiang, People's Republic of China (Debata, 2014). While speaking at this international conference, Zhong Shan, China's International Trade Representative and Vice Minister of Commerce, put forth the government's position on the BRI in an assertive manner:

> This Chinese initiative (BRI) can open up new frontiers of cooperation, development, and growth besides boosting regional cooperation. It will link different regions in Eurasia, enable the convergence of their different interests for mutual advantage, and share development opportunities for achieving common goals. Generally, it will help in achieving peace, progress, and prosperity for the entire region, creating a win-win situation.
>
> SHAN, 2014, edited for clarity

To popularise this grand strategy through official narratives, Chinese media has played a vital role. The government mouthpiece, the *Global Times* summarised: 'With economic exchanges, China hopes to gain closer cultural and political ties with each of the countries along the Belt, resulting in a new model of "mutual respect and mutual trust" ' ('Xi suggests China, C. Asia build Silk Road economic belt', 2013). While the *Global Times* ('Energy cooperation to lead Silk Road economic belt', 2014) further describes the BRI's aims to ensure regional energy security and supporting sustainable economic growth, the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America (2014) contends that the BRI aims at reviving the old route of trade, commerce, and people-to-people contact. Several experts, both Chinese and otherwise, also toe the Chinese government line on the BRI. Tiezzi (2014) found that the Belt creates not just a trade route, but also a community with common interests, fate, and responsibilities, and represents China's vision for an 'interdependent economic and political community' stretching from East Asia to Western Europe.

The BRI got a boost, when the Communist Party of China (CPC) incorporated it into its constitution. A resolution approved by the 19th CPC National Congress on 24 October 2017 agreed to write into the constitution 'following the principle of achieving shared growth through discussion and collaboration,

and pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative' ('Belt and Road Incorporated into CPC constitution', 2017). Further, the cooperation objectives, principles, and measures of the BRI are outlined by the Chinese leadership in the Joint Communiqué of the Leaders' Roundtable of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation on 16 May 2017 and reiterated further by President Xi Jinping in the Joint Communiqué of the Leaders' Roundtable of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation on 27 April 2019 in the following words:

> The BRI can create opportunities through communication and coordination among other global, regional, and national frameworks and initiatives for promoting cooperation in connectivity and sustainable development, [framework and initiatives] such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; the Addis Ababa Action Agenda; Agenda 2063 of the African Union; Ancient Civilizations Forum; APECConnectivity Blueprint; ASEAN Community Vision 2025; Asia–Europe Meeting and its group on path-finder of connectivity; Caravanserai Customs Initiative; China and Central and Eastern European Countries Cooperation; China–Europe Land–Sea Express Route; East–West Middle Corridor Initiative; EU–China Connectivity Platform; EU Eastern Partnership; Eurasian partnership based on the principles of equality, openness, and transparency; Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America; Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025; Main Directions for Economic Development of the Eurasian Economic Union until 2030; Paris Agreement on Climate Change; Trans-European Transport Networks; Western Balkans 6 Connectivity Agenda; and WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement.
>
> 'Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation', 2017, edited for clarity

4.3 Two Different Narratives: The 'Other' Perspective

Because the BRI covers the old Silk Route and its adjoining areas and beyond, the strategic, economic, and security issues involved in this grand Chinese strategy deserve to be highlighted.

Firstly, as far as strategic issues are concerned, the old Silk Route and its branches spreading throughout the region have been of considerable strategic importance. For China, especially in the post-Cold War period, the strategic factor remained important, keeping in view US interests, engagement,

and involvement in Central Asia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and intervention in Afghanistan (October 2001 onwards) following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Many keen observers of China's growth and present stature in the global power circle failed to understand US intentions, both overt and covert. China, however, did understand well the narrative regarding a hidden US agenda that neither would the US allow resurgence of her Cold War rival Russia, nor would it tolerate China's rise first as a regional heavyweight with the ambition to become a global power.

Further, the world knows well that Russia was upset at the loss of influence in Central Asia to China. Central Asian countries found solace in China when seeking to shift their seven-decade long dependence on, and loyalty to, Russia, thus helping China to make massive commercial advances in Central Asia over the last two and a half decades. Even though China and Russia have interacted well, both regionally and internationally, for the last one and a half decades, an observer of China–Russia relations might be cynical of overt friendship. Russia is as a dormant volcano: it can erupt at anytime and may do so if challenged by China, that is, if China crosses further limits.

It should also be noted that, with a strong leader like Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the helm in New Delhi, the Chinese leadership has serious concerns about a rising and assertive India.

Thus, the focus of the BRI on Central Asia and the Middle East, and perhaps Pakistan also, could be understood from the above-mentioned strategic concerns. The BRI's direction towards Central Asia can be understood from the Chinese intention to keep the Russian Federation, especially under the stewardship of such leader as Vladimir Putin, at a safe distance, and also from not wanting to allow the US to recoup its waning influence in the region. The BRI's extension to the Middle Eastern region aims exclusively at the US, which has been enjoying enormous support from most of the countries in this oil-rich region. The energy resources of the Middle East are, of course, the cynosure of China's eyes. China has been able to cash in on the angst of many of the Middle Eastern countries over the US attitude towards Islam, especially by the recent president Donald Trump. China has turned the tide to its advantage by means of substantial capital investment, promises, and high hopes through the BRI. The BRI's focus on Pakistan is prompted by India's rise as a regional power, a strong contender to Chinese hegemony in Asia, and India's closeness to US and Japan in recent times.

Secondly, the economic issues discussed under the non-Chinese narrative are in some way or other similar to what has earlier been described in the Chinese perspective of the BRI (trade promotion, infrastructural connectivity, and economic cooperation), although there are many differences. Economic

and energy interests form a vital part of China's increasing tilt towards Central Asia and the Middle East. In order to keep up its energy security, China, which is the world's most populous country, largest oil importer, and second largest energy consumer, wanted to ensure its access to the rich hydrocarbon and mineral resources of Central Asia and the Middle East. As far as China's ties with the Gulf are concerned, energy has become the most important long-term driver (Ahmad, 2019). It has been found that China's oil consumption has increased fourfold, from 2.9 million barrels per day (mbpd) in 1993 to 11.9 mbpd in the year 2016. Oil of Middle Eastern origin accounted for none of China's total oil supply in 1993 but accounted for more than 66 per cent in 2016, or around 7.6 mbpd (Al-Tamimi, 2017). In addition, China has become a 'valuable trade partner' of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The bilateral trade between PRC and GCC states has registered a dramatic increase from $10 billion in 2000 to a whopping $150 billion in 2017, almost 15 times in just less than two decades. Further, Chinese investment in the Gulf is a staggering $60 billion in the year 2017, and perhaps around $90 billion by now. Most interestingly, the Chinese currency is being accepted increasingly in international commercial transactions (Ahmad, 2019). The United Arab Emirates (UAE), one of the GCC members, has become a key logistics and export gateway for China with the prospects of $70 billion bilateral trade by the year 2020. Because of reciprocal visa-on-arrival facilities, in 2018 alone, 875,000 Chinese tourists visited Dubai, which is fast becoming a key gateway for Chinese goods heading across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and continental Africa. At the second BRI Forum, the UAE signed agreements worth $3.4 billion that not only reinforced Dubai's position as a global logistics and trans-shipment hub for China, but also demonstrates how Dubai's strategic location, modern infrastructure and international expertise retain long-term appeal in China's plans (Ahmad, 2019).

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the BRI is the latest Chinese strategy to stabilise the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), which has a 5,600-km-long border with eight neighbouring countries. This strategically important region, through which almost half of the fabled Silk Route passes, has become a major security concern for China. The region has been a theatre of violent separatist and terrorist activities by Uyghur ethnic groups in the past few decades. This has compelled Chinese authorities to develop good neighbourly relations with Central Asian countries, where the largest populations of Uyghurs (outside Xinjiang) have been living, perhaps a total number of one million, and with whom the Uyghurs under Chinese rule share a common history, culture, and religion. The main reason for China looking at the Middle East has been to mobilise support from the Muslim world, where Middle

Eastern leadership has a major say, in order to accept the Xinjiang problem not as a religious issue related to Islam, but as an outcome of national separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism, the proverbial three evil forces. Even when the Western world, human rights groups and scholars included, are raking up the plight of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, where over a million Uyghurs are being held by Chinese authorities at unidentified and inaccessible camps, neither the Central Asian nor the Middle Eastern leadership minced a single word against China with regard to this. The precarious security situation in South Asia, China believes, may have spill over effects on the situation in Xinjiang, borders three South Asian countries, namely, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

4.4 Myths and Realities

As claimed by the Chinese central government, the BRI could provide opportunities for Central Asia on three counts: (a) a revival of civilisational ties with the region; (b) further strengthening the already established China–Central Asia economic cooperation, especially energy cooperation; and (c) staving off security challenges such as terrorism. Studying and examining the Chinese foray into Central Asia in the last two and a half decades, it can be deduced that China needs Central Asia to maximise its own interests, not the other way round. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country that has gained much economically from her ties with China. China has an annual trade of over US$60 billion with five Central Asian countries, out of which almost half is with Kazakhstan.

Similarly, in the 1990s, when China wanted to come out of the uncertainties that prevailed over the US-dominated energy market in the Middle East, seriously seeking to diversify its growing energy demand, Central Asia came on its energy radar. Central Asian scholar Syroezhkin (2012) found that the Chinese strategy to develop relations with the Central Asian states in the energy sphere had aimed at (a) acquiring ownership of raw hydrocarbon fields or their exploitation by providing long-term concessions; (b) building oil and gas pipelines for delivering resources to China; and (c) building and reconstructing hydropower plants, central heat and power plants, and power transmission lines to provide electricity to China. The Chinese government has been able to bring two pipelines from Central Asia: one oil pipeline from Kazakhstan and one natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan. In addition, China has been making efforts to bring another pipeline from Uzbekistan as well. In fact, China has obtained 60 million tonnes of crude oil and 81 billion cubic metres of natural gas from Central Asia through these two pipelines over the last decade. In

addition, the building of a US$30 billion oil pipeline from Russia to Xinjiang as part of a thirty year Sino–Russia energy cooperation agreement worth US$400 billion provides China the much-required energy security it needs. China and the Central Asian Republics (CARS) have agreed at bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral levels to expand their relationships to a new high under the ambit of the BRI. Afghan scholar Shahbazov (2016) has found that the latest news of Tajikistan becoming the fulcrum of China's growing security role in Central Asia stems from Beijing's offer to build eleven new border checkpoints and a new military facility along the Tajik–Afghan border. Further, the anti-terrorism alliance among China, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan exemplifies China's role in securitising Xinjiang and Central Asia. At this critical juncture, what China sincerely needs from Central Asia is stability in Xinjiang, as two of the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where over 600,000 Uyghurs live, have witnessed numerous anti-Chinese protests in the last couple of years. As stated by one scholar, the Chinese advance into Central Asia has not been all smooth as not everyone is enthusiastic about China's growing presence in the region. Sinophobia is present among the general Central Asian populace, who fear that increasing number of Chinese will overrun the Central Asian region (Hashimova, 2018).

China's emergence as the main driver of geo-economics in the MENA region has given way to the necessity of economic partnership downplaying political rivalry in the region. Several initiatives across the region that sit well with the BRI include Smart Dubai 2021, Saudi Arabia's National Transformation Programme 2030, Morocco's Mohamed VI Tangier Tech City, and the China–Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Co-operation Zone. Chinese technology firms now increasingly look to MENA, while partnerships between Dubai's Mashreq and China's Alipay have stepped up the process of Chinese integration into the region (Wragg, 2019). Sheikh (2017) has found that in order to gain foothold in the region, China has forged ties with four important powers in the region: Israel, Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Chinese leadership feels that Israel is politically and economically the most stable country in the Middle East and fits into its pet project, the BRI. Further, understanding the fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran is the vital cog in the BRI's extension into West Asia, China has reached a trade deal with Iran worth a staggering US$600 billion. In addition, joint Sino–Egypt naval exercises in the Mediterranean in June 2015, the Bridge of Friendship 2015, and Chinese investment in Egypt worth US$45 billion bear testimony to the strengthening of the Sino–Egypt military, as well as economic, partnership. Similarly, China has entered into a huge trade deal with Saudi Arabia worth US$65 billion. Saudi Arabia has been investing billions in China's refineries and petrochemical facilities, besides taking a larger

role in the CPEC, BRI's grand sub-project in South Asia. Almost $100 billion worth of deals have been agreed between the two countries in the past two years and trade showed a one-third increase in 2018. During the visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to China in February 2019, both countries pledged to 'speed up the signing of an implementation plan on connecting the Belt and Road Initiative with Saudi Vision 2030' (Khan, 2019). However, China should not forget that Saudi Arabia is one of the key allies of the United States, along with the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait, and is also an important part in the US security machine in the region.

Chinese manoeuvrings in South Asia date back to the late 1940s when, after becoming the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese leadership found India, another Asian giant, as a potential threat in the region. Hence, the all-weather friendship with Pakistan began. In the post-Cold War period, Chinese leadership apprehended the rise of India as an emerging power in the neighbourhood, then started the process of containing India through the 'strings of pearls' strategy, which culminated in the well-crafted BRI strategy. According to a report published by the China Institute of International Studies in 2017, China wants to nurture the BRI strategy in South Asia through four sub-projects: (a) the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); (b) the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Corridor; (c) the Trans-Himalaya Corridor; and (d) cooperation with the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh under its 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. If examined carefully, it can be deduced that China has managed to bring almost all the South Asian nations, except India, into the fold of the BRI by means of significant economic investments, and with a clear intention to contain the effect of an assertive India on the neighbourhood.

4.5 Potential Challenges

Although Central Asia stands tall in China's Belt and Road Initiative within the ambit of a 'neighbourhood first' policy and the Middle Eastern region gets priority as per her requirement, notwithstanding the glaring focus on Pakistan, China has to wrestle with several challenges in its march to achieve the goals it has set through the BRI. The major hurdle on its path will be the United States. The US will neither see her economic and military prowess being subdued at the global level, nor her superpower status be snatched away by a regional power like China. Even though many in China had felt good about the American nod for the BRI at the first BRI Forum, the US decision to skip the second BRI Forum must have raised many eyebrows. Further, one has to read

and understand this apparent snub in the light of the 'America First Doctrine' strongly advocated by former US president Donald Trump and the clarion call given by him to 'make America great again', which gives an altogether different perspective. The US position on the South China Sea is also clear. In recent times, be it the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) CEO Summit in Vietnam (November, 2017), the Shangri La Dialogue 2019 (31 May – 2 June 2019), or any other international forum, the US has clearly aired its views in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific region, giving cold-shoulder to Chinese regional aspirations. The US even went to the extent of renaming the strategically important US Pacific command as the Indo-Pacific Command (George, 2018). The latest salvo from the US is in the form of the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report that has been brought out by the US Department of Defense on 1 June 2019, which not only elaborates the vision and principles of a free and open Indo-Pacific, but also dubs China as a 'revisionist power' (The Department of Defense USA, 2019).

Secondly, India has not, and perhaps would not, accept the BRI with open arms, a potential stumbling block for the progress of the BRI in South Asia. India's conspicuous absence at both the first and second Belt and Road Forum is a clear signal of India's dissatisfaction over the BRI and its systematic rejection as well. China–Pakistan geniality over the CPEC is the main cause of consternation between the two giant Asian neighbours. The CPEC passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), which is actually an integral part of India's State of Jammu and Kashmir. Despite knowing the gravity and sensitivity of the problem, China continued its activities to develop the corridor. In a written response to Pakistan's lower parliament on the BRI, Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, Mr. V Muraleedharan stated:

> Indian Government's position on China's 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) or 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) has been clear and consistent. The inclusion of the so-called 'China–Pakistan Economic Corridor' (CPEC), which passes through parts of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir under illegal occupation of Pakistan, as a flagship project of OBOR/BRI, reflects lack of appreciation of India's concerns on the issue of sovereignty and territorial integrity.
>
> 'Inclusion of CPEC under OBOR shows lack of appreciation of India's concerns on sovereignty', 2019

Cai (2016) suggests that the CPEC has been the key reason for New Delhi's rejection of the BRI. He argues that when India agreed to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Indian government*specifically*

*pushed*for a provision in the charter of the bank that requires project financing in disputed territory to have the*agreement of the disputants*. However, China has paid no heed to this; rather, China continued its endeavours, much to India's chagrin. Some initiatives taken up by the present Indian government under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi have restricted the implementation of the BRI in South Asia. For example, India joined together with the US and Japan to curb the progress of the BRI and formed the Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) with Japan to reach out to the Asian and African nations. Immediately after being sworn in for his second term, Modi visited the Maldives and Sri Lanka on 8 June 2019 to gain the confidence of India's traditional spheres of influence and also to send a strong signal to China not to meddle in the Indian Ocean. During the SCO Summit held 13–14 June 2019 in Bishkek, India did not endorse the Chinese stand on the BRI.

Lastly, two issues – security and terrorism – will be major concerns for China despite the joint communiqués of both the first and second BRI Forums remaining silent on both matters (Clarke, 2017). Terrorism is, of course, one of the most intractable challenges of our times, not only for China but for the entire international community. The 2019 terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka on the auspicious day of Easter are a grim reminder. India and Afghanistan have been the worst sufferers of terrorist activities in the South Asian region. Even though the situation in Xinjiang is relatively peaceful these days, there is a fear of backlash of shattered security zone in the South-Central Asia region amid a looming ISIS threat and the growing dissatisfaction among Uyghurs over the re-education camps where millions of Uyghurs are kept under Chinese surveillance.

4.6 Conclusion

Amid this critical situation, the viability of the BRI will be in question, because of these strategic concerns. If one observes the facts and figures related to the BRI in the last five years or so since its inception in September 2013 and makes a critical assessment, there are three phases in the gigantic strategy launched by the People's Republic of China. Firstly, Chinese bids in Central Asia have to a large extent fulfilled Chinese strategic and economic objectives. For example, China has got considerable economic gain in lieu of substantial Chinese investment in almost all the sectors, especially the infrastructure and energy sector and a bilateral trade to the tune of US$60 billion. In addition, energy pipelines (both oil and natural gas) have been constructed and some are in the pipeline. Most importantly, Chinese leadership has mobilised all the Central

Asian nation heads in rejecting the Uyghur cause for a separate homeland out of China and joining the BRI subsequently.

Secondly, the focus of the BRI turned from Central Asia and towards the Middle East. So far China has been able to nurture its interests in the Middle East, both strategically and economically. This author has interactions with some academics and researchers looking at the Middle Eastern angle of the BRI. According to most of them, through the BRI strategy, China has secured her energy interests by maintaining warm relations with most of the Middle Eastern countries and almost all of these countries now rely on China instead of the US. In this way, the second objective of the BRI, that is, minimising the US role in the Middle East is also achieved. However, Hussain (2017) suggests that the United States may be trying to win back its old friends and allies in the Middle East and is attempting to wean them away from Chinese influence. Hussain points to the visit of US president Donald Trump to the Middle East in May 2017, a few days after the first Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, which saw Trump make a fervent appeal for unity among the members of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and working with Arab leaders to create a front to combat religious extremism.

US activities in the Middle East could frustrate Chinese ambitions in the region, especially the fruitful execution of its strategies and implementation of initiatives under the BRI. According to some scholars (Sheikh, 2017; Ahmad, 2019), Chinese engagement with the Middle East cannot yield results unless regional conflicts are resolved. It is suggested that a deft handling of the challenges of conflict resolution in the Middle East is key to the success of the BRI in the region.

The third phase is the latest target set under the BRI to nourish Chinese ambition for access to the Indian Ocean via Pakistan's Gwadar Port through the CPEC. Although China has invested over $60 billion in the CPEC, access to the Indian Ocean is difficult to achieve smoothly or easily amid a strong Indian objection to the project. In addition, the domestic issues in Pakistan, such as opposition to the CPEC from many quarters including the common people in Gilgit-Baltistan and Baluchistan, could be the stumbling blocks. There is an apprehension among all concerned Pakistani people about the debt trap made for Pakistan through the BRI, exactly the way Sri Lanka bore the brunt of Chinese investment in Hambantota. Pakistan too had withdrawn from the Diamer–Bhasa dam project worth US$14 billion. The fourth phase of the BRI has hinted at Europe, Africa, or South America.

At this juncture, it is advisable for the Chinese leadership to show keenness, sincerity, and resolve to address certain issues and concerns raised by the parties/countries involved and those who express unhappiness with the BRI, the

way it is being conducted and the way it is being implemented. As described in the joint communiqué of the Leaders Roundtable of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, published by the Xinhua News Agency: 'All countries, especially developing ones, still face common challenges of eradicating poverty, promoting inclusive and sustained economic growth, and achieving sustainable development' ('Belt and Road Incorporated into CPC constitution', 2017, para. 6), the main motto of the BRI should be to work religiously to stave off these socio-economic challenges that torment people living in developing societies. It is believed the aforesaid issues will be taken care of by the Chinese government and Beijing will definitely try to rectify the mistakes that have been done in the last five years and plug in the loopholes so that the BRI strategy does not remain a one-nation show, China-centric, or a China-led strategy, rather a vehicle to bring about world peace, social progress, and economic prosperity across the globe.

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CHAPTER 5

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor

Building National Consensus, Curbing Terrorism, and Managing Regional Rivalries in Balochistan

Saeed Shafqat

5.1 Introduction: The Place of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor in the Belt and Road Initiative

Analysing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), one can argue that it has three essential components. First, it links development with security. Conforming to neoliberalism, fundamental economic drivers such as trade and infrastructure investment are inextricably linked to political stability and peace. Second, the BRI anticipates cultural and educational exchanges as manifestations of its developmental strategy. Third, it envisions regional connectivity and economic interdependence as catalysts of the development and security nexus. The BRI is an ambitious initiative that covers about sixty-five countries, 4.4 billion people, and 40 per cent of the global gross domestic product (GDP) (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Given the ambitious scale and inherent risk of the plan, China has designed the BRI in a manner that addresses the cultural sensitivities, economic needs, and security concerns of participant states. In addition to factors such as the production and exchange of knowledge, innovation, and technological growth, trade, and transportation costs, China recognises that security acts as a pivotal determinant of the geography of development. By adding an element of security to the equation, China's revival of the ancient Silk Road into the modern BRI redefines the parameters of traditional geo-economics and international relations.

In effect, China's BRI is gaining global recognition and legitimacy. For instance, in April 2017 the UN's Social and Economic Council held a workshop with Chinese experts titled 'The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress and Future Cooperation – Dialogue between the United Nations and Chinese Experts'. The aim was to explore how this initiative intersects with the UN 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Chinese and UN experts noted that it was in line with 17 SDGs and 169 targets, as the initiative focuses on

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five categories of the SDGs: people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership ('Belt and Road Initiative provides strong support for UN 2030 goals', 2017).[1] In September 2015, the government of Pakistan adopted the SDGs and declared these global goals as national goals of Pakistan. It also decided to create a federal SDG Unit and under that umbrella established SDG Support Units in each of the country's four provinces. The National Initiative on Agenda 2030 supports the government of Pakistan and all the provincial governments in localisation of SDGs and creating an enabling environment for its implementation. The National Initiative includes activities at the federal, provincial, and district levels involving multiple stakeholders and ensuring vertical and horizontal policy coherence. In this spirit, besides localisation, the SDGs related to peace and partnership (16 &17) have special significance for the province of Balochistan, where combating a separatist movement and curbing terrorism remain key challenges.

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the pivotal components of China's high-profile BRI. A distinctive feature of this initiative is the scale and size of connectivity that it envisages for Asia, Europe, and Africa, combining all forms of exchange over rail, road, air, and sea. By facilitating connectivity, China promotes a vision where a 'win-win' situation of mutual benefits and people-to-people contacts can be achieved. Invoking a 2000-year-old history that China shares with Central Asia, Eurasia, and other parts of the world, President Xi Jinping has been persistent in conveying that the BRI plan, including the CPEC, aims to revive regional connectivity through infrastructure development, trade, and investment in industry from which development dividends can be shared across the world. Openness and inclusive growth thus form core principles of this 'project of the twenty-first century', while any scepticism over the geostrategic ambitions of the BRI have been categorically rejected by the Chinese leadership.

1 A month later, speaking at the BRI Summit in Beijing on 14 May 2017, the upcoming Secretary General of the UN, Antonio Guterres, urged the international community to support and join the initiative as it is 'rooted in a shared vision for broad development'. He went on to say that China is the 'central pillar of multilateralism' and supporter of global institutions and leading contributor to UN peace missions. Many world leaders (twenty nine premiers and representatives of over 130 nations) echoed similar sentiments demonstrating solidarity, support, and praise for the initiative. India was conspicuous in its absence. Speaking as host of the Summit, President Xi Jinping promised to contribute another $100 billion toward the BRI to create what he called a 'big family of harmonious coexistence'. For more details, see 'UN chief urges global efforts to tap Belt and Road potential for common development', 2017, and Lei, 2017.

Given this thrust, the BRI initiative has generated a lively discourse on how geo-economics could have a symbiosis with geopolitics. It has revived and energised the salience of geo-economics in the sense that China is not challenging the existing neoliberal international economic order; it is clamouring for legitimate space in it and is seeking 'integration'. In fact, President Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the World Economic Forum this year highlighted this very 'legitimacy', as China assumes an increasingly significant leadership role in global development. By claiming that,

> China has in the past years succeeded in embarking on a development path that suits itself by drawing on both the wisdom of its civilization and the practices of other countries in both [the] East and West.
>
> 'Excerpts of Chinese president Xi Jinping's keynote speech', 2017, A2

President Xi Jinping reminded world leaders to be conscious of China's civilisational accomplishments and its ability to remain relevant and progressive. Pinpointing China's achievement in lifting 'over 700 million people out of poverty', he added that,

> when assessing China's development, one should not only see what benefits the Chinese people have gained … but also what contribution China has made to the world.
>
> 'Excerpts of Chinese president Xi Jinping's keynote speech', 2017, A2

This was a clear statement on China's rise and its ability to direct and manage nations that seek partnership. More importantly, it indicated the shifting world order, where China exemplifies and champions that the 'East' is on the rise and the 'West' needs attitudinal change and needs to recognise this new reality and work for East–West cooperation ('Excerpts of Chinese president Xi Jinping's keynote speech', 2017).

However, sceptics caution that integration has limits, as China is not 'embedded' in the international economic order (meaning proportionate influence in the World Bank and the IMF) (Dai & Renn, 2016). Others contend that with its acceptance and participation in the neoliberal economic order, China should assume greater responsibility in maintaining peace and stability of the global order. The BRI initiative, particularly the CPEC, is China's response to that challenge. It manifests a paradoxical global trend that, on the one hand, socio-economic integration is making territorial boundaries and notions of national sovereignty irrelevant, but on the other, nation states are asserting pressure to regain national sovereignty (Brexit, America First, etc.). However, many

in academia, media, and global politics remain both critical of, and anxious about, China's real intent behind the BRI (Shafqat, 2017).

Regardless of China's intention, the CPEC nonetheless offers Pakistan an opportunity for both economic and human development. Projects in the CPEC are estimated to be approximately $46 billion to $62 billion, around 17 per cent of the country's total GDP. Through the CPEC, a network of road and communications infrastructure will be developed spanning over 3,000 km from the city of Kashgar in China to Pakistan's southwestern tip, Gwadar. In addition to infrastructure development (roads, bridges, and railways), there are three key elements to the CPEC: the development of the Gwadar port, investments in the energy sector, and the development of industrial zones, both in western China at close proximity to Pakistan and within Pakistan (Ahmar, 2015). This chapter maintains that Pakistan will be able to benefit from these opportunities if policies surrounding the CPEC are transparent, led by research and evidence, and backed by a deep and clear understanding of local conditions. Pakistan will therefore need to charter negotiations with China on the CPEC in a manner that boosts trade in Pakistan, provides Pakistanis with an opportunity for technical learning, and creates employment in the country. Such a framework should also ensure human development vis-à-vis investments in health and education. Thus, shifting focus towards building civil society.

5.2 Literature on the CPEC: Assumptions and Perspectives

Given Pakistan's politico-economic infirmities, including perceptions about security threats and a volatile regional strategic environment that contrasts to China's prudent, thoughtful, and vigorous determination to launch the BRI initiative with a particular focus on the CPEC, the project has evoked vociferous response from local, regional, and international scholars and policymakers. Pakistani scholars generally tend to be divided on the CPEC initiative. While academic, data-driven studies are scant, a variety of journalistic articles see the initiative in terms of black and white, good and bad, pro and con. For convenience and conceptual clarity, we can divide this literature into three typologies: CPEC enthusiasts, CPEC opponents, and CPEC pragmatists.

5.2.1 *The CPEC Enthusiasts*

The CPEC enthusiasts are primarily Pakistani political leaders belonging to the Pakistan Muslim League (N) (the ruling party from 2013 to 2018), government officials, and journalists who claim and built the narrative that the CPEC is a 'game changer'. They advocate and plead with missionary zeal (however,

lacking in evidence) that the CPEC is a harbinger of peace and development for Pakistan. Any critique or concerns of transparency, protecting interests of smaller provinces, or the need for environmental impact assessments is equated with conspiracy against the Pakistan–China friendship. Commentators in favour argue that the Chinese mega-plan goes beyond politics and, through a trickle-down effect, will help alleviate the livelihood of people across the country (see, e.g., Malik, 2017a; 2017b; 2016b). Enthusiasts see the CPEC as an opportunity for Pakistan to join the bandwagon of international economic growth, where participation in the global network of production and consumption is necessary for development. Since assuming power in August 2018, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Party (PTI) of Prime Minister Imran Khan has taken a somewhat cautious and pragmatic approach towards the CPEC.

5.2.2 *The CPEC Opponents*

The CPEC opponents come in two shades. One group opposes the CPEC because they think it would lead to the exploitation and 'stealing of Pakistani resources'. They argue that the CPEC is China's instrument to expropriate Pakistan's economic resources and is likely to lead to cultural, social, and political subjugation to China. They are quick to reject the idea that the CPEC will indeed be a 'win-win situation for all', citing the failure of previous agreements to bring the promised economic boost. For instance, the free trade agreement (FTA) signed between China and Pakistan that called for more favourable tariff rates and conducive trade and investment policies is in reality highly skewed and tilted towards China. Moreover, they fear that an influx of Chinese goods and services will crowd out local producers and enterprises that will lose out as the CPEC materialises (Ahmad, 2016). Dr. Mubashar Hasan, a reputable Pakistani leftist politician, said that the CPEC is an 'instrument of Chinese imperialism' and will adversely impact Pakistan's territorial sovereignty.[2] This theme of dependency, portraying the return of a reincarnated 'East India Company', was expressively conveyed on the cover of the August 2015 *Herald* magazine, where a caricatured President Xi Jinping cradles a toddler version of Pakistan's then prime minster, Nawaz Sharif (N. Jamal, 2015). Dr. Qaiser Bengali, an eminent Pakistani economist, has also said that the result of the CPEC would be Pakistan turning into Greece as it acquires unprecedented loans in the name of the CPEC. From this point of view, Pakistan has little to gain in terms of measurable developmental benefits; rather, it will play home to China's export

2 Dr. Hasan was making a speech at the opening ceremony of a book shop in Lahore on 20 October 2017.

of excess supply of labour and industries in which it has a competitive advantage, all the while adding to Pakistan's already high level of local and external debt – an estimated US$73 billion in 2015 (Chaudhury, 2011).[3]

The second group comprises those who articulate that the CPEC would widen the wedge between Pakistan and India, as the thrust of its infrastructure development is north to south and undermines the prospects of any East–West route, trade, investment, and connectivity. These are Pakistani and international contributors, who advocate that the revival of people-to-people contact and trade and transport connection between India and Pakistan is imperative for peace and development in South Asia. Some Indian and international scholars are also part of this group. They argue that the BRI and the CPEC, in particular, are China's instruments to 'contain' India and that this is the real objective of the CPEC. Kashmiri journalist Fahad Shah (2015) points out that Indian policymakers believe that China is trying to 'encircle' India, by cultivating and making bilateral agreements with its smaller neighbours by pursuing infrastructure development and regional connectivity (the so-called 'string of pearls' theory). Shah also magnifies three challenges that confront the CPEC. First, he thinks the disputed status of Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan can hamper the project (Shah, 2015). This is an idea reflected in a recent statement by US Secretary of Defense James Mattis as well. At a meeting with the Senate Armed Services Committee, Mattis said,

> The One Belt, One Road also goes through disputed territory, and I think that in itself shows the vulnerability of trying to establish that sort of a dictate.
>
> IQBAL, 2017

This statement has come at a time when the relationship of Pakistan and the United States is seemingly in a 'low phase', and by reinforcing the 'disputed territory argument', the CPEC project has once again come under attack (Iqbal, 2017). Second, Fahad Shah claims the resentment and resistance towards the CPEC in Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan is problematic. According to Shah, the people in these areas feel that they are being denied the benefits and rewards that this initiative promises. Finally, Shah observes that because a part of the CPEC targets Xinjiang, where the persecuted Uyghur Muslims are in a majority, the project risks irritating an already marginalised segment of Chinese society,

3 For further academic assessments of Indian apprehensions regarding the CPEC and possibilities of how India could benefit from it by adopting a positive role by building a network of roads between India, Pakistan, and China, see Ranjan, 2015.

which wants 'separation' from China and not 'inter-connectivity' (Shah, 2015). This leads him to erroneously assert that both Uyghurs and Baloch want separation, while through the CPEC, China and Pakistan are striving to suppress separatist movements and are not really promoting infrastructural developments or regional connectivity. China and Pakistan are cognizant of these challenges but do not consider them insurmountable. Of course the official Indian position is hostile towards the BRI and the CPEC and both Prime Minister Modi and Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj are on record as having stated that they are 'unacceptable' (The Express Tribune, 2016; Geo News, 2015).

5.2.3 *The CPEC Pragmatists*

The CPEC pragmatists, like the author of this chapter, are those who argue that the CPEC is in many ways an innovative and credible initiative and China has made great efforts to design it in a manner so that it could contribute towards the economic, human, and social development of Pakistan. It could also bring about cultural and political transformation leading to greater sociopolitical harmony in the country. However, this demands modification in both the blueprint of the CPEC project and its implementation. If the CPEC and the BRI are truly mechanisms to bring about people-centred development, as Chinese officials claim, then the litmus test of the CPEC would be an evaluation of whether or not local communities are being involved in the process of project development and whether their participation is being promoted in its execution. Evidence suggests that including an element of community-led development is essential for the success of top-down projects such as the CPEC, indicating that ownership from locals is imperative to avoid conflict and adverse consequences for civil society. Additionally, the overarching framework of the CPEC must adopt transparency – legal, political, and financial – and clearly spell out the terms of the forms of financial assistance. It should also carefully review the environmental impact of the associated projects and assess the potential benefits for the people of Pakistan, in particular vis-à-vis the various ethnic groups and provinces. This entails a critical review of security and strategic dimensions of the CPEC.

Some key international and Pakistani academic studies have echoed this understanding. For example, early in 2017, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) released a report evaluating China's Silk Road Economic Belt and its security implications in Eurasia and how the European Union could cooperate with China in this regard (Ghiasy & Zhou, 2017). According to the report's authors, the initiative promises great results in terms of infrastructural development in what have largely remained underserved areas, yet security concerns and anxiety over China's intentions remain key

markers of the eventual success of the project. Unlike the analysis emanating from the United States, much of which tends to see China as attempting to challenge traditional powers, the report describes China's objectives with the Silk Road Economic Belt as 'a convergence and clustering of multiple diplomatic, domestic socio-economic, financial, geo-economic and geopolitical interests and drivers, as well as pre-existing governmental overtures and proposals' (Ghiasy & Zhou, 2017, p. 5). From the perspective of many partnering countries within the region, including Pakistan, the Silk Road Economic Belt is just that, a way to engage with China for geopolitical, socio-economic, and financial gains of their own.

However, the report also identifies a number of challenges China faces as it demonstrates strategic muscle through inclusive growth, trade, infrastructure development, and regional connectivity. In particular, with respect to the CPEC, the SIPRI analysis forecasts heightened conflict in the region, at least in the short term. It correctly observes that without proper reforms, the CPEC could enhance the already prevalent corruption and the lack of political transparency in Pakistan (Ghiasy & Zhou, 2017). This reasoning stems from the political volatility of the region and the layers of internal conflict and externally financed proxy wars with which Pakistan is confronted. In Balochistan, separatists and insurgents have for year's resisted Chinese involvement in the development of Gwadar, threatening to sabotage projects that are being developed under the CPEC. In November 2018, the Chinese consulate in Karachi was attacked and the Balochistan Liberation Army claimed responsibility. No Chinese national were killed in the attack yet all the insurgents involved were killed. The incident was seen as a reflection of resentment against the CPEC (Aamir, 2019).

In analysing the objectives behind the BRI, Cheng (2016) argues that the Chinese grand scheme may be considered as a hybrid strategy of economic gains and well-intentioned development targeted towards countries that have growth potential. Accordingly, the development of the Silk Road does not necessarily have to be seen as either pure market-led profit making or 'financial aid' geared towards developing nations. In fact, as Cheng argues, 'foreign aid and profitability may be complementary, with aid creating conditions for trade and investment'. In this way, Chinese investment in countries such as Pakistan may be expected to bring about social uplift through principles of 'social responsibility'. Social uplift of people, particularly the youth, through social responsibility could serve Pakistani policymakers and civil society as an important guiding principle to ensure the success of the CPEC.

Despite Cheng's conclusions, a lack of credible information seems to be a recurring theme in the analysis emanating from local Pakistani sources.

Observers have underscored the need to achieve logistical and administrative prerequisites as an inextricable determinant of the viability of the Chinese grand scheme. Journalist Nadeem F. Paracha (2017) echoes such caution in declaring that the CPEC could in theory initiate virtuous cycles of development through economic growth, greater income, eventual sociopolitical stability, greater investment, and tourism, to name a few. According to Paracha, this requires change in the attitudes of Pakistanis and demands curbing religious extremism and pressuring the state to withdraw the support and patronage that has in the past been extended to militant groups. Pakistan needs to rediscover its culture of liberalism and project and preserve its peaceful and inclusive cultural heritage (Paracha, 2017).

Small (2016) summarises the most pertinent and perceptive questions surrounding the CPEC as follows: while many questions and doubts remain, these are now more concerned with 'how' rather than 'if' the CPEC will happen. What are the debt implications for the Pakistani economy? Will Punjab be the disproportionate beneficiary? What will be the local impact of the projects? Which route will be completed first? Does the government have the capacity to build a set of projects on as grand a scale as the CPEC envisages? Yet, Small argues, questions like these relate to the entire BRI and are not exclusive to the CPEC. He thinks that as the CPEC is the brainchild of the Chinese, it is their leadership that must address concerns that naturally emanate from pursuing the CPEC, specifically those pertaining to transparency and human development (Small, 2016).

Wagner (2016), a member of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, foresees an optimistic impact of the CPEC on Pakistan and India. Unlike Shah (2015), or the official position of the Modi government, he recognises that besides strengthening China–Pakistan relations, it could also help diffuse India–Pakistan tensions. Wagner correctly highlights a few steps that Pakistan has taken in this direction. First, in 2009, Pakistan gave Gilgit-Baltistan the status of an autonomous region which, according to the partition plan of 1947, was part of an undivided Kashmir – which remains a point of contention between India and Pakistan. Second, after December 2014, albeit reluctantly, Pakistan is showing signs of a change of approach towards terrorist groups. Prime Minister Imran Khan has shown determination in combating terrorism. Third, the CPEC could also restrain the Pakistani military from misadventures such as the Kargil conflict. Finally, the Chinese hope that the economic dividends of trade, investment, and connectivity would help bring more tolerance and peace to Pakistani society. Thus, Wagner argues, the CPEC can result in a more peaceful region, if properly designed and implemented (Wagner, 2016). Extending this argument further, Ali, a researcher based at

Shanghai University, postulates that if Iran and India were to join the CPEC, it could be transformed into IICPEC, giving a new sense of economic and regional connectivity to South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East (Ali, 2016). Such a broad international project might seem fanciful today but if India and Pakistan were to change their attitude and outlook, a regional socio-economic transformation could indeed occur. It is in this spirit of pragmatism and redesigning the CPEC that this chapter will examine and evaluate the challenges, risks, and opportunities that the mega-project offers.

5.3 Harmonising Provincial Interests and Building National Consensus

The edifice of both China–Pakistan and US–Pakistan relations is built around strategic and geopolitical considerations (Small, 2015).[4] However, the fundamental difference between the two is that in the case of China and Pakistan, geographical contiguity and civilisational roots also strengthen the alliance. In the popular Pakistani perception, China is recognised as an 'all-weather friend', while America is seen as a 'fair-weather friend'. It could be argued that the CPEC initiative offers unprecedented opportunity for both countries to transform ties and deepen their economic, cultural, educational, and strategic partnership. While Chinese policymakers have carefully planned the CPEC, investing diverse resources to effectively design and pursue the CPEC, Pakistani policymakers have been struggling to comprehend the enormity of the task. However, the determination to seize the opportunity is visible and is gaining momentum.

Broadly, the CPEC has four components: infrastructure development, energy projects, the creation of industrial zones, and the construction of the Gwadar port. These components can be pivotal in helping Pakistan expedite its development process. However, in order to maximise economic and human development returns from the CPEC, Pakistan must first overcome internal political differences in approaching the project. The federal government must seek support and win the trust of the provincial leaders while engaging with China. With secure national consensus, the CPEC can result in equitable gains in terms of business opportunities, environmental protection, and infrastructure development. In the absence of a broad national consensus and inclusionary process, implementing the CPEC will continue to be acrimonious and

4 Small (2015, pp. 1–6) provides a perceptive overview of Pakistan–China relations with some understanding of the role of the United States. However, he is wrong to suggest that China–Pakistan relations are founded on 'shared enmity with India'.

will offer suboptimal benefits. Despite the fact that China enjoys considerable goodwill among the Pakistanis and the work on the project is ongoing, the CPEC has become a point of friction. While the government of the PML(N) was enthusiastic about the project, the opposition parties and the provincial governments remained sceptical about the CPEC being a 'win-win' situation for all (Small, 2015). Indeed, a significant hindrance to the smooth implementation of the CPEC is the inability of the federal government leadership to convince the provinces that the project will deliver equitable benefits for the entire country, especially for its economically peripheral regions. Prime Minister Imran Khan's government has initiated some discussion on re-negotiating the CPEC framework with China and the officials of the two governments met in April 2019 and signed FTA II, enhancing trade opportunities for both, particularly for Pakistan, providing greater access to the Chinese market and reducing tariffs. Advisor to the Prime Minister on Commerce and Textiles Abdul Razaq Dawood, said, 'We are extremely thankful to the Chinese government. It has accepted our demand for concessions' (Shafa, 2019). Prime Minister Imran Khan has been a little more re-assuring and skilful in carrying along the provincial leadership of the smaller provinces and the military on the CPEC negotiations with China.

On the other hand, the Pakistani military has demonstrated strong resolve to support the project and remains a pivotal player on the Pakistani side. The military's vision is security-centric and confined to protecting the infrastructure, the port of Gwadar, and Chinese personnel. While a separate security division has been created for the protection of Chinese workers in Pakistan, the cost and consequent effects of creating an additional army division have not been revealed and remain controversial. Securing consensus within Pakistan will also mean adopting a transparent and accountable system of project management. The Pakistani official and non-official CPEC enthusiasts have so far disseminated limited information relating to key issues such as project financing, project locations, and specific implementation timelines being kept away from public review.

The operational features of Pakistan's federal character are still in a formative phase. The tension between the federal government and the demands of provincial autonomy has a chequered history, where provinces have traditionally complained about the lack of authority or engagement in an overcentralised system of decision making (Javed, 2016). Harmonising provincial demands and interests, therefore, continues to be a key challenge for the civilian and military leaderships. With such high stakes in the collaboration with China, active participation from the provinces in the CPEC would be a

desirable goal to comfort lower levels of government and the civil society that could otherwise threaten a positive investment climate.

There are various reasons for the underlying mistrust and scepticism surrounding the CPEC. First, a credible description of the CPEC infrastructural, energy, and social sector projects is missing, raising apprehension and suspicion. Such transparency is necessary, not only to avoid the dire costs of malpractice and corruption, but also to ensure that the CPEC does not derail the economic and human development rights of those being affected.

Second, there is little discussion over the extent to which the new rail and road projects will build on existing infrastructure. If the new investment will disregard previous transport networks and begin afresh, the government should be able to confront concerns regarding the waste of physical resources and meagre finances and extensive environmental degradation that could be avoided (Shafqat & Shahid, 2018, pp. 52–54).

Third, there needs to be a clear indication by the government on how the project routes are going to impact the social, economic, political, and environmental well-being of local communities. Explanation will support local communities to benefit from the economic development that the CPEC offers without fearing economic or environmental disasters. Previous experiences indicate that impact assessments were lacking during the construction of the Karokaram Highway, which had various adverse consequences. The third interim report of the Special Committee of Senate on the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor points out several flaws surrounding the development of the highway in light of increased traffic due to the CPEC. There is ecological damage taking place along the Ataabad Lake in the form of cracks on the lake's embankment as a result of construction work. The lake itself appears to be a product of a landslide resulting from the degradation of surrounding mountains because of the blasts that took place during the construction of the highway (Raza, 2016).

Finally, there is considerable ambiguity concerning whether the government has been able to negotiate trade agreements, whereby local markets can maximise returns from the proposed CPEC projects. Is there, for example, an understanding of the various areas of Pakistan's competitive advantage and how the CPEC routes can be altered to benefit them? Take the case of Balochistan, a province that has low population density and a dearth of skilled labour coupled with low income levels; worker migration into the province from other parts of the country may prove to further worsen the plight of the local labour force, who would not be able to compete in terms of skill or education (Raza, 2016). Pakistan must charter negotiations with China on the CPEC in a manner that boosts trade in Pakistan, provides Pakistanis an opportunity

for technical learning, and creates employment in the country. Such a framework should also ensure human development by investments in health and education. The good news is that China is responding favourably to address some of these concerns; in 2017 it established the China–Pakistan Emergency Medical Center in Gwadar, which provides medical assistance and medicines to the local population. Earlier in 2016, in collaboration with local villagers, Gwadar Faqeer School was launched to encourage the children of fishermen and local villagers to seek primary education. There is then a sense of urgency attached to the need for complementary policies in the form of technical and vocational training of the local labour force. More importantly, both governments have agreed to prioritise agriculture, education, medical treatment, poverty alleviation, water supply, and vocational training as key cooperation areas. The CPEC Joint Working Group (JWG) of Social Economic cooperation has begun work on establishing agricultural demonstration centres, poverty alleviation demonstration villages, vocational training schools, and hospitals, and for increasing scholarships for Pakistani students in China. These are small but positive steps and could win the confidence of local people in supporting the CPEC.

5.4 Curbing Terrorism and Strengthening Security

A prevalent security threat and acts of terrorism make it imperative to provide protection to Chinese companies and their personnel. Pakistan continues to be a venue for global terrorists: it is a victim, but also a source. There is a growing realisation that domestic sources of terrorism must be dismantled and destroyed. A politically volatile situation in Balochistan also threatens the prospects of the CPEC.

In terms of Pakistan's plan of action, the country will need to overcome the hurdles surrounding the CPEC by making a paradigm shift from a security state to a development state, where pursuit of peace and harmony promotes a culture of economic growth and reform. While striving for internal socio-economic reform, China has sought peace within and abroad, particularly in its neighbourhood (India, Vietnam, Russia, etc.), setting an example of pursuing diplomacy effectively. Pakistan is haunted by the twin problems of political instability and terrorism. Uprooting terrorism and maintaining internal peace and harmony continue to be the key challenges for Pakistan. In the past four years there has been considerable progress in this area, particularly in Karachi, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and Balochistan. Further foreign and local investment can come and development could be enhanced if

Pakistan is able to create a terror-free environment. Response of the provinces to security threats has not been proactive and uniform but rather reactionary and scattered. There is variation in the capacity of public institutions and officials in the provinces. The links and coordination at the federal, provincial, and local levels of government on matters of intelligence gathering and countering terrorist threats also remain weak.

Suicide bombings and targeted killings in Karachi and terrorist attacks in the relatively safer urban areas of Punjab further add to the risk associated with bilateral investment projects. Moreover, the security situation in Balochistan continues to be a serious challenge to national peace in Pakistan. Ethnic tensions, political violence, terrorism, and suicide bombings continue to project Pakistan as a country that does not have an investment-friendly environment. Baloch separatists have also explicitly demanded China to not engage in Gwadar (Esteban, 2016). On 2 July 2019, the US State Department declared the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) as an international terrorist group. Pakistan banned it in 2006. The State Department noted that, 'The BLA is an armed separatist group that targets security forces and civilians, mainly in the ethnic Baloch areas of Pakistan' (Bhattacherjee, 2019). On its part Pakistan has welcomed the decision as a 'positive development' (Ghazali, 2019). The global war on terror has cost Pakistan billions of dollars since 2001, an estimated total of US$123.13 billion (Jamal, N., 2017).

Very recently, in May 2019, a five-star luxury hotel was attacked in Gwadar. BLA claimed responsibility. The US designation of the BLA as a terrorist organisation is a relief for both Pakistan and China. Earlier in February 2017, a suicide bomber attacked Mall Road in Lahore, killing thirteen people, including the deputy inspector general of the traffic police (Gabol, 2017). A few days later, a shrine in Sehwan, a town in southern Sindh, was targeted, resulting in the death of at least eighty-eight people ('Army kills "100 terrorists" after Sehwan shrine blast', 2017). Less than a week later, the session's court in Charsadda, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), was attacked and seven people were killed (Mohmand & Khan, 2017). Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan, also witnessed the martyrdom of one of its leading bomb-disposal experts, who was killed during a bomb-diffusion operation. Additionally, attacks take place in the province on a daily basis. After a relatively peaceful 2018–2019 in the region, terrorist-related casualties occurred throughout the country, raising alarm over the extent of countrywide infiltration of armed extremist networks, casting shadows on the CPEC. Over the past three years the provincial government of Balochistan has taken several steps to counter terrorism and to enhance the capacity of the police and security forces, including the establishment of the Police Training College, the Balochistan Constabulary,

and the Anti-Terrorism Force Training School. In addition, a command and control centre with cameras has been set up in Quetta. This clearly shows that the federal and provincial governments are making concerted efforts to improve the security environment in Balochistan.

In April 2015, Pakistan promised the addition of 12,000 security personnel for the purpose of ensuring safety surrounding the CPEC. However, it is evident that the security situation demands a more multifaceted solution (Esteban, 2016). The solution will require more than simply increasing defence spending and setting up armed regiments. Already Pakistan's social sectors have suffered from funds being allocated away from health and education and towards security. A further rise in expenditure on security may further tighten resources for social development. The government has attempted to keep provincial authorities on board through promoting participation at international forums, such as international meetings of the Joint Cooperation Committee of the CPEC, demonstrating to some extent the importance of internal consent. Yet provincial scepticism continues with regards to project development.

5.5 The Political Economy of Balochistan

Analysing the current territorial distribution of CPEC projects reveals that most of the new projects do in fact appear to be concentrated towards the eastern part of Pakistan, while apprehension about the CPEC is brewing in the western part (KP and Balochistan). This clearly shows that it is imperative for the federal government to engage, persuade, and assure the leadership and people of Balochistan on the economic dividends that the CPEC offers. The political economy of Balochistan presents a paradox. It is rich in natural resources (including minerals such as gold, copper, and coal) and energy reserves, but it is characterised by socio-economic under-development, widespread poverty, low-skilled labour, and poor infrastructure, making it a province that has a population that is difficult to engage. More importantly, it is troubling to note that over the decades, successive governments in Pakistan have not paid adequate attention to the social and economic development of the Baloch people.

The people in Balochistan worry that the CPEC projects could catalyse the process of resource extraction from the province without a fair chance for local development. Promoting the 'Western route' of the CPEC could dispel this scepticism. From the maps available on government websites (CPEC, 2020), it is quite evident that development in the province remains limited. Two railway upgrade projects are in addition to the construction of new lines that connect Gwadar to Quetta and Quetta to Zhob. Furthermore, a significant

proportion of the investment in Balochistan is focussed on the development of the port city of Gwadar, which is largely managed by Chinese companies or the Pakistani military. How the province's rural heartland will benefit from the CPEC remains a serious concern. The Baloch people, therefore, need to be assured about the dividends of development in terms of improvements in human resource capacity and quality of life. Resultantly, an important area of action is to promote greater representation of the Baloch people in the CPEC activity. Greater representation could also help correct the perception that the CPEC is not Punjab-centric but brightens prospects of investment, trade, and development all over Pakistan. In the past three years some movement has begun to occur in this direction. For example, in 2017 in collaboration with the Higher Commission of Education (HEC) the Chinese government launched the Gwadar–China Scholarship Program, an international programme designed for the Baloch youth and especially for the indigenous students of Gwadar. The programme offers numerous opportunities, notably the opportunity to learn Chinese at a leading Chinese language institute. Fourteen students of Gwadar were selected for this yearlong Chinese language learning course in March 2018, and another thirty-six in November of the same year. The scholarship is primarily sponsored by the government of Pakistan but operates in collaboration with the Chinese universities. This programme is dual purpose: from a Chinese perspective it is likely to promote cross-cultural learning and from a Pakistani perspective it is likely to produce individuals proficient in the Chinese language who will benefit from job opportunities emerging through the CPEC. More importantly, it is likely to create a sense of inclusiveness and ownership of the CPEC in the Baloch students. This is imperative if we are to realise it in its true spirit; for in engagement lays the prospect of the CPEC being a 'game changer'.

In addition to the Baloch, the people in Gilgit-Baltistan also demand due dividends from the CPEC. Thus far, hardly any meaningful investment has been identified for the area, with the exception of the passage of a road. Gilgit-Baltistan, for instance, could also benefit from access to the 1,000 km gas pipeline between Tajikistan and China for energy use. The third interim report of the Special Committee of Senate on China–Pakistan Economic Corridor revealed that while around $36 billion of the CPEC were targeted towards electricity generation in Pakistan, power generation in Gilgit-Baltistan remains without any funding whatsoever (Raza, 2016).

The government in the province of KP has similar expectations, demanding that CPEC-related investment in the region should go beyond just highway construction. ICT infrastructure, railway networks, and energy projects should also be ensured for the province. In fact, if the CPEC infrastructure development

is pursued with imagination and commitment, it has the potential to play a substantial role in reducing regional disparities in Pakistan. Economically and politically marginalised territories could benefit in terms of employment generation, basic road infrastructure, and training.

Here a bottom-up approach can be crucial in materialising the CPEC. For instance, greater employment of local labour, the creation of vocational institutes to complement infrastructural developments, and setting up road networks to connect the infrastructurally impoverished rural areas to major highway routes are a few options to consider. Of course, learning the Chinese language would be a step in the right direction, and some progress is visible. According to the Chinese director of the Confucius Institute Islamabad, Chinese language courses are becoming popular in Pakistan; last year, 1,000 people took the language qualifying test and this year, 1,029 people have applied (Yunbi, 2017).

5.6 Fostering Regional Cooperation under the Shadow of India–Pakistan Rivalry

Given the significance of the CPEC, it is worthwhile analysing how the changing dynamics of China–India relations could impact Pakistan. To begin with, it is important to realise that the strategic environment in South Asia is driven and defined by India–Pakistan rivalry. Despite a shared colonial past and visible cultural and institutional similarity, the dynamics of the relationship continue to be driven by hostility, lack of trust, conflict, and war. Insecurity, fear, and suspicion of the 'other' continue to keep South Asia as the 'nuclear flash point' while peace, cooperation, and economic partnership remain elusive. Most scholarly and journalistic studies continue to present a dismal picture of an 'unending conflict' in South Asia (Ganguly, 2001). This rivalry encourages violence and perpetuates an environment that ignites terrorism. The roots of 'hatred of brothers' are buried in the Hindu, Muslim, and British histories and cultural experiences. Both India and Pakistan can, and do, invoke 'past glory' to run each other down. Suspicious of each other's intent, Pakistan and India tumbled into war over Kashmir in 1947, aggravating insecurities. Since then, Kashmir has been the core issue between them. India claims Kashmir is an 'integral part of India', while Pakistan contests that it is a 'disputed territory'. The two countries have fought three wars over the matter (in 1948, 1965, and 1999). Over the past half a century, the international community has shown little interest in the 'historical, legal validity or merits' of the case or even of the plight of the Kashmiris. The primary concern of the international community

has been to ensure that a conflict between India and Pakistan does not degenerate into large-scale military conflict or nuclear war.

The hostility between Pakistan and India has a deep impact on the psyches of both nations and continues to be an obstacle to the evolution and development of the CPEC. Some international studies have commented that territorial disputes between India and Pakistan may now gain global attention through the CPEC, finally leading to international action on the issue. In this way, the CPEC may not bring the intended peace and regional integration promoted by China but may lead to an intensification of conflict in the region. Would China venture to convert the challenge of India –Pakistan rivalry into a peace dividend opportunity?

5.7 Changing Dynamics of Indo–China Relations and the CPEC

In 2014, as Narendra Modi became Prime Minister, the initial indications were that China and India could embark on a new phase of strategic partnership. In September 2014, China's President Xi Jinping visited India and, along with Prime Minister Modi, the two announced the signing of sixteen memoranda of understanding (MOUs) on a wide range of collaborations in science and technology, culture, trade, infrastructure, and border management. Ahead of President Xi Jinping's visit, Modi remarked, 'China and India are two bodies, one spirit'; the comment was appreciated by the Chinese president and set the tone for China and India's cooperation. A few weeks later in the last few days of September 2014, Prime Minister Modi paid his first official visit to the United States. The visit led to a re-definition of the Indo–US strategic partnership. It opened up new vistas of partnership between India and the US moving beyond strategic concerns and could have caused a schism between India and China. Nonetheless, President Xi and Prime Minister Modi have shown enormous diplomatic skills in sustaining personal rapport. There were several other occasions where the Indian and Chinese leadership also met. First, in 2015 the Indian prime minister visited China and, in 2016, the two leaders met again, on the side lines of the BRICS meeting in Goa. However, between 2014 and 2016 the Indian prime minister visited the United States four times. This clearly shows that the India–US strategic partnership has solidified and India appears to have opted to side with the United States in containing China. Geopolitically, this could intensify the India–China rivalry in global and regional affairs; however, it is unlikely to dampen prospects of economic cooperation between the two. Having said this, two factors that could keep India–US relations tenuous are that, first, the mindset of the Indian political

leadership and policy makers remains tilted towards non-alignment and, second, the unpredictable and brinkmanship driven style and behaviour of US president Trump. Yet, given the scale of Indo–China economic relations and crafty Modi–Xi Jinping personal diplomacy, it is plausible that India may be weighing its options and would strategize to negotiate terms of joining the CPEC by maximising concessions from both China and Pakistan (Ranjan, 2015). The proposed Bangladesh–China, India–Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor thus remains under active consideration and warrants attention being given to the prospects for both economic cooperation and geostrategic contestation between India and China.

5.8 Balochistan: The Emerging Epicentre of Regional Power Rivalry and the Future of the CPEC

It is within the context of great power rivalry and Chinese suspicions of 'containment' and Indian worries of 'encirclement' that Balochistan has become a battleground for future contestation, rivalry, and proxy wars. Balochistan's geostrategic location, rugged topography, rich mineral resources, tribal and nomadic population, and long coastline has been highlighted by a number of scholarly studies (Titus, 1996; Kaplan, 2011). From the Pakistani perspective, India and Iran are two countries whose strategic and economic cooperation sets security alarms in Islamabad. Hence these must be monitored carefully and thwarted before they pose any threat. In this context deepening of any Iran–India relations are of immense concern for Pakistan. Besides, terrorism, the expansion of commercial and strategic ties between Iran and India rouses serious concern for Pakistan with special reference to Balochistan.

In May 2016, India made yet another strategic move to impede the CPEC. Prime Minister Modi signed twelve pacts with Iranian President Rouhani to upgrade the operationalisation of Chabahar Port in the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan (which neighbours the Pakistani province of Balochistan) by agreeing to invest US$500 million. For India, the Chabahar Port could serve as its gateway to Afghanistan and the rest of Central Asia (Malik, 2016a). India promised to undertake projects worth US$20 billion that would lead to a 'strategic game change' across the region, including China. The Indo–Iranian deal came in the wake of the Iran–US–Europe nuclear deal and opened up an opportunity for Iran to increase the export of its oil (at the cost of Saudi Arabia). Iran has already built 600 km of road between Chabahar and Zahedan.

Rail connections are also being built: Iran sees Chabahar as an alternative to Bandar Abbas which is inside the Gulf and west of the Arabian Sea. Chabahar, like Gwadar, is a deep-water port that gives Iran access to the Indian Ocean. Pakistan is however discomforted by this Iran–India collaboration in Chabahar, as it suspects this port would be used for surveillance of the Pakistan Navy in the Arabian Sea. Iran could also use it as a tactical ploy to put pressure on Pakistan to reduce reliance on Saudi Arabia, particularly in light of President Trump's recent visit and the Arab Islamic American Summit (in which fifty Islamic countries participated), which seemed to be against Iranian influence in the region. Pakistan is also wary that through Chabahar, India's influence will increase, both in Afghanistan and across Central Asia.[5]

On the other hand, both Iran and Pakistan have a common interest in quelling the Baloch separatists; neither is willing to accept any demand of an independent Balochistan. In the 1950s Iran crushed the Dadshah revolt in Iranian Balochistan and Pakistan extradited Dadshah's brother to Iran. Similarly, in 2011 Abdulla Malik Riggi, a Jundallah leader, was arrested by Pakistan, returned to Iran, and was executed there.

Baloch separatists on both sides have intensified their international campaign for separation and vocalised their opposition to Chabahar and Gwadar. The situation is complicated by India and China viewing investment in these two ports as an opportunity for countering the other. These two ports are likely to intensify Saudi–Iran rivalry as well, for influence/power projection in the region. This became evident when in February 2019, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, while visiting Pakistan pledged an investment of $20 billion, including $10 billion for building an oil refinery at Gwadar (Dilawar & Haider, 2019). Despite continuing sanctions on Iran, the United States has encouraged India to build Chabahar yet it also perceives Gwadar as a long-term threat if, and when, China is able to connect through Gwadar's western part and then deeper into Central Asia. For the United States, it is not an immediate threat, as the US Navy is much more technologically advanced and has greater reach as compared to China. For both China and Pakistan, Gwadar, on the mouth of the Persian Gulf, does provide an edge. Therefore, as I have argued elsewhere, whosoever controls the Persian Gulf will control the Arabian Sea; whosoever dominates the Arabian Sea will dominate the Indian Ocean (Shafqat, 2017). Thus, Pakistan needs to astutely monitor Iran–India cooperation and tread carefully around the Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry in the Gulf and beyond.

5 For a perceptive analysis of these regional rivalries and state strategies, see Hughes, 2016.

It is worth noting that the two emerging strategic ports, Gwadar and Chabahar, are both part of Iranian and Pakistani Balochistan and are merely a distance of 70 km from each other; if the two are connected and cooperative peace building occurs, it could spur economic activity and strengthen China's BRI and CPEC initiatives.

From China's perspective, Pakistan serves many of its vital geostrategic objectives in the region. Pakistan is a regionally important country to China, and the CPEC could usher a brighter economic future. Pakistan was a key ally for China throughout the Cold War period. However, today a militarily muscular India is also a leading trading partner of China. Any new economic partnership between China and India could weaken ties between China and Pakistan. Beijing, however, would not abandon Pakistan, as China's interest in a stronger Pakistan parallels its own interests. In particular, Pakistan plays an important role in fighting terrorism, contributing to China's efforts to fight terrorist and separatist forces in southwest China. Just as India has been able to build economic ties with China despite its border disputes, Pakistan and India can also learn from that practice and pursue the significant opportunities that can be realised for both countries if economic interactions are strengthened. This will require India to overcome its scepticism regarding the CPEC road routes going through Gilgit-Baltistan (Kashmir) or its fears of China's facilitated access to the Arabian Sea (Esteban, 2016). That implies that both India and Pakistan would also need to abandon proxy wars as a policy choice; the arrest of an Indian intelligence agent in Balochistan this year has sparked controversy in this regard (U. Jamal, 2015). This demands diplomatic engagement and resolution of 'intractable conflicts' through political means for mutual economic gains, trade, and development, and to that end the CPEC can be pivotal.

5.9 Conclusion

Taking a pragmatist position, I have argued that the eventual success of the CPEC for Pakistan could be assessed through a human development lens, where it is participatory and inclusive. For Pakistan, prioritising harmony and consensus between the provinces is one area that needs to be pursued with urgency. This can be done through involving local members within the management and design of the individual CPEC projects. For instance, for the communities in Gilgit-Baltistan, in essence the first geographic point of entry of land-based economic interaction between China and Pakistan, there needs to be a coherent policy framework that encourages participation in, and ownership of, the CPEC. This can be achieved through promoting local agricultural

and handicraft projects and facilitating labour movement from northern Pakistan to China.

Similarly, Balochistan has been confronted with chronic unemployment and grim job prospects for its youth. Ensuring the employment of Baloch labour in Gwadar and their technical training to enhance their skills will pacify anxiety that the CPEC will be exploitative and unjust. Simultaneously, China and Pakistan need to create an enabling environment for Baloch traders and businessmen by working with the Quetta Chamber of Industries that was established in 1972 and today has over 2,000 members. The CPEC would gain a boost along with credibility in the eyes of the Baloch business people if China opens up visa application centres or consulates in Quetta and Gwadar. Currently, a Baloch businessman has to travel to Karachi to obtain a visa for China and besides this expense and inconvenience the business visa is itself pretty expensive, costing about US$1,500 (Aamir, 2019). Prudence on the part of Pakistan and China demands that this visa fees must be rationalised to promote a sense of ownership and engagement among the Baloch businessmen, investors, and bazaar traders.

This chapter also argued that managing the security situation will be a determining factor on the basis of which Pakistan will be able to capitalise on the opportunities the CPEC offers, both through engaging with China and also through an enhanced role in the regional economy. The civilian and military leaderships appear more determined in fighting terrorism, especially since 2014. Operation Zarb-e Azab and Radd al-Fasad have indicated the army's newfound fervour for curbing militant activity, while the civilian government has supplemented military efforts with policies such as the National Action Plan. These measures, however, continue to remain controversial and their implementation questionable, many pointing out that the root causes of terrorism still require a more holistic solution. Such solution would require engaging across the educational, social, political, religious, and cultural spheres of governance through improved curriculum design, providing opportunities for skills development and quality employment, and undertaking community-building initiatives that include interfaith dialogue and effective awareness campaigns.

Only by establishing internal harmony can Pakistan's leadership expect to resolve its external conflicts, including the pressing India–Pakistan rivalry that presently threatens the smooth completion of CPEC projects. Learning from China, Pakistan too will need to engage in skilful diplomacy to project the CPEC as an opportunity for the entire region, not just for Pakistan. This chapter argued that an East–West corridor can complement the CPEC, formalising

the significant clandestine trade that occurs between India and Pakistan and boosting the potential for greater development gains for both countries.

Analysing the strategic dimensions, the chapter argued that the port of Gwadar in Balochistan is now an integral component of the CPEC. Its development and full-scale operation as a seaport and potential naval base has caused anxiety for India and other regional powers. Through this port, China gets the closest access to the Persian Gulf and its oil as well as to the Middle Eastern markets. China has become the world's second largest oil consumer and it is well aware of the significance of Pakistan's strategic location on the globe.

The second important rationale for the CPEC is related to China's sensitivity about the growing strategic partnership of the United States with India, emerging under the Bush administration in 2004, expanding under President Obama, and more recently reaching new heights under President Trump and President Biden. On the other hand, Pakistan, despite its 'roller-coaster' relations with the United States, has maintained an enduring partnership with the US. On occasions Pakistan has served as a bridge between China and the United States (such as the 1971 Kissinger visit to China), but more importantly, at critical times Pakistan has lent diplomatic support to China on international forums; the issue of Tibet and Taiwan and its support for China to obtain a seat at the UN Security Council are a few examples. This has helped Pakistan win China's trust and strategic friendship.

The third point to consider is that China and Pakistan share a history of strong geopolitical interests and military ties. Transformation and expansion into economic, commercial, educational, and cultural links could enlarge the framework of cooperation that the two countries share. The CPEC, under the BRI framework, is perhaps one of the most critical components of the Chinese vision, to borrow Nye and Keohane's expression of 'complex interdependence' (Keohane and Nye, 1973). The CPEC's geostrategic location requires that both China and Pakistan develop sophisticated diplomatic and foreign policy skills to make the salience of the CPEC understandable to people within the country and across the region. Pakistani policy planners had realised the strategic significance of Gwadar in the early 1960s but had neither the resources nor the capacity to develop it into a port. Nonetheless, today the port city of Gwadar and its development as a key component of the CPEC symbolises the importance of China–Pakistan relations that cuts across all of the dimensions mentioned above. In particular, the upgrade of Gwadar reflects China's policy of safeguarding its security concerns vis-à-vis its overarching development programme. The Pakistani port city forms one of the three focal areas of recent Chinese military strategy, in addition to the ports of Djibouti and Chabahar. In that spirit, Balochistan is the geo-economic and geostrategic 'heartland' for

the CPEC. Gwadar's 'ultra-strategic location', plus the propping up of the ports of Pasni and Ormara along the Makran coast makes it Pakistan's 'new destiny' (Kaplan, 2011, pp. 68–69).

Establishing strong military cooperation with Pakistan's navy in Gwadar will further deepen ties between the armed forces of the two countries and will help both Pakistan and China expand its commerce and security role in the Indian Ocean. Pakistan would remain pivotal for China's BRI strategic vision, but to ensure that it becomes a 'game-changer' for Pakistan, it would need to redesign its economic policies and security interests with pragmatic foresight, discretion, and national consensus that manifests national will.[6]

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PART 3

China's Soft Power and Hard Power in the MENA Region

CHAPTER 6

Confucius in the UAE: Chinese Soft Power in the GCC

Habibul Haque Khondker

> When French foreign minister Pierre Laval asked Joseph Stalin in 1935 to soften his brutal anti-Catholicism, Stalin dismissed the request: 'The Pope! How many divisions has he got?' Today, Stalin and the Soviet Union are dust while the papacy influences billions with its soft power. It turns out that army divisions aren't necessarily useful instruments of power outside of wartime.
>
> PETER JENNINGS, Inquirer, *The Australian*, 3 September 2016

• • •

> When one by force subdues men, they do not submit to him in heart. *They submit, because* their strength is not adequate *to resist*. When one subdues men by virtue, in their hearts' core they are pleased, and sincerely submit, as was the case with the seventy disciples in their submission to Confucius.
>
> MENCIUS (372 BCE–289 BCE)

⁘

6.1 Introduction

The epigraphic quotes above indicate simultaneously the salience and the pedigree of the idea of soft power in the affairs of governance. More recent discussions since Bell (1975) and Nye (2012; 2011; 2004; 1990) have introduced the concept of soft power directly in the domain of international relations, which has now been embraced in various parts of the world, especially among aspiring global 'powers'. At the opening of the 19th Party Congress of the Communist Party of China at the People's Hall on 18 October 2017, President Xi Jinping declared, 'China's cultural soft power and the international influence

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of Chinese culture have increased significantly'. President Xi continued, 'China's international standing has risen as never before' (Mitchell & Hornby, 2017, para 1).

In the present chapter, I explore China's charm offensive or deployment of soft power in the Arab region in general and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in particular. The exercise of soft power on the part of China poses a unique challenge because China's image of a hard state was one of the keys to the rapid economic transformation of China since the Communist Revolution of 1949. Hard power remains a hallmark of China's model of development. The two questions that this chapter raises are theoretical in nature: whether the state-driven soft power is limited in its efficacy and to what extent a state that has built a reputation as a hard state can be the fount of soft power. The latter part of the question alludes to the absence of a vibrant civil society in China, which produces a paradox of denial of soft power internally by the Chinese state while it is projecting it internationally. The following narratives explore the state of the play of Chinese soft power in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in light of the above-mentioned theoretical questions.

As China has emerged – more accurately, re-emerged – as a global economic and political power, it is also trying to exert its cultural power of attraction or soft power in the world, especially in the region where China has vital economic and security interests. In this exploratory essay on the state of the play of Chinese soft power, I choose to focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in general and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in particular. The Chinese population in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was estimated at between 30,000 and 50,000 in 2006. As of August 2016, it grew fourfold; more than 200,000 Chinese people were working, doing business, or studying in the UAE. There are 4,000 Chinese enterprises in the UAE, which include large state-owned enterprises and self-employed enterprises in Dragon Mart in Dubai. These enterprises cover such areas as energy, telecommunications, transport, construction, trade, finance, securities, and services, according to Ambassador Chang Hua (Kader, 2016). Another author estimated in 2018 that 300,000 Chinese nationals were living and working in Dubai (Dorraj, 2018). In 2015, the UAE was the host of the Beijing International Book Fair and in 2018, the Department of Culture and Tourism of Abu Dhabi won the best pavilion award at the 2018 Beijing International Book Fair ('Abu Dhabi pavilion wins award at Beijing Book Fair', 2018). More than 500,000 Chinese tourists visited the UAE in 2015 (Kader, 2016). These are some of the aspects of the growing significance of the Chinese soft power in the UAE. Such softer cultural exchanges were based on firmer economic relations. In 2017, China–UAE trade surpassed the US$46.3 billion achieved in 2016. The UAE is China's second largest trade

partner in the region after Saudi Arabia. With more than 2,400 Chinese enterprises registered as members of the UAE Chamber of Commerce and with 300,000 Chinese nationals living in Dubai (Dorraj, 2018), the relationship between these two countries has reached a new height.

Historically, nations – and before nations, cities and civilisations – had always taken a keen interest in exerting their cultural influences on the peoples outside their borders. In the civilisational encounters, religions, philosophies, and cultural traditions were aspects of what we call soft power today and they exerted an influence that was not limited by borders. Although in earlier historical encounters, it was a subtle, imperceptible process that slipped through geographical and cultural boundaries unobtrusively, in the age of imperialism, of course, there were deliberate attempts to impose cultural values through transplanted institutions and cultural practices.

In the present chapter, I focus on the spread of Chinese soft power broadly in the GCC countries in general, with special focus on the UAE. In the concluding section I dwell on some of the limitations of soft power as well.

6.2 Soft Power and Its Growing Reach

'Soft power' is defined here as the spread of cultural influence to enhance the attraction of a nation or development of a favourable attitude towards a given culture. Such attraction is fostered by a combination of diplomatic processes, with a focus on public diplomacy and non-traditional linkages between nations. A voluntary acceptance is preferable to coercion. Superpowers have always engaged in charm offensive to present a better image of their respective nations, long before Nye coined the term in the late 1980s.

On 26 April 2017, His Highness Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, launched the UAE Soft Power Council, which was to define a comprehensive strategy to reinforce the country's position and consolidate its values of respect and appreciation with governments and citizens across the world. Such is the force of soft power ('Mohammad Bin Rashid launches UAE Soft Power Council', 2017). When Nye coined the term he defined it as 'the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion' (Ikenberry, 2004, para. 1). For Nye, a country's soft power rests on three resources: (a) its culture (in places where it is attractive to others); (b) its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad); and (c) its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority).

Soft power may be defined as the ability to obtain what you want through co-option and attraction, rather than force and coercion.

Although Nye has been invariably credited with the coinage of the term, various political thinkers had long advocated the very idea of soft power itself. One could even trace its probable origin in China. As one of the quotations at the start of this chapter indicates, Mencius, a disciple of Confucius, also alluded to the idea of soft power ('Ancient landmarks XII', 1927). The idea of soft power, if not the term itself, has a longer history. Bell (1975) used the term 'influence strategy', which presaged soft power. Bell used 'power strategy' to mean hard power, which relies on coercion. Bell argued that one advantage of an influence strategy is that it may result in less hostility or resentment than a power strategy. Sociologists from Max Weber onwards have made a distinction between power and influence. And in the Gramscian tradition, the distinction between power and hegemony also leads to valuable insights. What is new is the application of such distinction in the context of the relations between the nation states.

As shown in Table 6.1, in the soft power ranking curated by Softpower30.com and the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy, China made it to the list of the top thirty countries (McClory, 2015). There are six indices against which countries are ranked. The indices include culture, digital, enterprise, education, engagement, and government. These indices give the countries of the developed Global North a comparative advantage. By 2018, China's position improved to twenty-seven. The discourse of China's soft power followed the country's momentous economic growth since 1978 which catapulted it to the second largest economic power in the world.

TABLE 6.1 Soft power of the leading Asian countries

Country	2015	2016	2017	2018
Japan	8	5	6	5
South Korea	20	20	21	20
Singapore	21	21	20	21
China	30	27	25	27

TABLE DEVISED BY AUTHOR USING DATA DRAWN FROM HTTPS://SOFTPOWER30.COM

6.3 Re-Emergence of China as an Economic Power

There were periods in Chinese history when China was the leading civilisation of the world or one of the leading civilisations, but never in the past has China sought to present itself as a preeminent power. The most glorious phase of China's civilisation in terms of its achievements occurred in the Tang dynasty (618–907), when China influenced parts of the Middle East by spreading its products, including silk and porcelain and technological know-how, and also influenced its East Asian neighbours such as Korea and Japan with the philosophy of Confucius. There is a consensus among historians that China was the strongest, most advanced, and best-governed country in the world in the seventh and eighth centuries CE. During the Tang dynasty, trade with Central Asia via the Silk Route reached new heights. In the long term, China during that period had exercised a great deal of influence – soft power, if we can use the term anachronistically – in the world.

In Tang's China painting, sculpture, calligraphy, poetry, literature, music, and dance reached a new high. Important scientific innovations, such as woodblock printing on paper and silk, helped to speed up the transfer of knowledge and improve literacy. Sometime in the ninth century, the Arabs learned the process of papermaking from the Chinese and helped transmit that knowledge to Europe (Abu-Lughod, 1989). The technological and scientific advances were not sustained in the following centuries, and by the time of the early modern period in Europe, the China of the Ming period – with all its technological, maritime, and developmental advantages –chose to close its doors and decided to withdraw from the rest of the world. The process of China's return to the global system began with the Republican movement of the first decade of the twentieth century. Whether it is the nationalist period or the communist period, China was at the receiving end of Western ideas, technology, and modernity. It is only at the end of the last decade of the twentieth century that China began to awaken, and in the first decade of the twenty-first century, China is beginning to be assertive, giving rise to the discourse of Chinese soft power.

6.4 China's Soft Power

The idea of soft power in the context of China was probably first mooted by an unlikely but scholarly leader, namely Mr. Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, who predicted as early as 1996 that 'China can acquire military and economic strength (hard power) in [the next] thirty years but it might take them longer to acquire cultural influences (soft power)' (Lee, 1996, para 7). In a speech delivered at

the 21st Century Forum in Beijing on 4 September 1996, Mr. Lee optimistically spoke of a Chinese renaissance. He stated:

> In a world of nuclear deterrence, usefulness of force is limited. Soft power, the influence of culture especially through television, films and the intangibles of a more technically advanced civilization, becomes as important as hard power in international affairs. Soft power is achieved only when other nations admire and want to emulate aspects of that nation's civilization.
>
> LEE, 1996, para 7

In his 1996 speech, Mr. Lee dwelt on the future of Asia and its rise in the twenty-first century. Singapore's founding and wise leader had some concern as to how China might be able to progress so as to earn the respect of others. Yet as early as 2002, five years before the leaders of China officially introduced the discourse of soft power, a Singaporean commentator predicted, perhaps, also optimistically, that China's soft power would rise following its pre-eminence in military and economic power in the forthcoming years.

> As Japan's soft power reached the world outside Japan in the 1970s and 1980s, when it influenced fads and ideas around the world, from the Walkman to Japanese animated cartoons and manga. Likewise, China's soft power would undoubtedly increase, with things Chinese becoming a la mode internationally. Acupuncture, Chinese martial arts, herbal medicine and Chinese cuisine have become increasingly popular with the globalized generation. Chinese cinema, pop music and culture are also more easily accessed internationally, as China opens its doors wider to tourism and international exchanges. Chinese fashion fads, based on the Chinese collar, women's qibao or the traditional men's tunic would influence international vogue even more, just as Chinese calligraphy and artwork will invade world artistic markets.
>
> TEO, 2002, p. 15

It may not be unfair to suggest that there is little evidence of a linear relationship between hard power and soft power, nor is soft power a natural consequence of hard power.

According to Nye, China enhanced its soft power by its successful staging of the Olympic Games. Officially, it was in October 2007 that President Hu Jintao declared China's intent to increase its soft power. Staging the Olympics was

an important part of that strategy; the other event was the Shanghai Expo of 2009. For Nye,

> With the establishment of several hundred Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese culture around the world, increased international broadcasting, attraction of foreign students to its universities, and softer diplomacy toward its neighbors in Southeast Asia, China made major investments in soft power. Opinion polls showed an increase in its international reputation. By accompanying its growth in hard power with an attractive soft power narrative, China was trying to use smart power to convey the idea of its 'peaceful rise' and thus head off a countervailing balance of power.
>
> NYE, 2011, p. 2

In his keynote speech to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2007, as he charted the ambitious goals of economic and social developments, Hu also emphasised the need for enhancing Chinese culture as the country's soft power. Hu stated,

> Culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength.
>
> The 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 2007

Linking the global to the national, President Hu also emphasised the need for his compatriots to 'enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests'. In terms of specific actions, President Hu outlined the following:

1. to step up the development of the press, publishing, radio, film, television, literature and art, give correct guidance to the public, and foster healthy social trends;
2. to strengthen efforts to develop and manage Internet culture and foster a good cyber environment;
3. to continue to develop non-profit cultural programmes as the main approach to ensuring the basic cultural rights and interests of the people, increase spending on such programmes, and build more cultural facilities in urban communities and rural areas;
4. to vigorously develop the cultural industry, launch major projects to lead the industry as a whole, speed up the development of cultural

industry bases and clusters of cultural industries with regional features, nurture key enterprises and strategic investors, create a thriving cultural market, and enhance the industry's international competitiveness;

5. to establish a national system of honours for outstanding cultural workers.

XINHUANET, 2007

A careful reading of the above objectives would reveal a highly instrumental approach to use soft culture to advance both the global position of China and the national interest at the same time. It also reflected a 'tool kit' approach to culture (Swidler, 1986). The underlying objectives also reflect a pragmatic, if not hard, approach to the promotion of soft power.

Surely, President Hu Jintao's declaration was not a surprise. Before the declaration by President Hu, Chinese academics discussed for several years the importance of *ruan shili* or soft power. In the Party Congress, President Hu launched it officially as a goal of the Chinese state. Since Xi Jinping assumed office in 2012, he took special interest in promoting this idea. In 2013, he convened a Politburo meeting to discuss the idea. President Hu liked the idea of the Chinese dream.

One of the earlier attempts to bolster China's soft power was sending two pandas to the US during President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972, a move which was labelled as 'panda diplomacy'. Since then China has been loaning home-grown pandas to the UK, Japan, France, Germany, Spain, and Mexico. 'The most important reason', according to one commentator, 'for the surge in panda emissaries is President Xi's emphasis on enhancing Chinese soft power abroad' (Anderlini, 2017). In 2017, following a G20 summit in Berlin, China loaned Germany two pandas for 15 years with Chancellor Angela Merkel called them 'two very pleasant diplomats' (Anderlini, 2017). Whether this is promotion of soft power or not is somewhat debatable, yet this has been an instrument in China's arsenal in promoting a softer image of China overseas for some time now. The exhibition of pandas also served as a public diplomacy tool outside of formal diplomatic dealings. The projection of China's soft power in many regions of the world involves a range of tools, 'from cultivating overseas diaspora and promoting the Chinese language through Confucius Institutes, to state media outlets providing Chinese perspectives to African newspapers' (Goh, 2012, para. 4).

In September 2011, as part of the country's sixtieth anniversary celebrations, Chinese President Hu Jintao held an international conference on soft power and nation branding at the prestigious Tsinghua University. Invited guests

included high-level academics, government officials, and media experts who came from the United States, South Korea, Australia, and Pakistan to help brainstorm China's charm offensive strategy.

China wanted to gain a better international image through the exercise of soft power, to offset what China considered a demonisation of China by the Western media. China realised the importance of a good image in a world dominated by images. The common criticism of China by the Western media includes lack of democracy, as well as lack of freedom of the press and religion. Second, China's economic rise was increasingly perceived by some quarters as a threat. China's initiative to institute public diplomacy was to 'promote the correct image of China abroad', states Zhao Qizheng, a high-level government official.[1]

Whether China's embrace of soft power is indicative of its long-term goal of following the model of liberal democracy, as implied by Nye, is open to question. South Korean professor Chung Ki-yul argued that Nye's dwelling on soft power was motivated by his analysis of why America lost its war in Vietnam. Nye, Chung concluded, realised that although America's military far outstripped that of Vietnam, it failed to earn the hearts and minds of the indigenous population (Lee, 2009, para 20.).

It was also stated that the idea of soft power may be more relevant to the advanced post-industrial societies with a liberal democratic tradition, and the question was posed as to whether soft power is appropriate for China. Zhao cleared up the debate by explaining to the audience that China has a moderate ambition with its soft power experiment.

> China's voice will increase in the world. But we don't have the intention to be regarded as a big and powerful country. What we hope is to get equal treatment in the world. We hope the international media doesn't have to harbor grievances on China and Chinese people. … I hope the two pictures of what the international media report about China and what China really is, could come closer to each other. And our goal is to explain China to the world.
>
> LEE, 2009, para 25[2]

1 Zhao Qizheng was the former minister in charge of the State Council Information Office, the government's voice.

2 Zhao Qizheng was best known as the voice of the Chinese government when he served as the Minister of the Information Office of the State Council (1998–2005) in China's cabinet. Trained originally as a nuclear physicist, he served as a vice mayor of Shanghai before he came to be in charge of the State Council Information Office.

Analysts consider that developing a higher media profile, that is, projecting China's perspectives on various issues of the world, is an important aspect of China's soft power. As China transforms to a major power, China realised the need for presenting a softer image of itself internationally to offset or neutralise the hard image of China and any possible misgivings about China's intention of world domination.

Another important aspect of China's soft power is that it complements China's national development strategy, where it fosters cultural pride accruing to regime legitimacy. Joshua Kurlantzick (2007) warned that the way Beijing would mount the challenge is not by employing its military might against Washington, but by using its economic strengths to spread across the world its soft power: the ability to shape the preferences of other countries without the threat or use of force. But this fear may be misplaced.

Unlike the hard-core communist leaders of the past, the new generation of Chinese leaders are more sophisticated and take into account the idea of image and impressions. They project the image of the peaceful rise of China as a global economic and military power. The idea of soft power complements this strategy. In the Chinese multi-pronged strategy of nurturing soft power, trade, and economic assistance are also included. China provided interest-free loans to some of its neighbours such as Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia to help tide over the financial crisis of 2008. Some such assistance has also been strategic, as in the case of Burma. It is arguable whether or not providing US$3 billion to the military junta of Burma can be considered as an aspect of soft power.

It is possible to talk about soft power and projection of influence through soft loans advanced for infrastructural development in the same breath. China's attempt at charm offensive was buttressed by offering attractive economic assistance programmes to the developing countries in the region and beyond. In 2015, President Xi inaugurated a US$46 billion economic assistance package to Pakistan on building a deep-sea port that would link China directly to the Arabian Sea (Liu, 2015). This project, known as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), promised to help revive a sluggish economy. In 2017, it appears that the economy of Pakistan against difficult security threats is picking up and growing at around 5 per cent. China also offered to provide US$32.6 billion to India to help build a fast train linking Chennai with Delhi. In addition, China offered US$24 billion to Bangladesh and signed scores of projects (Paul, 2016) that included generating electric power and other infrastructural development projects including building deep seaports.

In the mid-1990s, with the end of the Cold War and the presumable victory of the liberal world – the 'end of history', in the optimistic narrative of Fukuyama – contra Washington consensus, Beijing consensus was mooted

indicating a new role of China in the world. With the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Council in 2010, which included Russia and the former Soviet states in Central Asia, the role of China was established and recognised.

The establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in January 2016 was an important countervailing force to the dominance of the world by the Bretton Woods institutions. The Bank's first four loans included loans for infrastructural development such as power and transport to countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, totalling half a billion US dollars. All these countries were among the forty-six founding members of the bank. Members of the bank from the GCC countries include Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

According to *The Economist* (2017), China spends billions of dollars a year on the promotion of soft power, as a complement to its rapidly growing economic and military power. China, *The Economist* observed, has long recognised that it suffers a 'soft power deficit'. China's international cultural influence lagged behind its economic influence. In 2007, President Hu Jintao declared that getting other countries to like China was a national priority ('Public diplomacy', 2019, p. 44). China is spending billions to make the world love it. Shambaugh suggests that the Chinese charm offensive is one of the most extravagant state-sponsored programmes the world has ever seen. While China spent US$10 billion on its image-building efforts overseas, the US spent $670 million in 2014 on 'public diplomacy' ('Soft power', 2017, p. 51). The increasing number of Chinese tourists, workers, professionals, and students is also contributing to the rise of Chinese soft power. According to Nye, China's successful economy makes it attractive, and Chinese culture, traditional culture, is attractive. And China has pursued a series of policies which have been attractive to other countries, particularly in Southeast Asia (Nye, 2005, para 6). Nye (2005, para 6), noted the sharp rise of foreign students and tourists in China as indicators of China's rising soft power, yet at the same time, he cautioned that, 'Politically, China suffers from corruption, inequality, and a lack of democracy, human rights and the rule of law' which makes it less attractive in the West as an example of soft power.

6.5 Chinese Soft Power in the GCC: China and Saudi Arabia

The main geographical focus of this chapter is the countries of the GCC, a regional bloc formed in 1981 on the basis of geographical contiguity for economic, technical, social, and cultural cooperation. The six GCC countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – share not only a

TABLE 6.2 Favourable images of China in Muslim-majority countries

Country	Favourable (%)	Region
Pakistan	78	South Asia
Bangladesh	77	South Asia
Malaysia	74	Southeast Asia
Indonesia	66	Southeast Asia
Tunisia	64	MENA
Palestine	61	MENA
Egypt	48	MENA
Jordan	35	MENA

ADAPTED FROM PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 2014
HTTPS://WWW.PEWFORUM.ORG/2013/04/30/THE-WORLDS-MUSLIMS-RELIGION-POLITICS-SOCIETY-OVERVIEW/ (ACCESSED JULY 1, 2021)

common religious and linguistic heritage, they are also endowed with hydrocarbon resources that have fuelled rapid economic growth and modernisation.

Saudi Arabia plays a special role in the GCC region and was the first Arab country that the reformist President Xi Jinping visited in 2016 after he took over the Chinese premiership. President Xi had earlier visited Saudi Arabia in 2008 as Vice President of China. In 2016, before his presidential visit, the Xi Jinping published a signed article in *Al Riyadh*, a national Saudi daily newspaper. In that article President Xi emphasised the historic connection between the two countries.

> Over 2,000 years ago, numerous camel caravans from the two sides travelled along the ancient Silk Road. Diplomatic envoys from the Seljuk Empire visited China during the Tang Dynasty. Zheng Hem China's Muslim navigator in the Ming Dynasty, travelled to Jeddah, Mecca, and Medina, and he described them as paradises where people enjoyed peace and harmony.
>
> XI, 2016

Xi ended his article promising China's commitment to 'step up exchange and cooperation with Saudi Arabia in areas such as education, media, think tanks, and the youth and to enhance people-to-people and cultural exchanges at various levels' (Xi, 2016).

In the same year as Xi's visit, the China–Saudi Arabia High-Level Joint Committee was established. Saudi King Salman bin Abdualaziz Al Saud's visit to China in 2017 marked not only signing business deals worth US$65 billion, it also saw the two sides pledging 'to work together to create synergy between "Saudi Vision 2030" – an initiative intended to diversify the Saudi economy – and the Belt and Road Initiative' (Dorraj, 2018). As of early 2019, 70 per cent of Saudi oil is sold to Asia (He, 2019). China's largest trading partner in the GCC region is Saudi Arabia, while the UAE emerged as China's second largest trade partner (Dorraj, 2018). During the visit by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to China in February 2019, Saudi Arabia and China signed economic cooperation agreements worth a total of $28 billion and thirty-five agreements in total were signed. The Saudi visitor renewed the pledge of backing China's Belt and Road Initiative and linking the project to Saudi Arabia's flagship Vision 2030 plans (Arab News, 2019). The closer ties between Saudi Arabia and China were not limited to economic cooperation. During the Saudi Crown Prince's visit to China, he reminded the Chinese leader of the historic relations with China. In March 2019 Saudi Arabia announced its plan to include the Chinese language in the curriculum at all stages of education in Saudi schools and universities. The agreement was finalised during the crown prince's visit to China in February 2019. Learning Chinese was hailed as a bridge between the two peoples which will contribute to enhancing both trade and cultural ties between the two countries (Al Arabiya, 2019).

6.6 Knowledge as Soft Power: Asian Studies in the GCC

In this section, before discussing the state of Asian studies in the Gulf region, which plays a role in sustaining Chinese soft power, it may be useful to note that China has become a major destination country for international students a phenomenon which coincides with a dramatic improvement in the ranking of China's top universities. In 2014, there were 377,054 international students in China who came from 203 countries. Asian students made up the majority with 59.80 per cent. African students made up 11.05 per cent or 41,677 of the international students in China (China's University and College Admission System, 2017). These numbers increased rapidly in 2016 when China hosted a record number of 442,773 foreign students. This was an increase of 11.4 per cent from 2015 ('Foreign enrolment surging in China', 2017). In 2017, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued a formal document stating that the purpose of their education reform initiative at international level was to 'make it possible for Chinese soft power to serve the national interest' (Marleku, 2019). China

also invested steadily to increase the capacity of its universities in order to compete globally with world-class institutions through two initiatives, known as Project 211 and Project 985. It is estimated that nearly half a million foreign students attend 935 higher educational institutions in China. 'China uses higher education to increase its impact of soft power in the world, especially in countries stretching along the One Belt One Road Initiative' (Marleku, 2919). Many Arab students are also choosing to go to China. In the UAE there is also a growing interest in attracting students from China. In March 2017, 600 scholarships were offered to students from China to study in the six private universities in the UAE, located in Dubai (Swan, 2017).

Modern education is an important aspect of modernisation. Higher education, though relatively new in the GCC region, has received considerable state patronage. The first university in the GCC region, King Saud University, was established in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1957. Kuwait University was founded in 1966. University education began in Qatar in 1973 with gender-segregated faculties. The first university in the UAE, United Arab Emirates University, was set up in 1976 in Al Ain. The first public university in Oman, Sultan Qaboos University, was set up in 1986. In Bahrain the first university, University of Bahrain, was founded in the same year, combining the College of Arts, Sciences, and Education, established in 1978, and the Gulf Technical College, established in 1968.

Most of these universities were public institutions created to meet the challenges of human resource requirements of the modernising countries of the region. Social sciences were not given any priority. In fact, throughout the Arab world the modern universities are relatively young. A recent report observed that '97 per cent of Arab Universities – 491 out of 508 – were created after 1950', and 70 per cent did not exist before 1991 (Bamyeh, quoted in Faek, 2015, para. 2).

One of the challenges faced by these universities is the singular focus on technical development accompanied by a penetration of market ideology, which affects both the curricula as well as the structure of the higher educational institutions. In all, the corporatisation of the universities takes a toll on liberal education. Yet, it is interesting to observe that social science education is likely to receive more attention, with growing interest in East Asia, which has become a dynamic economic region. With growing trade relations between the Arabian Gulf countries and China, Chinese soft power is being projected in the rest of the world including the Gulf countries.

Since 2005, 300 Confucius Institutes have been set up in ninety-four countries around the world to promote Chinese culture and language. China, like other big powers, is engaged in the task of winning the hearts and minds of

people around the world. The charm offensive is a complement to growing Chinese influence around the world as an economic and military power. By the end of 2016, China had established 512 Confucius centres and 1,073 classes in 140 locations around the world (Gao Xiaoping, quoted by Tamimi, 2017). Eleven of these educational centres are located in just seven Arab countries: Lebanon (1), Jordan (2), UAE (2), Bahrain (1), Egypt (2), Sudan (1), and Morocco (2) (Tamimi, 2017). As of April 2019 there were 548 Confucius Institutes around the world.

In the UAE, a Confucius Institute was set up in 2011; the Confucius Institute in the University of Dubai was the first one in the Persian Gulf region. A Confucius Institute was also set up in Zayed University, Abu Dhabi in 2012. The third one in the GCC region is in the University of Bahrain, set up in 2014. Of the total of 437 Confucius Institutes worldwide (as of June 2015), there are only three in the Arabian Gulf, and a total of nine in the Middle East, two each in Egypt and Jordan, and one each in Lebanon and Iran. In Russia alone, there are twice as many Confucius Institutes as in the entire Middle East. The United States, of course, is the main destination of the Confucius Institutes, with its presence in ninety-six universities.

The Confucius Institute was created following President Hu Jintao's call for 'enhancing soft power of Chinese culture' (Lee, 2009). Nye (2012), among others, was sceptical about the success of China's soft power offensive because China takes an oppressive policy against its own civil society. Nye's analysis may be appropriate insofar as the United States and other democracies with a vibrant civil society are concerned; for the rest of the Global South, China's cultural diplomacy may yield positive outcomes.

The Confucius Institute at Zayed University, as elsewhere, offers Chinese language courses, which have grown in popularity in recent years. The Confucius Institute of the University of Dubai, established in 1997, has offered Chinese language training for various government departments in the UAE. The University of Bahrain, established in 1986, is a full-fledged university that

TABLE 6.3 Confucius institutes around the world

Africa	59
America	160
Asia	126
Europe	182
Oceania	21

SOURCE: HTTP://ENGLISH.HANBAN.ORG (ACCESSED 30 APRIL 2019)

has a Japanese studies programme alongside French, German, and American studies programmes. Zayed University also hosts the King Sejong Institute of Korea since 2010, which offers courses on Korean language.

In 2015, Sultan Qaboos University of Oman became part of the Silk Road Universities Network, which was formed in Hankuk University in Jeonju, Republic of Korea. This is an important step that promises research cooperation and exchange of students and promotes interest in East Asian studies. Sultan Qaboos University also celebrates Japan Day, as do many other academic institutions in the region.

Following the course structure of the North American universities, many of the public universities in the region have introduced general education programmes. These broad historical courses about civilisations are offered to generate a global awareness. Many of these courses include study of East Asia and South Asia. In terms of offering specialised courses on East Asia or South Asia, and Southeast Asia, the choices are rather limited. Under the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University, courses on world regions are offered for senior undergraduate students where courses on East Asia and South Asia are offered. In the universities of the GCC region, the initial focus was on training human resources for rapid modernisation. Humanities education did not receive much attention. In recent years this lacuna is being addressed. General education courses in a number of universities in the UAE have been made more global, in that they deal with not only Western civilisations but also include East Asian civilisations. At Zayed University, a full course is offered under the master's in diplomacy programme on East Asia that covers China, Japan, and Korea and the newly industrialising economies. Courses on East, South, or Southeast Asia are highly popular. The United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain also offers the option to combine a degree course with Korean language studies with the aim of educating in written and oral skills.

The absence of advanced courses or programmes on East, South, or Southeast Asia, and Central Asia in the GCC universities does not indicate a lack of awareness of the importance of East Asia in terms of emergence or re-emergence. Japan and the Republic of Korea have already made significant inroads insofar as their popular cultures are concerned. At Zayed University, there are Japanese clubs and Korean clubs initiated by students, who partake in various Japanese cultural activities. Japanese manga animation has won the hearts and minds of many young Emiratis and has made inroads into the Gulf culture (Good, 2009a, 2009b). The availability of Arabic versions of manga is proof of the popularity of East Asian popular culture. There is also a growing number of fans of Korean drama and K-pop among the youth (Khondker, 2015).

6.7 China Syndrome

One of the key factors for the rapid economic growth in the post-Mao era is a tradition of good governance with a hard-line position against corruption and social indiscipline. Good governance administered under a hard state helped achieve the success of China in both these regards. Yet success has resulted in a global perception generated by the Western world that China is an authoritarian state. The image of hard state internally may impede the generation of soft power overseas. Yet, China cannot let go the image of the hard state, which is a cornerstone of China's economic success.

The fact that the main promoter of China's soft power is the Chinese state has both advantages and disadvantages. On the pro side, the state-directed Chinese soft power is bankrolled by billions of dollars; on the con side, there is always a lingering suspicion as to whether it is truly a soft power, an aspect of public diplomacy, or a manufactured soft power directed by state elites. In late 2016, a dance troupe from the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute (now renamed as Beijing Foreign Studies University) visited Abu Dhabi's Zayed University and Jordan. Their exquisite, professional quality performance dazzled the audience, no doubt, yet a lingering question remained as to whether it was truly an initiative of, and by the students to foster relationships with students in the Gulf and the Arab world, or a state-directed tour for projecting the cultural superiority of China.

Conversely, the soft power in other East Asian countries, for example, Japan and South Korea, is projected from civil society or private sector organisations. Japanese and Korean films often draw large crowds in the film festivals of Abu Dhabi or Dubai. The popularity of J-pop or K-pop is another example. One of the leading Chinese academics, Cao Yunhua, Dean of the School of International Studies at Jinan University, suggested that,

> China should develop its own unique method of promoting soft power abroad, because its state of economic development is different from that of Western countries. [...] China wants to develop peacefully to become a major country. It is not trying to be the leading economic or political power. But our image is not so good, we are seen as the new money, a fast-emerging rich power, but we want to change this image.
>
> CAO, quoted in LIU, 2015

Cao focussed on the need to build a harmonious society internally first, and not rely on projecting selective images. The people in China must be allowed

to feel safe and to feel proud of themselves to sustain the projection of soft power, Cao implied.

> We cannot just rely on Chinese food and Peking Opera. We need to show the world some of China's vulnerable sides, for example, allowing others to see how our rural villages are developing.
>
> CAO, quoted in LIU, 2015

The main point made by Cao is that honesty is more important than presenting a facade. This makes a great deal of sense in this era of global media connectivity. An honest portrayal of the Chinese culture, work ethic, and values will win more hearts and minds and persuade others to see China for what it is.

6.8 Limitations of Soft Power in the Twenty-First Century?

President Obama, in his inaugural address in 2009, stated that 'our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint' (quoted in Nye, 2011).

Obama foreshadowed the idea of 'smart power'. The twenty-first century is likely to be dominated by software power rather than soft power. In other words, it is the power of technology, especially new technology, that transcends hard and soft power and will dominate the world. The new sources of power are Apple, Google, Ali Baba, Huawei, and suchlike.

A 2014 Pew Research Center survey showed that although the United States beat China in soft power at the time of the survey in 2013, China might hold wider appeal in the future. The results show that in 16 out of 38 nations, younger people are significantly more likely than older people to look favourably on China. Half or more of those aged 18 to 29 in Nigeria, Ghana, Bolivia, and Senegal like Chinese music, movies, and television shows in addition to admiring Chinese science and technology. On balance, global views of China are positive, although ratings for the Asian power vary significantly across nations and regions. Similarly, China's growing economic might is generally seen as a good thing in most of the countries surveyed. However, in some nations China's increasing prosperity is considered a threat (Pew Research Center, 2014). In early 2018, a new concept 'sharp power' – as if to complement China's soft power – emerged from the National Endowment for Democracy

(NED), a think-tank in Washington, D.C. The sharp power consists of not only China's attempt to manipulate and interfere in politics in other countries but also 'media and academia, surreptitiously promoting a positive image of the country, and misrepresenting and distorting information to suppress dissent and debate' (*The Economist*, 2017, p. 19). Nye (2018) views sharp power as a type of hard power and a tool of the authoritarian system.

6.9 Conclusions

At the beginning of 2016 the Chinese government issued the Arab Policy Paper that stipulated the guiding principles for its projection of soft power (China's Arab Policy Paper, 2016). This document reiterated China's commitment to peace and cultural cooperation in addition to economic cooperation. The ensuing relationships between China and the Arab world have tended to be holistic, encompassing technological, economic, and cultural cooperation, as illustrated in the first ever visit by the Saudi leader to China in March 2017. The historic visit by Chinese president Xi Jinping in July 2018 led to signing strategic deals between the two countries. The Chinese president was conferred the Order of Zayed award by the UAE leadership (Dennehy, 2018). As China becomes a global leader, it might look into its own historical and cultural resources to revamp a new vision of world peace based on non-interference. A robust moral position of China based on the principle of non-interference and harmony, rather than hegemony, would be consistent with China's rich cultural and philosophical traditions. Such a moral stance would require China to stand on the side of the victims of aggression, and not strategic indifference. Championing the cause of justice with neutrality, commitment to the universal principles of respect for national sovereignty, cooperation in the field of development, and a respect for traditions can play a vital role in sustaining Chinese soft power in this region. The projection of Chinese soft power, according to Eric Li, is different from that of the original Nye version, since it is based on the idea that: 'You don't have to want to be like us, you don't have to want what we want; you can participate in a new form of globalisation while retaining your own culture, ideology, and institutions' (Li, 2018). Chinese foreign policy undergirded by moral and cultural resources would also be attractive to, and consistent with, the ideals enshrined in the Arab traditions of harmony and cooperation.

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CHAPTER 7

China–Egypt Relations

Constructing Images and Perceptions in the Belt and Road Initiative

Xiaoyue Li

7.1 Introduction

Proposed by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)[1] is framed to revive ancient land and sea routes that historically linked China with other prosperous civilisations via trade and infrastructure networks. In recent years, this policy has significantly reshaped China's foreign policies towards Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, the regions that China did not pay enough attention during its forty-year economic reform. Under the new initiative, Egypt – the country that bridges Africa and Eurasia – becomes increasingly crucial for China's outreach. During the first Ancient Civilizations Forum held in Athens in 2017, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with his Egyptian counterpart, Sameh Shoukry, and invited Egyptian delegates to take part in the upcoming summit on international cooperation within the framework of the BRI in Beijing. According to Wang, 'Egypt is our [i.e., China's] important partner in the joint implementation of "One Belt, One Road" strategy' (' "Important Partner" ', 2017, para. 2). For many Chinese companies, Egypt has become a potentially significant market of investment upon the opening of the BRI. China's exports to Egypt have grown steadily from 2012 to 2015 despite the unsettled political condition in Egypt (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016; 2015; 2014; 2013).[2] In terms of investment, Beijing and

1 There are different ways to refer to this policy, including the One Road and One Belt Initiative and the Silk Road Initiative but in this chapter I use the 'Belt and Road Initiative', or 'BRI' for short.

2 Exports from China to Egypt in the years from 2012 to 2015 are separately US$8.2 billion, US$8.4 billion, US$10.5 billion, and US$12.0 billion. Data are available from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2016; 2015; 2014; 2013). It is noteworthy that during the corresponding period, Egypt's export to China did not witness similar growth, but rather a slight decline. This is likely due to the unstable domestic conditions in Egypt because Egypt's exports to other countries also declined. It is salient that a certain degree of imbalance of trade and investment has long existed between the two countries. The statistics offers a background yet is not the major issue that I focus on in this chapter.

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Cairo signed multiple contracts to cooperate in more than fifteen projects in electricity, transportation, and other infrastructure sectors during Xi's visit to Cairo in early 2016 ('China to invest $15 bn in Egypt', 2016). Under the BRI, economic connections between China and Egypt have continously developed and expanded.

Within the Belt and Road framework of economic cooperation, my central question focuses on the everyday production and reproduction of images and perceptions through each other's eyes in both China and Egypt. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an emic study from within the social groups I have investigated. I explore from the perspectives of local people their processes of perceptions and categorisations, rules of behaviour, fashions of imagination, and logics of sense-making. Social scientists have conducted detailed researches in the comparison between Chinese and Islamic cultures and have argued various possibilities of relationship between these two. Huntington (2011) tries to demonstrate that Islamic and Chinese cultures are natural allies against Western dominance in his envisioned "clash of civilisations". An opposite viewpoint is presented by Inglehart and Welzel (2005). In their comparative studies of world values, they believe that Islamic countries and China are completely incompatible in the level of religiosity, as well as values of gender. My study does not aim to provide a middle ground between two divergent views in social science, but to suggest an alternative approach to examine Sino–Arab relations and soft power from what people feel and express in their daily experiences. Images and perceptions are by no means unified or stable but are mediated by multiple changing conditions. Therefore, it is vital to explain the rationales that give rise to stereotypical images and perceptions, which are the major focus of this chapter.

7.2 From International Relations to the Politics of Aesthetics

In the realm of international relations (IR), scholars have found it important to study the correlation between a country's images and its behaviours in the international arena. Nye (2004) explicitly points out that a positive image can increase the chances of a country to attract or cooperate in getting a desirable outcome. Nye conceptualises the capacity of constructing a positive image, which operates differently from coercive forms of power, as soft power.[3] Soft

3 'A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it' Nye (2004, 32).

power relies on non-coercive and less transparent channels, including culture, political values, and foreign policies. Through these channels, a country can influence or change public opinions of another country, and furthermore put pressure on its policy-making process.

The concept of soft power within an IR framework engages in macro-level analyses of power operation, regarding a country's image either as a source of national power or a product of comprehensive cultural influence. For fulfilling this elegant concept, IR scholars have tailored complicated social surroundings and fit their abstraction within traditions of their discipline. Few IR scholars, accordingly, pay attention to how individual citizens perceive national images and how these images become popularised and stabilised. As a result, they mainly concentrate on the facets of soft power that derive from state publicity or policies, while partially neglecting that soft power is based on popular consensus. Nye is not unaware of this analytical limitation. Taking a Hollywood movie as an example, he observes that it could bring about both positive and negative effects, depending on where the movies are watched and who watches them.[4] The unpredictability of national images locates in specific social contexts, where micro forms of power operate in more subtle ways.

Social researchers, in comparison, are more enthusiastic about exploring processes of image construction among certain groups. They suggest taking daily perceptions of an object as constituted reality and study social mechanisms of assigning meaning to the object. Among them, Bourdieu (1996) argues that social distinction is rarely a freedom of personal choice, but it is firmly grounded in a system of embodied dispositions and tendencies – Bourdieu calls the system 'habitus', implying that people have limited possibilities in their decisions. The production of habitus is a social process, reflecting experiences of socialised individuals. People of various social positions acquire and then possess different volumes of cultural capital – non-financial assets, including social class, religion, and education – which structurally shapes people's judgement of good and bad. Rancière (2013) develops Bourdieu's theory of distinction by further politicising its social effects. Perception of things – or 'the sensible' in Rancièrean terminology – is not distributed evenly.[5] What

4 Nye (2004) pays special attention to the 'source of American soft power' in chapter 2. He analyses that soft power can come from culture, domestic value, and foreign policies. Meanwhile, he admits that soft power is always contextual, conditioned by local specificities. It is difficult to find a universal standard for an attractive culture, value, or even foreign policy (Nye, 2004, pp. 33–68).

5 Rancière's vocabulary of 'the sensible' can be more or less regarded as an equivalent of Bourdieu's 'distinction'.

is salient to some social groups can be completely invisible to other groups. The distribution of the sensible is composed of the a priori customs and laws, which presume what is possible to see and hear, to say and think, to do and make. The distribution of the sensible, therefore, dictates people's perceptions, thoughts, activities, and what common senses are possible to apprehend. It may further be partitioned into various regimes and delimits forms of inclusion and exclusion within a political community.

The inclusion of critical theory, including Bourdieu's (1996) theory of social distinction and Rancière's (2013) theory of the distribution of the sensible, along with my analyses of international politics, contributes to a fresh understanding of Nye's (2004) concept of soft power. The attractiveness of one country cannot be fully attributed to its efforts at state publicity or lobbying. Indeed, state publicity or lobbying may reinforce established images in people's minds. But blatantly fabricated images will make the country lose credibility, and in the long run, destruct the entirety of its public relations. By using social theories, I attend to society more than government, that is, individual perceptions over policy statements.

Perception of other countries, as this chapter further uncovers, is relevant to facets of self-reflection, conditioned by people's changing experiences embedded in their own societies. Particularly in the age of information, ordinary Chinese and Egyptians do not passively receive news from the state centre; they also produce knowledge of their own and publicise it via popular social media. In blogs, Facebook or Weibo posts, or questions on the Chinese question-and-answer website Zhihu, these ordinaries can freely express their original opinions and become to some extent authoritative within their circles if their answers meet the expectations of their audiences. Therefore, it is increasingly crucial to understand politics within various formations of aesthetical regimes, that is, how perceptions are made and become stabilised in certain conditions and how they change under different social influences.

7.3 The Rising China in the Eyes of Egyptians

With China becoming an important global player, reports on China and its people have also increased in Egyptian public media. In *al-Ahram*, the semi-official voice of the Egyptian government, reports on China or Sino–Egyptian relations have made headlines constantly over the past few years. *Al-Ahram*, in both Arabic and English versions, pays extensive attention to China's BRI and actively advocates for Egypt's of participation in this initiative. El-Sayed al-Naggar, the chairman of al-Ahram organisation writes,

> China's One Belt, One Road Initiative seems to be in line with what Egypt plans for its international economic ties, that is, to be built on peaceful, just and equitable cooperation. This raises the question of the possible Egyptian–Chinese economic cooperation in a just manner that serves the people of both countries.
>
> EL-SAYED AL-NAGGAR, 2016, para. 12

In another article, Abdel Samie says,

> The strategic partnership agreement between Egypt and the People's Republic of China – signed during President Sisi's visit to Beijing last week – reinforced the Egyptian trend to diversify the international relations between Cairo and the various powers in today's world.
>
> ABDEL SAMIE, 2015, para. 1

Al-Ahram to a large extent represents the voice of the Egyptian government, which historically holds a positive view towards China and now sees China as a strategic partner in the new framework of the BRI. The articles by Abdel Samie (2015) and El-Sayed Al-Naggar (2016) reflect the eager willingness of the Egyptian government to take the BRI as an opportunity to strengthen bilateral relations and to develop the Egyptian economy.

Official voices, however, can hardly reveal how common Egyptian people view China in the context of an increasingly visible presence of Chinese and Chinese products in Egyptian metropolitan cities. For many Egyptians, China is no longer a geographically remote country, but has become a tangible change in their daily experiences over the past years. An interesting comment from Ahmed,[6] one of my Egyptian friends, prompted me to discover the true feelings of ordinary Egyptians towards the Chinese consumer goods that have swept through the Egyptian market. In an informal conversation, Ahmed swung the pen in his hand and said to me, '*kull mustalzamāti mina al-ṣīn, kull hāga! Wa ana sanaʿ fi al-ṣīn*' ('All what I use are made in China, everything! Even I am a Chinese product'). Then he pointed his pen towards himself, or more precisely, towards his made-in-China T-shirt. As far as I could tell, he yelled with a mixture of exhilaration and frustration. I started to wonder what made the complicated feelings and sentiments behind this simple Arabic sentence. In the summers of 2015 and 2016, I interviewed eighty-four ordinary Egyptians living

6 All names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms for the purpose of ethical use of interview data.

in downtown districts such as Dokki (Giza), Mohandiseen (Giza), Imbaba (Giza), and Shubra (Cairo). Interviewees included small vendors, taxi drivers, watchmen, university students, and retired workers, none of whom have yet had a chance to travel to China. Most of them had never spoken with a Chinese person for longer than five minutes before my visit. Despite their unfamiliarity with China, they somehow 'specialised' in their comments on Chinese consumer goods in Egypt. Their lives were full of these inexpensive goods; or more exactly, they could not live without them. In their living environment, it was not surprising to see a housewife taking a linen bag with Chinese characters, or a street sweeper with second-hand Chinese paramilitary clothes. Their knowledge of China came from nearby kiosks, from simple but pervasive Chinese products. These Chinese products, in turn, provided them a way of living that matches up with certain shared characteristics – inexpensive, not durable, but still usable. Structurally speaking, living with inexpensive Chinese products was identified with their social status – they were not the wealthiest one per cent living in fancy private villas, who in their daily lives consumed exclusively European products. My interviewees expressed different degrees of satisfaction with Chinese products. 'They are much cheaper than anywhere else'; 'They are too easily broken'; 'I think I will still use them all my life'. The products they displayed to me commonly had rather mediocre qualities; but they were unquestionably fruits of their hard labour and pains.

In my interviews, the gap between perception and reality is saliently observable. At times, perceptions become a perceivable mismatch of reality. One of the most common mismatches is that some of my interviewees would take some categories of goods as 'made in China' for granted, including plastic toys, daily utensils, or cheap electronic devices. This perception seems to correspond with Ahmed's comments on the omnipresence of Chinese products in the Egyptian market. However, as I soon discovered, some products that my interviewees recognised as Chinese were in fact imported from Korea, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Thailand, and other Asian countries; some others were more likely to be made locally. The mismatch further revealed that 'made in China', in the perception of my informants, was not a loyal description of reality but an interpretive category that had already been processed within their cognitive frames. Products of this category tended to be less expensive, and for that reason, they filled the daily lives of ordinary people. Chinese goods contrasted with European imports in price, which makes Chinese goods more affordable by most city dwellers.

The second mismatch further strengthens the stereotype of Chinese products as inexpensive and low-quality daily utensils. Some interviewees had not realised that the Chinese products they were daily in contact with were

merely a limited portion of China's total exports to Egypt. The other interviewees blamed traders, Chinese and Egyptian alike, who made only low-quality Chinese products available for Egyptian consumers. 'Since the most important thing for a trader is profit, he does not care about quality or warranty even, but he cares about the price! The cheaper the price is, the worse the quality is, the more they benefit from profits!'[7] In reality, Chinese products have various levels and classes, aiming for different consumers. For instance, in the newly-established Suez Canal Industrial Zone, Chinese corporations invest less in labour-intensive industries, but more heavily in many sophisticated machine-manufacturing and high-technology sectors (Calabrese, 2020). These sophisticated machines and high-tech products, in fact, compete with their European counterparts in the same commercial market. Therefore, the association of Chinese products with inexpensive labour in the eyes of many of my interviewees, is far from the reality; but it is believed as truth.

What are the possible explanations to these ostensible mismatches in the perceptions of ordinary Egyptians? It is improper to simply reduce the perception-reality mismatch to falsehood or an intentional distortion of reality. In fact, my informants showed their sincerity and thought they had informed me with what they believed as truth about Chinese products. However, perception – as Bourdieu and Rancière have theoretically explicated – cannot be equalised with a direct reflection of what is seen and heard. Perception is translated through the matrix of complicated social structure, which maintains its equilibrium at a particular historical moment yet constantly changes over time. In the contemporary environment of metropolitan Cairo, inexpensive 'Chinese goods' have become a way of living and a special mark of social status. Those who consume these goods mostly belong to *al-shaʿab* (the people), in the social lexicon of contemporary Egypt. *Al-shaʿab*, to be specific, benefit little from the rising neoliberal economy since the reforms of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. They have constituted the majority of residents in Cairene mid- and lower-class neighbourhoods. Products labelled as 'made in China', for *al-shaʿab*, may not necessarily be a factual statement of the products' original place of production. But they help constitute a significant part in the social identity shared by my informants, which is embodied in their contrasting ways of consumption and lifestyle from upper-class Egyptians.

Reliance on Chinese products created a mixture of feelings among Egyptian consumers. On the one hand, affinity with China arises, even without their

7 The 'trader theory' is among the most common reasons that Egyptians offer to explain why Chinese products are usually low-quality.

experiential familiarity with the production place. In the dualist format of imagination, grassroots Egyptian consumers conceptualise Chinese automobiles as the antithesis of Mercedes,[8] and themselves as opposite to dwellers of the Fifth Settlement.[9] Their closeness to Chinese products creates a surreal daily experience in which they feel as if they truly interact with China and witness China's economic expansion.[10] On the other hand, the omnipresence of Chinese products at times challenges the national pride of many interviewees, making them feel frustrated about the dire economic situation in post-revolutionary Egypt.[11] Samer, another of my interviewees, complained to me, 'Now we produce nothing in our own country. We have no industry! Meanwhile, we buy everything from foreigners! Our traders only suck our blood!' In narratives like this, China's economic expansion has put post-revolutionary Egypt to shame, adding to their anxieties towards the future of their country.[12]

This mixture of feelings about the rise of China is also reflected in Arabic-language self-media. In a 2016 blog, Salih Abdullah Kamel expresses his full admiration to China's economic growth after the 1980s. He writes,

> The fact is that in less than a quarter of a century, after the death of Mao Zedong, [China grew] into a giant country, it has become the second largest economy in the world after the United States, and I am certain that it is in the first place or is about to be. Its economy is growing and there is no war.
>
> KAMEL, 2016, para. 2

Besides rapid economic growth, Kamel is also fascinated by the rule of law and social order in China. He comments in the same article:

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8 The German automobile brand is often regarded as a sign of well-being and status in Egypt.

9 The Fifth Settlement, *al-tajammuʿ al-khāmis* in Arabic, is one of the most affluent districts in New Cairo and is sometimes used as a reference to wealthy Egyptian families.

10 Most of my interviewees told me that they know of China's economic rise mostly from the influx of Chinese products, instead of from television channels or newspapers.

11 It is noteworthy that male interviewees reflected more frequently a loss of national pride because of the influx of foreign goods, as compared to female interviewees.

12 Another relevant mode of thinking among the interviewees is the contrast between the past and present. None of the interviewees thought Gamal Abdel Nasser did not achieve well in his economic plan, but many worried about the job market and salary of present-day Egypt. As a result, nostalgia to the period of the early republic was often expressed during my interviews. Within the nostalgia, cooperation between Egypt and China during the 1950s and 1960s was often mentioned. Nine interviewees expressed knowledge of the Bandung Conference (1955), and two even mentioned Zhou Enlai, the Premier of the PRC during the Bandung Conference, and blessed him upon mentioning his name.

> In China, no one is late for paying taxes. The employee's taxes are taken from his salary monthly – from the source. And [tax collection is for] every transaction or profit directly.
>
> KAMEL, 2016, para. 4

China, in the imagination of Salih Kamel, has perfect public order, where every justice is upheld, and evil is punished.

The admiration of social order in China reminds me of a catch phrase constantly repeated in the mouths of many Egyptians '*mā fīsh niẓām*', meaning 'there is no order'. The phrase expresses a frustrated and almost helpless complaint when Egyptians confront chaos and injustice in their everyday lives. The imagination of an orderly China is more closely related to the perceptions Egyptians have of their own country rather than China in reality. Kamel (2016) writes of Egyptians' tax-paying process immediately following his mention of Chinese orderliness:

> In Egypt, business tax is only estimated, and here lies the problem. The estimation is subject to the whims of the elite, which wastes large sums of money on the state. As evidenced by the fact that estimates vary from case to case and from person to person – a matter of mood.
>
> KAMEL, 2016, para. 5

Kamel also notices that 'in China, [he] did not see any beggar on the streets, even in alleys' (2016, para. 6). He compares with situations in Egypt, where, he narrates, 'dozens [of beggars] rush down and surround you and your car for fear you will leave them' (Kamel, 2016, para. 6). Compliments to China could mean more complicated sentiments than simple admiration. Most of the time, these compliments also include a self-reflexive criticism and probably a deep-rooted frustration in their inability to initiate change in their own country.

7.4 Post-Revolutionary Egypt in the Eyes of Chinese People

In the official narratives of China, the BRI aims at reviving ancient land and sea trade routes that linked China with countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe via commercial and infrastructural networks. The initiative does not simply mean a duplication of the ancient model, but a contemporary innovation that redresses China's foreign policies and meanwhile 'transforms the world' (Wu, 2017, para 4). Numerous studies have addressed the transformative power of

the BRI with the rise of China in both economic and political arenas (Bardhan, 2012; Ross & Tunsio, 2017; Wong & Tan, 2017). Some researchers have examined various perceptions of China as a rising global power (Herrick, Gai, & Subramaniam, 2016). However, knowledge production in Western academia tends to portray China as a passive object of study and therefore exclude voices from within China. This section, by expanding the existing literature on the BRI, explores how Chinese people themselves imagine the possible transformations they can bring to the whole world.

Cultural products from official channels provide an overall glimpse of China's perception of the Middle East. The Xinhua News Agency has recorded a song – entitled 'One Belt, One Road, Sing Along' – which has become well-known to many Chinese (New China TV, 2017). The song metaphorically details how transformations could occur upon the arrival of the BRI. With particular regard to Egypt, a Chinese male rapper sings, 'When Belt and Road reaches Egypt, Suez Canal Economic Zone boosts the local GDP. Wind from China sweeps across the desert' (New China TV, 2017). Lyrics of the song, of course, are not a direct manifestation of how policies are made and implemented. But they reflect to a large extent the presupposed framework that China's official media intends to construct for its audiences. In this framework, the 'global transformation' seems to inevitably resemble the transformations that have already taken place domestically. 'The world' is portrayed more or less as a projection or extension of China's self-image. Among various transformations, the most typical indicator is economic growth, reflected in statistical measures such as GDP, according to which China has shone most brilliantly in the past thirty years. According to the narratives of Chinese official sources, the 'new globalization' (Wu, 2017) emphasises economic cooperation. It is within the framework of economic cooperation that promotion of the successful Chinese model of development can be most persuasive.

Similarly, ordinary Chinese also have the tendency to project their self-image to their perceptions of Egypt. They view Egypt according to personal experiences, memories, and the history of their own nation. In China's largest question-and-answer website, Zhihu, there are many questions on Egypt raised by Chinese netizens. The Zhihu platform is widely popular among university-educated youth in China. This demographic appears to be curious about all sorts of news happening around the world. But rarely do Chinese youth have the opportunity to spend an extended period of time in the Middle East. A search on Zhihu for questions related to Egypt is illuminating, revealing how this new generation of Chinese citizens perceive Egypt. Generally, questions on Egypt's political unrest are as popular as questions

on tourism in Egypt. Some of the most frequently asked questions on Egypt include, 'what is the fundamental problem in Egypt?', 'what did Morsi do?', and 'why was he overthrown by the military after only one year as president?' Other questions include 'why do so many Egyptians support the military?', 'what is the relationship between the military and the government in Egypt?', and 'why can the military intervene in politics?' These *why* questions embody increasing curiosity of Chinese netizens about the current situations in Egypt.

When a question is posed by a Zhihu user, other users can freely express their own opinions. The community can support answers by clicking on 'like' as an expression of endorsement. Comprehensive answers receiving the most 'likes' are shown first in the webpage. Some respondents claim to have travelled to the Middle East and express a desire to share their experiences, sometimes with their own photos or statistics. The majority of Zhihu users, however, do not claim first-hand experience of the Middle East. This can be seen in responses to the question 'what is the fundamental problem of Egypt?' The answer to this question that receives the most 'likes' on Zhihu attributes the Egyptian 'problem' to population explosion during the reign of Hosni Mubarak.[13] This anonymous response analyses the connections among population explosion, unemployment, and revolution, arguing that the seed of dissatisfaction from the Egyptian youth with the Mubarak administration had already been sowed when population exceeded the capacity of the state to provide public resources ('What is the fundamental problem of Egypt?', 2013). This 'population' explanation for the 2011 revolution is by no means a novel answer and has been proposed by academics (Kingsley, 2014). But what captures my attention is that this particular answer received the most support on the Zhihu platform. The 304 'likes' received for this 'population' explanation was more than the total 'likes' for all the other answers combined. Among alternative answers, corruption, bad governance, de-industrialisation, problems in education, and other sound explanations were also presented in equally convincing fashions. However, none of these answers received even one tenth as many supporters as the 'population' answer. Why do Zhihu users so strongly support one particular answer from among multiple reasonable answers?

I suggest that the credibility of one answer over the others in the eyes of Zhihu users concerns the subject more than the object. In this question,

13 According to this anonymous Zhihu respondent, the population of Egypt grew from 35 million in 1981 to 83 million in 2011.

Chinese netizens, as the subject, seek the most plausible answer within their epistemological spectrum, which does not necessarily correspond to the social conditions of the object under investigation – the Egyptian society. This answer resonated with users' own experiences given that population is the thorniest problem for the generation in which most Zhihu users fall (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005).[14] Population explosion, in their life experiences, is equated with fierce competition in public resources, including chances for entering a good college, availability for jobs, and more visibly, the length of queues waiting for public transportation. In China, the scarcity of public resources is both visually and discursively related to the sheer size of its population. Moreover, the population problem is perceived historically. Rapid population growth in Mao's era, as Chinese children have learned from their school textbooks and oral history, seems to foreshadow extreme material scarcity and lack of social security, while the reduced population growth after 2000 seems to coincide with economic prosperity and material well-being. This widely accepted parallel between population and economic growth offers such a neat model for many Chinese to conceived social problems in contemporary Egypt. Because most Chinese people have no first-hand experience of Egypt, they tend to believe, despite inaccurately, that Egypt *must* be similar to what China looked like thirty years ago. Their population growth, as statistics prove, *must* be the fundamental reason for their relative poverty. Alternative answers, including corruption, bad governance, de-industrialisation, and lack of education, although reasonable in the Egyptian context, are less convincing in providing Chinese netizens with such a comparable model of thinking. For instance, the rise of corruption as a political and social problem since the 1990s coincided with the beginning of the rapid economic expansion. It is not to argue that Chinese do not see corruption as a severe problem; yet they generally would not identify corruption as a major cause of poverty. In other words, they would prefer not to imagine political corruption as the sole source of depriving people of public resources, which most of them have not experienced.

Interestingly, the post that received the second highest amount of support is the shortest and least analytic among all posts. It is an excerpt from a daily conversation between a Chinese student and an Egyptian student. Both of them at the moment of dialogue were studying in the United States:

14 For the history of Chinese population growth, see Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005.

CHINESE STUDENT: 'Do you feel happy after the Revolution?'
EGYPTIAN STUDENT: 'Sure, we get rid of the cancer in our government. Egypt could eventually take off again'.
CHINESE STUDENT: 'Then why you come to the US if Egypt is going to take off?'
EGYPTIAN STUDENT: 'We just experienced a coup and Egypt is still in chaos. I will stay here in the US for several years. If I am equipped with more advanced knowledge from the US and then return to my country, I will surely gain huge advantage'.
CHINESE STUDENT: 'I see. But if those who made the coup turn out to be another Mubarak, what will you do?'
EGYPTIAN STUDENT: 'Good question …'
'What is the fundamental problem in Egypt?', 2013

Most likely, the conversation did not turn out to be satisfactory for either side. The answer was posted in March 2015, before the Morsi government was overthrown and Abdel Fatah al-Sisi rose to power. At this moment, the Egyptian student was immersed in the joy the successful revolution, regarding it as a historical landmark. However, the Chinese student paid little attention to the revolution per se and cast doubt on its achievement. Indeed, many Chinese hold similar attitudes towards the 'Arab Spring'. They do not share the same passion as the revolutionary youth of Egypt do. For them, revolutions always bring more turmoil than structural change. The key of good life lies in political stability and individual hard work, not mass street protests or catchy political slogans. Revolution is such a remote concept for them, something that only appears in books or documentary series or that belongs to their older generation, but is rarely applied to their age. The 2011 revolution in Egypt, again, evokes contemporary Chinese memories of the Cultural Revolution, a disillusioned past that they hope never to revisit.

As this Zhihu post has reflected, many Chinese, upon investigating Egypt, inevitably think through the very circumstances that China has gone through over the past thirty years. Therefore, they mirror Egypt as a second China of the past, and expect it to undergo the same developmental trajectory if it maintains similar domestic stability. Personal experiences, memories, and history of one's own nation are all rich components that construct Chinese people's perceptions of contemporary Egypt. Embedded within a complicated social structure, perceptions of other countries can extend far beyond the object of investigation. Chinese and Egyptians alike perceive each other through the magical mirror of the self.

7.5 Conclusion

While the infrastructure of the BRI is aimed at physically connecting separated places in the Eurasian and African continents, imaginative interactions have already taken place in the formation of individual perceptions, where this chapter locates the specificities of soft power. Both Chinese and Egyptians conjure images of each other through a priori knowledge of their own cultural realm. Cultural communication between China and Egypt has hitherto lagged far behind economic cooperation. Language learning, student exchange programmes, or even everyday conversation with foreigners will create possibilities of mutual understanding and diminish – hopefully remove – cultural barriers in the near future.

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CHAPTER 8

Smoothing the Waters

Science and Research Collaboration between China and the Arab World

Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvanitis

> China is willing to work with Arab states to contribute to diversified development and mutual learning among world civilizations. We will enhance people-to-people exchanges, strengthen cooperation in such areas as science, education, culture, health, radio, film, and television, deepen understanding and friendship between the two peoples, promote mutual learning and integration between the two cultures, build a communication bridge between the two peoples, and jointly contribute to the progress of human civilization.
>
> Chinese government, 2016, p. 5

8.1 Introduction

China is a developing country rapidly rising to superpower status at the core of the world's most economically dynamic region. The connection between the Arab world and China dates back to ancient times (Jih, 2017). More than two thousand years ago, land and maritime silk roads linked the two geographies and societies. For long stretches of history, China has been supportive of the Arab national liberation movements. In 2004, a China–Arab States Cooperation Forum was set up. Since then, it has developed into a collective cooperation platform covering many fields, with more than ten (10) cooperation mechanisms. In 2010, China and Arab countries established a strategic cooperative agreement (Chinese government, 2016). As the first chapter in this volume suggests, this effort should be understood within the framework of an overall policy of China in all domains and is mainly oriented towards feeding the country's industrial and economic development and providing markets for its production (Carfantan, 2014). As of July 2018, China offers $105 millions in aid to some Arab countries (Palestine, Yemen, Syria, and Jordan) within the

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Belt and Road Initiative (Middle East Eye, 2018). Arab countries as a whole have become China's biggest supplier of crude oil and the seventh most significant trading partner; trade exchange amounted to $171 millions in 2016 (China Eyes Arabic website, 2017).

The Arab world performs well per capita in some measures of science and research. With only 0.5 per cent of the world's population, the Arab world now produces 2 per cent of the world's scientific publications. This share has risen in the last decade despite a fast-growing global output. China has just under 20 per cent of the world's population, and after fast growth in scientific output now accounts for 9 per cent of publications, second in the world.

As China has become one of the Arab world's important international partners, science and research collaboration have featured in the relationship. Yet, it represents only approximately 2–3 per cent of the Arab publications. This percentage is tiny if we consider that 67.2 per cent of the publications in the Arab world are co-authored with a foreign partner (Zou'bi, Mohamed-Nour, El-Kharraz & Hassan, 2015). It is a consistently positive area of multilateral relations, more than bilateral relations.

Based on bibliometric data and literature review, this chapter argues that there is little scientific collaboration between the two regions, despite the increasing number of publications co-authored by Chinese and Arab scholars, and funded by European and American partners. The growth of co-authorship is indeed related to international projects (engineering, astronomy, physics, geophysics) in which Arab countries participate as well as China, but neither China nor Arab countries have initiated intense common work.

8.2 Rapid Scientific Development in China

China has witnessed an impressive growth in science and technology in the past decade. Its scientific output has become the second-largest in the world. It has also experienced a very impressive integration of its scientific production inside the international mainstream literature in the past 10 years (Wang, 2016; Zhou & Leydesdorff, 2006).[1] What is striking about China's scientific growth is its orientation towards applied areas of knowledge, with innovation and technological development being absolute priorities (Zhao & Arvanitis, 2014; Bironneau, 2012). For the Chinese national government, as well as for

1 Not all areas have experienced this integration. For example, the social sciences continue to lag behind (Zhou, Su, & Leydesdorff, 2010).

local governments, industry and technology are a very high priority, considered vital both for sustainability and for social and political reasons, and the consolidation of the technological capabilities of firms has been the main effort (Zhao & Arvanitis, 2010). The south of China has been pioneering and exemplifying technological and industrial development with active support from local governments (from both regional and city-level governments), as well as innovation policy (Arvanitis, 2007; Qiu, 2007), and the regional innovation policies have been developed at the same time as the first design of a national strategy for innovation (Jastrabski & Arvanitis, 2006; Oulion & Arvanitis, 2017).

This has left a somewhat unbalanced support towards research in academic environments, with difficulties connecting academia with the industrial world, which is not uncommon in other countries (Arvanitis & Qiu, 2009). The research policy has mainly relied on a national policy designed by the Ministry of Science and Technology; a powerful funding agency, the National Natural Science Foundation of China; and the more traditional and elite Chinese Academy of Sciences. The central government entirely directs the whole research system, and local governments usually replicate the national policy. The State Council issued a national 15-year Medium- and Long-Term Programme for Science and Technology Development in 2006. Natural sciences, mainly in engineering, physics and physicochemical disciplines, telecommunications, aeronautics, and astrophysics, have driven this growth (Wang, 2016; Zhao & Arvanitis, 2010). In the biological domains, the more technical areas have received particular attention, as is the case in pharmacology, bioinformatics, and a spectacular national plan for nanotechnology (Bironneau, 2012; Kahane, 2012). Since 2003, health has been prioritised after the dramatic crisis of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) (Cao, 2004), although after the opening policy, health did not get the same attention as the more technology-oriented domains of knowledge.[2] Publishing in English-language journals renders Chinese science more visible. It paves the way for its wider recognition and higher citation (Wang, 2016). However, publications in the Chinese language are still important – so much so that there is now a Chinese Science Citation Database published by the Chinese Academy of Science that has been integrated into the well-known Web of Science platform (see the Clarivate Analytics website for details).

2 Fields with the lowest comparative advantage scores are psychology; arts and humanities; nursing; health professions; social sciences; economics, econometrics, and finance; dentistry; and veterinary medicine.

Objectives set by the National Medium- and Long-Term Programme for Science and Technology Development (2006–2020) are ambitious (see The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2006): (a) R&D expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product (G.D.P.) should increase to 2.5 per cent or higher; (b) the rate of S&T contribution to the economy should reach 60 per cent or higher; and (c) the annual number of patents granted to Chinese inventors and the cited scientific publications of Chinese authors should rise to the top 5 worldwide (Wang, 2016). These policy objectives have still not been achieved but have had effective results in research. Nanotechnology has been the domain with the earliest definition of a national policy, based on strong financial support; it produces a very notable number of patents, although very few seem to be licensed and – as publications, rather than economic instruments (Cao et al., 2013) – tend to concentrate in a small number of academic publications (Kahane, 2012; Oulion & Arvanitis, 2017). Moreover, the plan is rather less indicative of scientific research and publications. It just mentions that some priority scientific areas that correspond to specific technologies are to be favoured, producing the very specific profile for research publications mentioned above (Wang, 2016).

Over the past two decades, China's scientific community has begun to embrace open science, increasing its number of data repositories and open-access journals. But strong policies and changes to academic culture are needed before science in the country can become fully open and transparent (Phillips, 2017). As one of us (Arvanitis) can attest, the pressure to publish in 'internationally recognised' journals is as strong in Chinese universities as it is in the larger Arab universities and is tightly linked to funding. That explains the growth of scientific publications and also the share of English-language publications that is calculated to be around 72 per cent of Chinese scientific publications indexed in Scopus (Wang, 2016, p. 448).

8.3 International Collaboration

Until 2014, fewer than one-fifth of China's papers in the Web of Science were co-authored with an international peer. The percentage of international papers increased to 24 per cent in 2016, and in journals included in the Web of Science, international collaborations comprise just over 50 per cent of its papers (Phillips, 2017; Onward and upward, 2017) which is a very high percentage by any standard, usually found in the scientific production of developing economies (Gaillard, 2010).

8.4 Arab–Chinese Research Collaboration

China collaborates with almost all countries, including the countries of the Arab world. (Onward and upward, 2017) The Web of Science data suggests that in 2014 Chinese authors were strong contributors to co-authored articles with Saudi Arabia. This country stands among the ten top collaborating countries with China. (See 'China's top international collaborations in publication' in 2014 in Onward and upward, 2017)

We examined the scientific production from all Arab countries (21 countries) in the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, which seems more inclusive. According to WoS, the average share of co-authorship is 1.9 per cent of total publications in the Arab world in the last decade (2007–2017), while it is 2.8 per cent in Scopus. Not only is there a wider collection of articles in Scopus, but this database indicates nearly double the number of co-authored publications with China: 15,123 in Scopus and 8,197 in WoS, which is 84 per cent more co-authored papers. Four Arab countries in WoS have more than 800 co-authored articles with China: Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Algeria, and Egypt (see table 8.1). In Scopus, five countries mention more than 790 co-authored papers: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Morocco, and the U.A.E. (see table 8.2). Let's consider that WoS is more restrictive in defining what composes the scientific 'mainstream'. We can then make the hypothesis that WoS figures, although much smaller, concentrate on those fields that correspond to China's priorities in terms of scientific fields. They depict the older and stronger integration of co-authored publications in the more traditional mainstream fields in international journals, whereas Scopus provides figures that translate newer developments in the scientific fields both for China and the Arab countries. Nonetheless, one would have to enter into more detail to assess this aspect.[3]

When looking at the share of co-authored articles in each country's production, one gets a rather different image. Suppose we exempt countries with tiny figures, which coincide with difficult political situations (Palestine, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain) and produce strong outliers. In that case, a pretty coherent image appears (see table 8.3).

It is remarkable to show that the most active scientific country in the Arab world, namely Tunisia, has very low co-publications with China, either in absolute figures or in relative terms. The same goes for Kuwait, which has been among the oldest countries regularly producing scientific publications since

3 To our knowledge, Wang (2016) has been assessing this distribution by areas by using the concept of revealed comparative advantages (RCA) from the field of international trade economics, rather than impact factor or citation analysis (Jin & Rousseau, 2004).

the late 1970s and early 1980s (El Alami et al., 1992). Kuwait has a publication profile that is very close to that of Tunisia and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon. As Hanafi and Arvanitis (2016) show, most Arab countries have a very technical and physicochemical profile of publications (chemistry and agricultural sciences mainly). In contrast, Lebanon and Tunisia have a more life-sciences specialisation.

Very strong linkages appear among Saudi Arabia, Qatar (not well represented in WoS), and the U.A.E. Gulf countries have very actively promoted scientific publications. They have had the policy to attract foreigners or expatriate nationals by paying high wages and giving good living standards. Since 2013, the number of co-authored papers between Saudi Arabia and China has leaped forward at a very high proportion. In general, in these three countries, the number of co-authored articles increases much more quickly than their overall production. Morocco and Egypt, both large producers, also have strong links with China, although to a lesser degree than Gulf countries. Algeria has a very different presence in the two databases, and as such, we suspect a statistical anomaly. In any case, Algeria has a very engineering-oriented specialisation that is very congruent with China's profile.

Below we will analyse in detail the data from Scopus for the countries Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Lebanon.

Many of the articles are co-authored by many authors and funded by institutions other than from China or any of the concerned Arab countries. The average number of authors per article for Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia are 31.5, 15.8, 13.3, 7.7, and 5.2, respectively. Within science, this variation is related more to medicine and biology and less to engineering and chemistry. These articles are often the product of research funded by large international consortia, either private or international, on topics that include multi-country and comparative methodologies. Most of these are funded by an institution from the U.S.A. or the European Union. Most of these articles are written in English, but some articles (21) are written in Chinese, but none are written in Arabic.

The subjects of co-authorship are often similar. For the co-authorship between Saudi Arabia and China in the last decade, the top 10 subject areas are engineering (1,477 documents), chemistry (1,403), physics and astronomy (1,283), computer science (1,264), mathematics (1,188), materials science (1,172), biochemistry, genetics, and molecular biology (836), medicine (784), chemical engineering (698), and agricultural and biological sciences (656). For the U.A.E., these subject areas are to a large extent similar: engineering (225), medicine (155), computer science (126), physics and astronomy (122), chemistry (112), materials science (106), chemical engineering (77), mathematics (77),

TABLE 8.1 Publications from Arab countries listed in the web of science and co-authorship with China (2007–2017)

Country	Documents	Co-authorship with China	% of co-authorships on country's total publication output
Saudi Arabia	99,579	2,494	2.5
UAE	24,745	1,432	5.8
Algeria	33,993	864	2.5
Egypt	101,150	831	0.8
Morocco	26,939	389	1.4
Lebanon	16,231	355	2.2
Jordan	16,779	347	2.1
Yemen	2,073	319	15.4
Tunisia	48,102	303	0.6
Iraq	9,515	243	2.6
Oman	8,116	196	2.4
Qatar	14,672	181	1.2
Kuwait	10,318	77	0.7
Palestine	264	56	21.2
Bahrain	2,645	48	1.8
Syria	3,637	30	0.8
Sudan	4,417	25	0.6
Comoros	63	6	9.5
Libya	2,889	1	0.0
Djibouti	102	0	0.0
Somalia	83	0	0.0
Total	426,312	8,197	1.9

energy (74), and Earth and planetary sciences (72). It is interesting to note that in all of these countries except the U.A.E., the field of agricultural engineering is among the top 10 fields. Specialisation in these areas is congruent both for China and those countries that have long been promoting agricultural engineering as a national priority.

From these data, we suggest that there are four patterns of co-authoring. First, some articles have multiple authors driven by funding agencies or big

TABLE 8.2 Publications from Arab countries listed in Scopus and co-authorship with China (2007–2017)

Country	Documents	Co-authorship with China	% of total publication output
Saudi Arabia	118,860	6,734	5.7
Egypt	126,060	2,545	2.0
Qatar	17,349	1,311	7.6
Morocco	36,131	911	2.5
UAE	32,112	790	2.5
Sudan	5,901	483	8.2
Iraq	14,553	433	3.0
Algeria	43,886	331	0.8
Lebanon	19,054	325	1.7
Tunisia	57,650	301	0.5
Oman	11,785	251	2.1
Jordan	24,357	226	0.9
Kuwait	13,172	192	1.5
Syria	4,711	95	2.0
Palestine	4,418	71	1.6
Bahrain	3,787	51	1.3
Yemen	2,732	39	1.4
Libya	3,853	25	0.6
Comoros	98	5	5.1
Somalia	118	4	3.4
Djibouti	176	0	0.0
Total	540,763	15,123	2.8

laboratories in the U.S.A. or Europe, involving large research projects, usually needing comparison work, and/or involving a large number of countries that 'participate' even very little, with some data. Forouzanfar et al. 2015 represent a case in hand. The research lead was Christopher Murray of the University of Washington, who collaborated with 711 co-authors. Murray also published another article (Raetz et al. 2016) with 34 co-authors, including two authors from Syria (one affiliated to the Syrian Ministry of Health and the other independent) and seven from China. Raetz et al. 2016 was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Another medical article was co-funded by the

TABLE 8.3 Share of co-authored articles with China in the total of production

Scopus		WoS	
Qatar, Saudi Arabia	p > 5%	UAE	p = 5.8%
Iraq, Morocco, UAE, Oman, Egypt	2% > p > 3%	Iraq, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Lebanon, Jordan	2.1% > p > 2.6%
Lebanon, Kuwait	1.5%> p > 1.7%	Morocco, Qatar, Egypt	0.8 > p > 1.4
Jordan, Algeria, Tunisia	0.5 > p > 0.9%	Kuwait, Tunisia	0.6 > p > 0.7

British Heart Foundation and other donors (Naghavi et al., 2014). Another example publication, this time from the field of psychology, is Vignoles et al. 2016, co-authored by seventy-two authors. Some research receives funding from a variety of funders (not only Arab or Chinese). An example is an article in astrophysics carried out at the CERN laboratory on the Franco–Swiss border (Raetz et al. 2016) with thirty-four authors, one of them from Syria, M. Moualla from the Department of Physics at Tishreen University, Latakia, Syria.[4] Another article, Khachatryan et al. 2014, was co-authored by 130 authors, the last of

4 The acknowledgements for Raetz et al. 2016 indicate a number of funding bodies: 'SR is currently a Research Fellow at ESA/ESTEC. SR, CA, RE, MK and RN would like to thank DFG for support in the Priority Programme SPP 1385 on the 'First Ten Million Years of the Solar system' in projects NE 515/34–1 and-2, NE 515/33–1 and-2, and NE 515/35–1 and-2. TK acknowledges support by the DFG programme CZ 222/1–1 and RTG 1351 (extrasolar planets and their host stars). MK would like to thank Ronald Redmer and DFG in project RE 882/12–2 for financial support. MF acknowledges financial support from grants AYA2014–54348-C3–1-R and AYA2011–30147-C03–01 of the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competivity (MINECO), co-funded with EU FEDER funds. DK and VR acknowledge support by project RD 08–81 of Shumen University. Z-YW was supported by the Chinese National Natural Science Foundation grant no. 11373033. This work was also supported by the joint fund of Astronomy of the National Nature Science Foundation of China and the Chinese Academy of Science, under Grant U1231113. XZ was supported by the Chinese National Natural Science Foundation grands no. 11073032, and by the National Basic Research Programme of China (973 Programme), No. 2014CB845704 and 2013CB834902. MM and CG acknowledge DFG for support in programme MU2695/13–1. JS, RN and MMH would like to thank the DFG for support from the SFB-TR 7. CG, and TOBS would like to thank DFG for support in project NE 515/30–1. CM acknowledges support from the DFG through grant SCHR665/7–1. RN would like to

which is based in Qatar. The acknowledgment shows more than 30 funding agencies for this project, one from China but no Qatari funding.[5]

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thank the German National Science Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) for general support in various projects. We would like to acknowledge financial support from the Thuringian government (B 515–07010) for the STK CCD camera used in this project. This work has been supported by a VEGA Grant 2/0143/13 of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The observations obtained with the MPG 2.2 m telescope were supported by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports project – LG14013 (Tycho Brahe: Supporting Ground-based Astronomical Observations). We would like to thank the observers S. Ehlerova and A. Kawka for obtaining the data'.

5 The acknowledgment is: 'We congratulate our colleagues in the CERN accelerator departments for the excellent performance of the LHC and thank the technical and administrative staffs at CERN and at other CMS institutes for their contributions to the success of the CMS effort. In addition, we gratefully acknowledge the computing centres and personnel of the Worldwide LHC Computing Grid for delivering so effectively the computing infrastructure essential to our analyses. Finally, we acknowledge the enduring support for the construction and operation of the LHC and the CMS detector provided by the following funding agencies: the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy and the Austrian Science Fund; the Belgian Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique, and Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek; the Brazilian Funding Agencies (CNPq, CAPES, FAPERJ, and FAPESP); the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science; CERN; the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Ministry of Science and Technology, and National Natural Science Foundation of China; the Colombian Funding Agency (COLCIENCIAS); the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sport, and the Croatian Science Foundation; the Research Promotion Foundation, Cyprus; the Ministry of Education and Research, Estonian Research Council via IUT23–4 and IUT23–6 and European Regional Development Fund, Estonia; the Academy of Finland, Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, and Helsinki Institute of Physics; the Institut National de Physique Nucleaire et de Physique des Particules/CNRS, and Commissariat a l'Energie Atomique et aux Energies Alternatives/CEA, France; the Bundesministerium fur Bildung und Forschung, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and Helmholtz-Gemeinschaft Deutscher Forschungszentren, Germany; the General Secretariat for Research and Technology, Greece; the National Scientific Research Foundation, and National Innovation Office, Hungary; the Department of Atomic Energy and the Department of Science and Technology, India; the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics, Iran; the Science Foundation, Ireland; the Istituto Nazionale di Fisica Nucleare, Italy; the Korean Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the World Class University programme of NRF, Republic of Korea; the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences; the Ministry of Education, and University of Malaya (Malaysia); the Mexican Funding Agencies (CINVESTAV, CONACYT, SEP, and UASLP-FAI); the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, New Zealand; the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission; the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the National Science Centre, Poland; the Fundacao para a Ciencia e a Tecnologia, Portugal; JINR, Dubna; the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, the Federal Agency of Atomic Energy of the Russian Federation, Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Russian Foundation for Basic Research; the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Serbia; the Secretaria de Estado de Investigacion, Desarrollo e Innovacion and Programa Consolider-Ingenio 2010, Spain; the

Kahn (2018) has been arguing this kind of papers, rather frequent among developing countries and emerging economies, are the product of mega-science projects that impose 'rules of use' to protect the intellectual property of the project staff. These rules enhance co-publication counts and citations and distort the use of co-publication data as a proxy for collaboration. It seems to be particularly true for China, India, Brazil, and South Africa.

Second, there are articles related to development and funded by China. An example is Liu et al. (2015). This article has five Chinese authors and one Syrian (Theib Oweis) from the International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA), Damascus. The research work was supported by the Chinese National Scientific Foundation, the Special Fund for Agro-Scientific Research in the Public Interest, and the 12th Five-Year Plan of the National Key Technologies R&D Programme. It should be noted that ICARDA is an international research centre belonging to the Consultative Group of International Agricultural research centres (now based in Montpellier), and China is very much promoting agricultural research through these centres. ICARDA, before the Syrian civil war, was based in Syria.

Third, there is research funded exclusively by China. Alali et al. 2016 has eight authors: six are Chinese and two from Syria (University of Aleppo, Syria). This research was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China, Fundamental Research Funds of the Central University of Helongjiang (HEUCFZ), the Natural Science Foundation of Heilongjiang Province, the

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Swiss Funding Agencies (ETH Board, ETH Zurich, PSI, SNF, UniZH, Canton Zurich, and SER); the Ministry of Science and Technology, Taipei; the Thailand Center of Excellence in Physics, the Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology of Thailand, Special Task Force for Activating Research and the National Science and Technology Development Agency of Thailand; the Scientific and Technical Research Council of Turkey, and Turkish Atomic Energy Authority; the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, and State Fund for Fundamental Researches, Ukraine; the Science and Technology Facilities Council, UK; the US Department of Energy, and the US National Science Foundation. Individuals have received support from the Marie-Curie programme and the European Research Council and EPLANET (European Union); the Leventis Foundation; the A. P. Sloan Foundation; the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation; the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office; the Fonds pour la Formation a la Recherche dans l'Industrie et dans l'Agriculture (FRIA-Belgium); the Agentschap voor Innovatie door Wetenschap en Technologie (IWT-Belgium); the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS) of the Czech Republic; the Council of Science and Industrial Research, India; the HOMING PLUS programme of Foundation for Polish Science, cofinanced from European Union, Regional Development Fund; the Compagnia di San Paolo (Torino); and the Thalis and Aristeia programmes cofinanced by EU-ESF and the Greek NSRF' (Khachatryan et al. 2014).

International Science & Technology Cooperation Programme of China, and the Major Project of Science and Technology of Heilongjiang Province.

Finally, there is research conducted by Arab researchers who have a double affiliation and are funded by Chinese agencies. One example could be Zahi et al. 2017 that is in the domain of chemistry, food science and technology, and nutrition and dietetics. The first author is Algerian, who has two university affiliations, one in Beijing and one in Blida (Algeria). This project was supported by the Beijing Natural Science Foundation, China's National High Technology Research and Development Programme, and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities.

Out of these four patterns of co-authorship, few co-authored articles can be mentioned to be the product of a complete common research project between Arab researchers and their Chinese counterparts. In most cases, Arab researchers are part of a larger research programme.

China's Arab Policy Paper (Chinese Government, 2016) announced an interest for China to carry out scientific collaborations with the Arab world, but the initiatives are few. One is the Sino–Jordanian university project, and another is called 'Outstanding Young Scientist Coming to China Project', which encourages exchange between the young scientific talents of China and the Arab world. It is very striking from a country such as Sudan, which has a long-standing relationship with China that dates to 1956 when China helped Sudan in all domains of development but very little in scientific cooperation. Ahmad (2016) lists almost 200 projects of Chinese aid, soft loan, and investment in the framework of trade and investment agreements against the oil that China buys from Sudan. However, the only project not implemented was an integrated information system of higher education. It is clear that there is no evidence of supply from China or demand from Sudan to foster scientific collaboration. The same observation can be made about Algeria. In 2015, the Gross Annual Revenues of Chinese companies' construction projects in Algeria amounted to more than US$8 billions without any substantial research component to this economic cooperation (Johns Hopkins University's China-Africa Research Initiative, 2016).

Generally speaking, the Arabs have historically not really developed a cultural relationship with China that would be aligned with levels of economic cooperation. For instance, the Lebanese historian Daher (2017) noted that not much Chinese literature has been translated into Arabic. Recently, more linguistic connections have been established, thanks to the Confucius Institute, which one may find in many Arab countries. The Confucius Institute at the University of Dubai has taught people of all ages from a wide range of backgrounds (Rakhmat, 2015). The China–U.A.E. cooperation in education and

research is more likely to witness more positive developments in the coming years, especially in terms of the enrolment of Chinese students in U.A.E. universities (Hamdan, 2013).

What could explain the dearth of research collaborations between China and the Arab states? First, although China mentions an overall interest in Arab countries, it still is rather lower in priority than the interest China has with other regions, and particularly the European Union (E.U.). China and the E.U. launched a new co-funding mechanism to support joint research and innovation activities. Each year, more than €100 millions from the E.U.'s Horizon 2020 programme will be matched by at least €28 millions from Chinese programmes, for projects that involve European and Chinese participants. Before Horizon 2020, the E.U. ran the 7th Framework Programme from 2007 to 2013, in which China was the third-largest international partner country, with 383 Chinese organizations participating in 274 collaborative research projects that garnered €35 millions of funding from the E.U. It has been shown that the first agreements led to rather a small number of publications. Still, the newer H2020 EU programmes seem to be rather more productive (L. Wang, personal communication, September 2016).

Second, diasporas may play some role in scientific collaborations, although Gaillard et al. (2013a; 2013b) have shown that among drivers of international collaborations in science, diasporas are the lowest of all; this holds true for Europe, Arab countries, Turkey, Israel, and Latin America. Nonetheless, when initiating a new collaboration, it might appear that expatriates play some role. There are many Chinese communities in Europe and the U.S.A. that are not found in the Arab world. The Chinese scientific diaspora is very important indeed: only about one-third of the 380,000 Chinese who went abroad over the past 20 years have gone back to China (Cao & Suttmeier, 2001). The Chinese government has tried repeatedly to tap this huge human resource and has designed many efforts to incentivize a return to China by Chinese-born scientists.

> The Thousand Talent Programme, operated by the Central Origination Department of the Communist Party, is a prominent example of its efforts. Many Chinese scholars have studied in the United States, and this contributes to international connections that continue after returning to China.
>
> 'China's diaspora brings it home', 2015, para. 3

Since they were set up 20 years ago, these programmes have not been the object of any assessment apart from anecdotes and one unique study (Lu & Zhang, 2015).

Third, the Arab world and China have very different economic structures but are closely linked by trade. The Arab interest in science and innovation is less important than that of China for the market in Arab countries. Nonetheless, in the social sciences, alongside articles co-authored by both Chinese and Arab scholars we only find articles in pragmatic domains such as business (corporate social responsibility, organisational studies, etc.), psychology (cross-cultural interpretation of personality, individualism, collectivism, autism, etc.), or international relations. We do not yet find any critical study, either in sociology or in anthropology, that might be considered as threatening to the social or political order in the Arab world or China.

8.5 Conclusion

We have shown in this chapter that there are promising scientific publications co-authored by Arab and Chinese researchers. However, this does not necessarily indicate high-level collaborations. As mentioned above, and underlined by Kahn (2017, p. 117), part of the co-authorship relates to large scientific projects. Collaboration is thus limited to integrating large research projects, not by choice, but because of the need for comparative data or international networks. We explore some reasons for this lack of high-level and meaningful collaboration. Maybe research is still not very high in the political agenda of Arab countries and that 'science diplomacy' appears as very strange to Arab countries (not so for China). Moreover, there is little effort to foster collaboration such as through training or exchange. Australia, for example, has established a policy with China for geo-strategical reasons (Australian government, 2011). The E.U. is also trying to agree a policy with China. Yet none of this appears in the agendas of Arab countries.

In order to foster collaborations, China and the Arab world should have clear programmes providing institutional funding and facilitating collaborations between scholars from both sides. Nonetheless, we believe the linkages will still be pragmatic ones, mainly in technical and engineering fields. Following the recent period of Arab uprisings the Arab world is divided into two groups. The first group is made up of those who are open to change: more freedom, more justice, and more democracy. China will disappoint them concerning freedom and democracy. For the second group, made up by those supporting the authoritarian governments, China is a perfect partner who can provide safe scientific collaboration without cultural interference. Gulf countries do seek this kind of collaboration (see Chapter 6). China's government will preach neither human rights, nor women's rights, nor democracy, and so appears as

the best possible partner, bringing science without critical thinking, precisely as these Arab authoritarian countries have adopted the Western technology and the natural and exact sciences, not the social science. Arab countries are thus dissociating the economic from the political: a sort of win-win strategy, as Hamshi (2017) puts it. But the scientific prospect is still not one that appears as interesting enough either to the Chinese partner or the Arab countries, at least in the official relations. It does indicate, that the authoritarian mode of government, a shared feature of most Arab countries and China, is not enough to guarantee collaboration.

Appendix: References of Co-authorship Examples

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CHAPTER 9

China and the MENA Region in a Decentred World

Andrea Ghiselli

9.1 Introduction

Despite the significance of the energy from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for the Chinese economy, Nathan and Scobell (2012) argue, China has relatively little military presence in the MENA region. Similarly, Scobell and Nader (2016) contend that Chinese diplomatic and military engagement is short-lived compared to its economic and energy interests. Evidently, Chinese military presence in the MENA region is smaller than the American one, and yet, this chapter argues, one should not undermine the significance of China's military presence in the MENA region, as its evolution reflects the broader changes in China's foreign policy and its rise in international affairs.

After a lengthy analysis of its capability to influence world affairs, Shambaugh (2013, p. 8) declared that, despite what many think, China is a 'global actor without, yet, being a true global power'. Because it can wield global influence only in some areas of international politics, China remains a 'partial power'. There are two reasons behind this argument. First, sometimes, China does not have the capabilities to interfere. For example, the Chinese armed forces can hardly project substantial offensive power outside Asia. Second, even when Chinese capabilities are enough, material resources alone do not automatically buy long-lasting influence; a country also needs to develop soft and smart power (Nye, 2011). Such social understanding of power, and therefore of the status of great power, means that other countries are not always willing to recognise a rich country as a great power.

In his work on Chinese and Japanese frustration with their global status, as countries not being fully recognised as 'legitimate great powers', Suzuki (2008, p. 45) showed that differences in culture and political system ultimately generate the fear that an aspiring great power might use its military power either against other countries or not use it to promote the interests of the international community. In order to show their commitments to the society of states, Suzuki argued, Japan and China started to participate in peacekeeping operations under the aegis of the UN.

In this chapter, I build on Suzuki's (2008) study in order to offer a new perspective on China's bid to join the legitimate great powers and in order to offer

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insights into the future of the international system. The argument I present here is twofold. First, following the decline of war as an institution of the international society and the rise of non-traditional security in world affairs, China adapted successfully to a new logic, dominating the mechanism of great power management. China also managed to strengthen its bid to great power status despite persisting tensions in Asia and ongoing rivalry with the USA. Second, China's rise is likely to lead to a world without superpowers, characterised by what Buzan (2011) calls a 'decentred' globalism. This means that despite increasingly dangerous non-traditional security threats – ranging from terrorism to climate change – no country will be able to solve them single-handedly. Rather, it will need to find common ground and cooperate with other great powers.

The underlying assumption of my argument is that military power remains the indicator par excellence of 'great powerness'. Indeed, Lin-Greenberg (2018) has recently shown that even non-war uses of the armed forces, such as search and rescue operations, are often interpreted as demonstrations of strength because countries usually deploy their most advanced hardware to impress their peers. Although war as an institution of the international society might have been undermined by its tremendous human and economic costs (Bull, 2002; Buzan & Lawson, 2015), military power still 'provides a degree of security that is to order as oxygen is to breathing: little noticed until it begins to become scarce. Once it occurs, its absence dominates all else' (Nye, 2011, p. 59). Yet, order does not only mean peace among great powers. As convincingly argued by Cui and Buzan (2016), great power management – the main duty of great powers – has shifted from purely guaranteeing order through the prevention of wars to ensuring effective global governance. This shift happened because of the growing importance of non-traditional security since the end of the Cold War.

In order to pinpoint the process of China's evolution into a great power of a future decentred world, I show an ideal connection between Suzuki's (2008, p. 45) 'recognition game', played by frustrated great powers, and the set of actions envisioned by Mastanduno, Lake, and Ikenberry (1989) in their realist theory of state action. Such connection is evident when one examines the logic of Suzuki's recognition game and that of the pursuit of external validation by a state whose international standing is described as 'weak' by Mastanduno, Lake, and Ikenberry (1989).

Once the position on the international stage of a state has been strengthened, Mastanduno, Lake, and Ikenberry (1989) argue that the state will change its strategy to pursue external extraction. External extraction 'refers to state efforts to accumulate resources from outside its borders that can be of use in

achieving domestic objectives' and 'often requires an ability to influence other nation-states, to get them to do what they would otherwise not do' (p. 469).

In a decentred world, although great powers are likely to focus on their own region (Buzan, 2011), they will still require international government organisations (IGOs) like the UN to address transnational problems that pose a substantial threat to their global interests. Therefore, they support and act through IGOs as an effective way to wield power. In the specific case of military power, this does not simply entail participating in UN-sanctioned missions, but also being able to influence them to better serve its national interests. This means that, for example, while China in the past participated in peacekeeping missions mostly in order to boost its international reputation, now its main goal is to ensure a stable environment for Chinese businesses to operate in potentially unstable regions. This is a demonstration of great powerness, both in material and social terms: China has the capabilities to act and it is recognised by other countries as having the right to enjoy the benefit of a great power's 'legalized hegemony' (Simpson, 2004, pp. 67–76).

This chapter looks at two particular kinds of Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW), namely international peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations, carried out by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) under the aegis of the UN in recent years in the MENA region. This is a region where Chinese MOOTW are increasingly interfering. Both political instability and terrorism, two issues typical of a decentred world, are demanding more action, presence, and involvement.

In this analysis, it is important to understand the main goal of China in these operations, distinguishing between boosting the country's international standing (through the pursuit of external validation by playing a recognition game) and promoting international stability in relation with Chinese overseas interests (external extraction). As the term 'overseas interests' is a rather vague term, in this chapter, I look at the presence of Chinese workers, the value of the engineering projects contracted to Chinese companies, and China's reliance on some countries for its energy supplies as the three indicators of Chinses overseas interests.

9.2 China's Recognition Game in Sudan and the Gulf of Aden

Until 2011, Chinese behaviour is consistent with the logic of the recognition game, despite the risks associated with the expansion of its economic presence abroad. Besides the fact that China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), and therefore is expected to play a leading role in

international security, 2008 was also the year of the Beijing Olympic Games. Indeed, the Chinese government did not want to see such a symbolic event ruined by international criticism.

Although only engaged in engineering and medical activities, between 2000 and 2011 the number of Chinese peacekeepers deployed abroad every year grew from 100 up to roughly 2,000. Also, due to the participation of the PLA Navy (PLAN) in the international anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, the centre of gravity of Chinese military operations started to move steadily westward. Of course, this is not to say that the PLAN disengaged from Asia or that its Asian operations decreased, but that China started to be a security actor also outside its home region, thereby crucially expanding the geographical reach of its influence in security affairs.

Since the first UNSC resolution on the Darfur crisis, China tried to minimise criticism of the Sudanese government. However, as the crisis continued and the year of the Olympic Games came closer, a harsh media campaign that linked the killings in Darfur with the Games was mounted against Beijing. The publication of a 2007 report by Amnesty International (2007) on the failure of the arms embargo against the Sudanese government added further pressure on Beijing, as one of the main arms suppliers of Sudan.

In 2005, China started to press the Sudanese government through the missions of the Chinese government's special envoy Liu Guijun in order to allow the deployment of peacekeepers to the country. President Hu Jintao reportedly spoke about the issue personally with al-Bashir ('Hu puts forward principle on Darfur issue', 2007). At the same time, China, criticising the international media, emphasised that there was no reason to link the events in Darfur with the Olympic Games. Later, under China's presidency, the UNSC passed Resolution 1769 providing for the African Union / UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID). China contributed more than 300 medical and engineering troops, and they were among the first to arrive.

China was not only defending its growing international reputation, and learning how to act like a great power, but it was seeking to support the presence of Chinese workers and companies in the region. Chinese companies were invested heavily in the Sudanese upstream and downstream oil sectors. Between 1996 and 2007, 43 per cent of the foreign investments in the Sudanese upstream oil sector were from China. Between 2001 and 2007, an average of 6 per cent of Chinese crude oil imports came from Sudan.[1] Moreover, between 2003 and 2007, the number of Chinese contract workers, a term used by

1 Elaboration of data from ITC Trade Map, http://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx

Chinese statistics referring to state-owned companies' employees, grew from 3,618 to 16,904 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016, pp. 612–614).

Characterised by a mix of innovation and continuity, the diplomatic intervention and participation in the peacekeeping mission signalled a change in China's bargain with the international community. On the one hand, China acted in an unprecedentedly proactive way by engaging and mediating between the different parties involved. On the other hand, its military presence was consistent with the general trends of Chinese peacekeeping in those years. Since 2004, China had increased its contribution to the UNAMID forces significantly, but, as in the past missions, the Chinese peacekeepers still came mostly from engineering and medical units.

China's participation in the international anti-piracy mission off Somali waters since late 2008 shows how China's recognition game was becoming more expensive in terms of the level of engagement required by the international community. Indeed, as in the Sudanese case, the decision to join the international mission was mainly determined by the government's necessity to show China's commitment to neutralise a threat. The Chinese government wanted to send a strong message to both domestic and international observers (Erickson & Strange, 2015).

As Bull (2002) argued, a great power is not only acknowledged as such by other states, but also by its own citizens. According to online polls, more than 86 per cent of Chinese 'netizens' supported the deployment of warships to protect Chinese cargoes in the Gulf of Aden. Although these data can hardly be seen as a scientific measurement of the national attitude towards the anti-piracy missions, they are still indicative of the opinion of a part of the Chinese population that can exert a growing influence over the policy-making process through use of social media.

The Chinese task forces follow slightly conservative rules of engagement, moreso than their Western counterparts, and are mainly concerned to scare pirates rather than capture them (Lin-Greenberg, 2010). Yet, it is clear that the Chinese government was under great pressure to act. Indeed, China moved its most modern ships from their traditional defence duties to send them into faraway waters, despite the first signs of growing tensions in Asia.

Between late 2008 and 2012, the PLAN deployed ten task forces, each composed of a supply ship and two surface combatants, mostly frigates and destroyers. The three available supply ships were deployed multiple times; the *Weishanhu* and the *Qiandaohu* alone supported the anti-piracy missions for almost four years. Similarly, the same ten surface combatants from different fleets had been rotating continuously as between 2005 and 2010 the PLAN had fewer than six Type 54 frigates and four Type 52 destroyers available (O'Rourke,

2016). Only after the departure from Qingdao of the eleventh task force did the number of rotations per ship decline. Since then, almost all of the surface combatants deployed participated in only one expedition. It seems that the PLAN had to take away some of its most modern ships from traditional defence duties in order to avoid embarrassing problems such as not being able to repair their own engines at sea without foreign assistance, as has happened in the past (Collins & Grubb, 2008), and to support the leadership's decision to join the international anti-piracy efforts in the Middle East. This is a typical example of swaggering.[2]

In addition, the PLAN could not rely on a solid logistic support. On the one hand, the PLAN had to use the American GPS system for navigation because the Chinese Beidou was not ready (Beijing Youth Daily, 2009). On the other hand, lacking military bases in foreign countries, the PLAN had to find a partially sustainable arrangement through port calls in the region. Since the arrival of the fourth task force between 2009 and 2010 the duration of every deployment was extended from four to six months. From the list of the records broken by the first task force, it emerges quite clearly that for the PLAN, operating in the Gulf of Aden was much more about overcoming the challenges of being there than actually fighting the pirates (Sun & Zhu, 2009).

Once again, there are signs of continuity and discontinuity with the past. On the one hand, China was able to make the best out of a bad situation by taking the chance to start robust naval diplomacy through port calls and joint exercises with the other navies. On the other hand, the decision to send the best naval hardware far away from home is clearly indicative of the importance that the Chinese government attached to effectively projecting a strong image abroad. Moreover, the importance of economic interests abroad began to be evident.

Indeed, a key point of the work of Mastanduno et al. (1989) is that the shift towards a more proactive foreign policy is ultimately aimed at achieving domestic goals. Gaining the support of its citizens, preferably in a consensual way, is the main goal of every government (Kinne, 2005). Guaranteeing their citizens' well-being and preserving the territorial integrity of the country are

2 Art (1980, p. 10) argued that 'swaggering almost always involves only the peaceful use of force and is expressed usually in one of two ways: displaying one's military might at military exercises and national demonstrations and buying or building the era's most prestigious weapons. The swagger use of force is the most egoistic: it aims to enhance the national pride of a people or to satisfy the personal ambitions of its ruler. A state or statesman swaggers in order to look and feel more powerful and important, to be taken seriously by others in the councils of international decision-making to enhance the nation's image in the eyes of others'.

the two vital pillars upon which the legitimacy of a government rests (Klosko, 2005). Therefore, when the citizens perceive that their assets or their nation's assets abroad are under threat, the necessity for the state to change strategy and participate more actively in international affairs becomes more urgent. Also, trade and investments abroad naturally make a country richer. The newly acquired wealth can be transformed into material power through, for example, military build-up, the symbol of great powerness.

At the same time, the more trade and investments abroad expand, the more a country will be seen by others as rich and powerful, which in turn make their expectations grow. The domestic demand for great powerness will increase, as happened in China after the 2008 financial crisis (Shambaugh & Xiao, 2012). Within the Chinese international relations community, Wang Yizhou's (Wang, 2011; 2008) concept of 'creative intervention' probably goes to form the clearest proposal to change China's approach to its great powerness and the understanding of its role in international affairs.

As the first decade of the new century ended, the period of the recognition game was almost over. The growing overlap of China's interests and those of the international community was crucial in closing this process. As the next section argues, contributing to the promotion of international stability was not only about convincing the international community, but also protecting China's interests as a rich and increasingly globalised economy.

9.3 Beyond External Validation: The Importance of Libya

The evacuation of 36,000 Chinese citizens from Libya in the spring of 2011 radically changed China's global standing and, consequently, China's behaviour. The pressure from public opinion was high, both during and after the crisis. A number of Weibo users, some of whom were trapped in Libya, complained about the inefficient emergency hotline set up by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Chin, 2011).[3]

Avoiding the repetition of any similar accident became a new top priority of Chinese foreign policy (Zerba, 2014). The Libyan crisis had profound repercussions on the regional security environment, affecting the increasingly diversified Chinese interests in the region. For example, the destabilisation of Mali,

3 The Ministry of Commerce in April 2011 stated that Chinese companies had thus far signed contracts worth US$18.8 billion ('Chinese companies had contracts worth USD 18.8 billion in Libya', 2011).

where in November 2015 three Chinese managers were killed during a terrorist attack aided by weapons smuggled from Libyan arsenals.

Before assessing how the focus of China's strategy has shifted from gaining external recognition to pursuing external extraction, it is important to outline the scale of Chinese interests in the neighbouring countries of Mali, Libya, Sudan, and South Sudan. All these countries are, to different degrees, victims of instability and/or civil war.[4]

While in Mali the size of Chinese investments and the number of Chinese workers are negligible, the collapse of the Malian state as a result of civil war might provide a fertile ground for the growth of terrorist organisations capable of infiltrating neighbouring countries. Among them, Algeria has hosted the largest number of Chinese contract workers in North Africa since 2002, growing from 14,000 to more than 91,000 in 2016. The Algerian market is extremely important for Chinese companies: the total value of the engineering and construction projects awarded to Chinese companies between 2004 and 2017 is around $72 billion. Mali and Algeria should be seen as part of a delicate mosaic, where the other pieces are Morocco and Niger. Those two countries are lucrative markets for Chinese engineering companies worth $9 billion together between 2011 and 2015.

Moving eastward, in Egypt and Ethiopia, divided by Sudan and South Sudan, Chinese companies were contracted for engineering projects from energy to big logistic infrastructures, respectively worth $13 billion and $30 billion between 2011 and 2017. While in Egypt the China–Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone has been developing quickly in recent years, the number of Chinese contract workers in Ethiopia has grown from 5,600 to 10,000 (the peak was in 2014 with more than 14,000 workers). In terms of energy, North Africa is less important than in the past, notably since the imports of Libyan and Sudanese crude oil have significantly decreased because of war. However, the Ethiopian natural gas sector has become the target of Chinese investments recently. The Middle East, which has consistently supplied between 40 per cent and 50 per cent of Chinese crude oil and natural gas imports between 2001 and 2018, is the last segment of this arc of interests that stretches from Morocco to Iran. The Middle East, however, is as important as it is unstable. To sum up, it is clear why China is trying to transform its material power into the 'legalized hegemony' of a great power: it is so as to protect its own interests.

A first evident sign of change can be found in the quantitative as well as the qualitative growth of China's engagement in peacekeeping operations since

4 The following data are all from the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics (various years).

2012. That year, a platoon-sized unit of guard troops was deployed to South Sudan to provide exclusive protection to the Chinese peacekeepers already there. They had no other role within the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) framework and, therefore, were not officially considered China's first combat troops operating under the UN aegis. They nonetheless set an important precedent for the ensuing deployments of combat troops. After the first deployment, the PLAN continued to contribute similar troops both to UNMISS and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Those troops differ from the standard PLAN infantrymen. While the average equipment issued to the PLA troops is still relatively outdated and cheap (Q. Zhang, 2014), the combat troops in Mali and South Sudan boast full body armour, new weapons, drones, and modern armoured carriers, which in many ways make them similar to special forces (T. Zhang, 2015).

Reflecting on the need to provide better support to its troops and sailors, the Chinese military leadership also decided to bring an end to the discussion about whether, where, and how to establish military bases abroad. In 2013, Zhao Keshi, a member of the powerful Central Military Commission and leader of the former PLA General Logistic Department, wrote an article on this issue that was published in *China Military Science*, the flagship journal of the PLA Academy of Military Science, where he argued that it was high time that China established overseas bases/logistic spots to support its expanding military operations, especially peacekeeping and non-combatant evacuations (Zhao, 2013). Such a strong statement from Zhao implicitly confirmed that a decision had already been made.

Like other great powers, China needed military facilities abroad in order to step up the protection of its overseas interests and, eventually, better contribute to international stability. In late 2015, China finally confirmed that its negotiations with Djibouti were practically over. Although it is not possible to know exactly what kind of operations the facilities in the East African country will support, there is no doubt that they will greatly enhance the Chinese military presence in the region. The PLAN and the PLA Air Force had been waiting for a stable berth and perch (Ghiselli, 2016a). By looking at the presence of Chinese peacekeepers, the facilities in Djibouti, and the naval task forces in the Gulf of Aden, it is possible to see the emergence of Chinese military infrastructure built through growing engagement in the UN. A Chinese scholar (D. Sun, 2014, pp. 10–11) put forward the term 'soft military presence' to describe the PLA presence in this faraway region.

The decision to deploy combat troops and establish overseas facilities signals a broader reconsideration of the use of force vis-à-vis non-traditional security issues in foreign policy in recent years. In many ways, China's approach to

political instability in other countries directly grows out of its experience of promoting economic development in its own western provinces in order to create social harmony. Although this has not changed much, it is possible to see the emergence of a new trend.

In 2013, China voted in favour of Resolution 2100, which provided for the deployment of MINUSMA and tasked the peacekeepers to take 'all necessary means, within the limits of its capacities and areas of deployment' in order to 'stabilize' population centres in northern Mali and to 'deter threats and to take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements in those areas' (UN Security Council, 2013, p. 7). The same year, China was in favour of the creation of an 'intervention brigade', with offensive tasks, as part of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) (van der Putten, 2015, p. 17). Finally, after Xi Jinping called to boost the international efforts against terrorism in the aftermath of the killing of the Chinese hostage in Syria, the Chinese Ambassador to the UN mentioned that the tragic event was among the motivations behind China's vote in favour of allowing the use of force against terrorists in Syria and Iraq (UN Security Council, 2015). Considering that China had been opposed to this since 2011, when a similar resolution led to the fall of Gaddafi in Libya, and that the future of Assad in Syria, this vote/act is quite indicative of the change going on in China's understanding of terrorism and the protection of its overseas interests (Ghiselli, 2016b).

The qualitative and quantitative growth of China's participation in peacekeeping missions ensures that the country has a stronger voice regarding where, how, and when to launch or extend old and new missions. At the same time, the more that Chinese policymakers see the benefits that derive from acting through the UN, the more they will also be likely to increase their engagement and contribution.

An example of this development is the extension of UNMISS in 2014. China's offer to provide 700 more troops to the mission is likely to have weighed heavily in the debate on how to modify and extend the mandate of the mission in order to protect oil installations, many of which were operated by Chinese companies (Parello-Plesner & Duchâtel, 2015). Two years later, after it had already pledged the creation of an 8,000-troop standby force and the contribution of helicopters to the peacekeeping operations, China also reportedly tried to take more direct control of the peacekeeping planning process by proposing to put a Chinese officer in charge of the UN Peacekeeping Department (Lynch, 2016). Although the proposed candidate was arrested by Chinese authorities in 2018 for corruption, the appointment of Meng Hongwei, former Vice Minister for Public Security, as the head of Interpol in November 2016 can

be seen as a precedent for other senior appointments, including within the UN (Griffiths, 2016).

China's ambition to play an active role in regional security affairs was finally spelled out in the first white paper on the Middle East published in January 2016 (PRC State Council, 2016), shortly before President Xi Jinping's first visit to the region since he took power in 2013.

To conclude, it is quite clear that in recent years China has been trying to pursue a strategy of external extraction. The importance of being recognised as a great power never disappeared; it was simply upgraded, as the growing overlaps between the interests of the international community and China required a more proactive engagement. Thus, while the Chinese contribution to peacekeeping missions is praised internationally, domestic forces keep the pressure on their own government high. In the final concluding section of the chapter the implications of China's rise as a great power in a decentred world on the international system will be discussed.

9.4 Conclusion

This chapter offered a new perspective on China's rise by pinpointing the transition from an external validation strategy to an external extraction, as shown by the development of Chinese overseas MOOTW. Although Chinese operations might be less eye-catching than US operations, as China has been very careful to keep a low profile, they have shown that China's military presence in the MENA region should not be neglected, for its evolution reflects the broader changes in China's foreign policy.

The critical factor in China's strategic shift was the growing overlap between the interests of the international community and those of China. As China's status as a great power consolidates, its bargaining power with the international community is also growing. As attempts to influence the planning of peacekeeping operations shows, it is the other great powers that are likely to pay the expenses for this growing presence. The UN Peacekeeping Department has traditionally been dominated by French personnel for almost 20 years. More broadly, Chinese scholars (Zhi, 2016; Zhou, 2016) today suggest that cooperation in Africa between China and other great powers, especially in security affairs, should happen through the adjustment of those countries' policies to the Chinese policies, rather than the other way around. This is consistent with the emergence of a decentred world; whose precondition is the diffusion of material capabilities that limits the influence of the traditional great powers and boosts that of the new ones.

In such context, given their geopolitical and geo-economical importance, both the Middle East and North Africa will remain crucial places in which to observe the evolution of China's rise for two main reasons. First, great powers have the responsibility to promote stability and fight terrorism, and expectations of China are likely to continue to increase in the future. Second, China's interests in the region are growing and will continue to grow within President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China must not only find a way to protect its interests in the MENA region, but must also find a way to prevent threats from those places, such as from so-called 'foreign fighters'. Hence, China's rise and its engagement with the region will continue hand-in-hand.

This does not mean that it will be easy for China to successfully implement its strategy. Three interconnected issues are particularly important in this regard. First, many regimes in the region remain extremely fragile. They, therefore, are easy prey of stronger powers, and more inclined to seek external patrons, and less resistant to non-state challenges. Syria and Iraq are two classic examples. This fact, combined with historical rivalries, make the MENA region extremely difficult to navigate for a country that has little regional experience. Second, the slow but steady withdrawal of the United States, made worse by the erratic decisions of President Trump, has been creating power vacuums that (overly) ambitious regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel as well as external ones like Russia are trying to fill. This renewed struggle for power puts Chinese diplomacy in a difficult position because the stakes in this dangerous game are extremely high. Goals that seemed achievable once, might not be so anymore. Third, rocky relations with the United States might force China to focus all its efforts on these relations, thereby becoming distracted from significantly developing its strategy in the MENA region. Some signs of this are already visible ('Comment: China enters the list of countries exempted from American sanctions, why?', 2018). At this point, we can only wait and see how the situation will continue to evolve.

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PART 4

Sino-MENA Regional Dynamics: Energy and Beyond

CHAPTER 10

Sino–Turkish Relations in the New Era: From Political Conflict to Economic Cooperation

Michael McCall and Tugrul Keskin

10.1 Introduction

In a rapidly shifting global environment, China and Turkey have found many common points of interest. Despite the immense geographical and cultural distance between them, the bilateral relationship has emerged as a priority for both parties. In the modern era, as China seeks to expand its trade relations and other mechanisms of soft power throughout the world, improving relations with Turkey presents opportunities that cannot be ignored. Turkey's geostrategic placement, regional influence, and relatively strong economy by regional standards attract Chinese attention. Conversely, from the Turkish perspective, after years of strained relations with the EU and NATO, China represents a fresh partner willing to cooperate without overbearing political demands. The multifaceted and complicated nature of the relationship makes it difficult to briefly characterise. Since October 2010 the two partners have defined their bilateral ties as a 'strategic cooperative relationship' ('China, Turkey to establish strategic cooperative relationship', 2010), but despite the fact that cooperation between the two does exist (though it is questionable as to whether it rises to the 'strategic' level), there remains contentious problems where national interests on both sides collide.

In this relationship, the two sides are not equals. Contemporary China is a global juggernaut on the economic front and holds a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, whereas Turkey can make no such boasts in either field. Turkey is incapable of affecting the 'rise' of China. Whether or not Turkey desires a more assertive and powerful China is immaterial to reality on the ground. Therefore, from a purely pragmatic perspective, instead of resisting the changing tides of global power alongside its historic Western partners, Turkey is attempting to take advantage of the situation to capture a portion of China's growth for itself wherever possible.

Seeking to revive its position as a regional power, improving relations with China renews its historical image as a bridge between East and West. During the latter part of his tenure as foreign minister, Davutoğlu expressed an ambition

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to 'develop a democracy with European Union standards, and a production style with Chinese standards' (Bacık, 2011). Thus, within the vein of the 'China Model' or 'Beijing Consensus', Turkey views China not only as a partner, but as an example to be emulated in order to improve upon its own relative economic position. Beyond material interests, the 'rise of China' presents an ideational pull factor for Turkish attention. Particularly after the Eurozone crisis, the European development model and EU membership in general, has become far less attractive than close relations with China, to say nothing of the traumatic experience Turkey underwent in its own bid to join the EU.

On the popular level, however, Turks generally maintain negative perceptions of China, and a general improvement in bilateral relations will necessitate overcoming this gap. In a 2017 Pew poll, 54 per cent of Turks expressed an unfavourable view of China, a measure of disapproval that has not descended below 50 per cent since 2006 (Global Indicators Database, 2019). Relations are first and foremost driven by elites, and people-to-people ties remain lacklustre.

10.2 Turkey as a NATO Member and Western Ally

Since the founding of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkey has primarily looked to the West as a cultural model to emulate. As a member of NATO, Turkey has historically remained firmly in the Western camp regarding global geopolitics as well; Turkey and China militarily confronted each other directly once in the context of the Korean War. The development of Sino–Turkish relations followed a similar timeline to that of the Sino–US thaw, with the opening of a Turkish embassy in Beijing in 1971. With the general decline of the US–Turkish partnership after disagreements surrounding the 2003 Iraq invasion, improving cooperation with China is a potential asset for Turkey to diversify its foreign relations so that it is no longer completely dependent upon its traditional Western alliances. This is a part of Turkey's new multi-dimensional and multi-track foreign policy, which intends to expand Turkey's role in the world to that of a major regional player without subscribing to a zero-sum mentality in foreign policy. This foreign policy style is also apparent vis-à-vis Russia, where Turkey has sought out diplomatic cooperation despite Western resistance.

Despite this effort to create an atmosphere of competition among different power blocs, Turkey's alliance with the United States remains of paramount importance in its overall foreign policy outlook. It is unlikely that Turkey would prioritise its relationship with China over the interests of the United States regarding issues of dire importance. As stated by Çolakoğlu, 'In the case

of a confrontation between the United States and China, Ankara will follow a policy compatible to that of Washington' (Selçuk Çolakoğlu, 2013). Sino–US relations will therefore continue to have a major impact on Sino–Turkish relations as well, although they will never be wholly identical as Turkey attempts to develop its own independent relationship with China.

Even though this basic alliance paradigm remains intact, Turkey's relationship with NATO has become more and more strained over the past decade. Particularly in the wake of Operation Peace Spring in 2019, major NATO members have floated the possibility of even expelling Turkey from the alliance. Such a suggestion is an extreme option that is unlikely to be followed through, but has potent discursive effects upon Turkey's diplomatic relations with its NATO partners nonetheless. Therefore, while Turkey is not necessarily altering its alliances in favour of China at the expense of the West, its relationships are shifting drastically within the current structure to grant less emphasis to Turkey's historic Western partners. Turkey is attempting to play both sides; it does not seek to completely alienate either but rather to take advantage of the benefits that both can offer. By maintaining the capability to turn to the opposing power bloc when its interests are not met, Turkey retains extensive flexibility and freedom of action.

10.3 Influence in the Middle East

Relative to its presence in Africa or Central Asia, China's presence in the Middle East is fairly low-key in terms of economic and military activity. Most of the region, particularly the Persian Gulf, has been a firm stronghold of Western power, with petrodollars reigning supreme and US military bases abound. China feels that it needs to gain a greater amount of influence in the region, particularly as its imports of petroleum products from Middle Eastern states becomes a larger proportion of its total energy consumption. With a more active Chinese presence in the Middle East, the hegemonic status that Turkey currently possesses could come under threat, particularly when the interests of the two states are in direct conflict.

Turkey's desire to increase its influence in the Middle East region, what used to be considered 'Neo-Ottomanism' in the early days of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, has generated conflicting interests with China regarding regional affairs. The term 'Neo-Ottomanism', as a description of Turkish foreign policy, has been actively used by Chinese think tanks (Selçuk Çolakoğlu, 2012). The AKP government desires to reshape the political, economic, cultural, and social landscape of the Middle East in a fundamental

way, overturning the status quo. China, on the other hand, has largely adhered to a non-ideological, politically apathetic foreign policy, which primarily supports stability over political reform regardless of the government in power. Globally, Chinese foreign policy has proven to be consistently agnostic to political concerns so long as it does not interfere with their economic interests, whereas Turkey has become a vocal advocate of reform in the Middle East. Thus, on the international front in the Middle East region, the two sides often find themselves in opposition to one another.

The war in Syria has presented one example of conflicting policy aims: while Turkey was an early advocate for rebel forces and forcefully condemned the Assad government, China, within its typical non-interventionist discourse, had no such inclinations to oppose the existing government. Although China is not a major player in the context of the Syrian war, China's staunchly non-interventionist, status quo positions on Middle East policy do engender resistance from segments of Turkish society.

Considering China's position and ability to veto Security Council resolutions, Turkey would benefit from China being sympathetic to its position regarding Middle East affairs. Thus far, however, efforts to influence China to support Turkish initiatives has proven fruitless; Turkey has maintained a relatively activist regional foreign policy seeking to incubate governance structures similar to its own, while China is wholly uninterested in altering the Middle East status quo. As the United States retreats from conflicts in the Middle East, first under the waning years of the Obama administration and fully under the Trump administration, Russia has proven a far more reliable partner in this regard, given the willingness of Moscow to engage militarily with the region. With a staunch propensity towards non-intervention, China is unlikely to ever be a major partner for Turkey in the military realm.

Common regional interests do exist: on the economic front, both China and Turkey receive the majority of their energy imports from the region. Turkey, without any hydrocarbon reserves of its own to speak of, must maintain a constant flow of energy from the region to sustain its economy. As the second largest consumer of oil in the world, a major portion of China's petroleum imports come from the Middle East, and the GCC states in particular. The Middle East is also a valuable export market for both, but is far more vital for the continuing growth of the Turkish economy. As has been visible in the Turkish domestic market, it is difficult for Turkish products to compete with their Chinese counterparts. However, in the context of exports to the rest of the Middle East, Turkish products can benefit from lower shipping costs as well as an 'Islamic' brand, and so may yet remain a competitive source of economic growth for Turkey in specific sectors. Competition between the two countries in the

Middle East is particularly fierce in the construction sector, where the battle has driven prices down considerably.

10.4 Central Asia

Central Asia is a realm of competition between a variety of players: China, Turkey, Iran, and Russia, among others. With significant reserves of energy and other natural resources, both Turkey and China find it desirable to assert political influence over the region. Whether the two countries are competing or coordinating their foreign policy in Central Asia depends on the policy sphere. Both countries remain in lockstep regarding regional security issues, such as the elimination of terrorism, yet each also seeks to increase their cultural permeation at the expense of the other. China has proven itself more adapt in this respect compared to Turkey. Due to the ties with Central Asian countries as members of the former Soviet bloc, Russia continues to retain its position as the most important regional power, though its influence is waning in favour of China. Turkey's role, though minimal and diminishing, can be viewed as that of a balancing actor which offsets wholesale Chinese appropriation of the region in the post-Soviet era. China is far more concerned with Central Asia than the Middle East (Tao, 2013), simply because China is directly adjacent to Central Asia and thus its interests in that region are more significant.

Turkey has long been involved in the region due to its ethnic ties, but its influence particularly increased after the fall of the Soviet Union. Turgut Özal emphasised the establishment of pan-Turkic relations, and today it represents one of several regional players. Pan-Turkic ideology, despite never gaining a firm political hold in the area, links the peoples of Central Asia with Turkey. Turkey is re-emphasising this ethnic relationship today mainly through financial investment, particularly the provision of scholarships for Central Asian students, thereby gaining influence and an improved image among the general public.

Turkey's image as a secular, democratic Muslim country has provided a model to which many Central Asian countries aspire. Its political system is far more attractive than that of China, as it represents Western-style democracy with all its attendant benefits; Kemalist ideology, in particular, presented an ideal transition for post-Soviet countries dominated by a former Marxist–Leninist elite without a clear sense of direction. Secondly, the Turkish experience in terms of economic development presents an attractive model for Central Asian states. Islam Karimov, for example, actively promoted the

'Turkish model' as a political and economic model for Uzbekistan (Lipovsky, 2016). Additionally, Turkey's generous foreign aid packages cement favour, particularly due to the fact that they come without troublesome strings attached. Turkey appears to desire Central Asian development for the sake of the countries in question, rather than for self-serving motives. All these factors form the basis of Turkey's soft power in Central Asia, which greatly exceeds that of its hard power both in geographic extent and influence potential.

In contrast to this utilisation of cultural and ideational ties between Turkey and Central Asia, China has attempted to limit the impact this close identification between the Turkic peoples by increasing its economic presence in the region, and thus promoting greater Chinese involvement in regional affairs indirectly (Kumar, 2013). Low prices for Chinese imports and geographic proximity present irresistible pull factors driving closer economic links between China and Central Asia. In the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is also an investor in infrastructure projects throughout the region, cementing its presence in regional economic life. To take advantage of these opportunities, learning the Chinese language has become more common in Central Asian nations, and Confucius Institutes throughout Central Asia have been promoting this trend (Li, 2018). Turkish and Chinese exports and companies do compete in Central Asian markets. Chinese goods hold the advantage of lower prices, yet many people in Central Asian countries are willing to pay a premium for specific Turkish goods rather than their generic Chinese counterparts. Construction companies also compete for contracts in the region.

Aside from its strategic resource interests in the region, China views Central Asia as the most important front in the battle against terrorism. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a variety of radical Islamic groups in Central Asia, Uyghur organisations deemed terrorists by the PRC have been active in countries throughout the region. China fears that a full-scale insurgency in Xinjiang is possible if tight control is not kept on militant separatist organisations that operate outside of China's borders. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has become the primary tool to expand China's military influence throughout the region and promote this security cooperation. The SCO is seen as an organisation that can serve as a regional alternative to NATO's power (Cooley, 2012) and, given Turkey's role as a dialogue partner, draws Turkey into a partnership position on security matters in Central Asia. In this respect, the SCO as an institution limits Turkish influence in Central Asia on security matters by bringing them into the fold with a security dependence on China and Russia (Doyon, 2011).

10.5 Xinjiang

The status of Uyghurs in China presents one of the most intractable issues in the bilateral relationship. Due to the close ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties between Turks and Uyghurs, the Turks have historically held a deep affinity for a people whom they consider as their own cousins. Xinjiang has been a contentious issue since radical Islamic groups emerged within and from Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. After the Ghulja incident in 1997 and the Urumqi riot in 2009, China re-evaluated its own ethnic policies and religious practices. However, the increasing trend of radicalisation and 'Salafisation' among Chinese Muslim communities has generated a general communal unrest. On the other hand, since the AKP came to power in the early 2000s, Turkey has played an active role in championing Muslim 'rights' under the banner of a global Muslim '*ummah*' (loosely defined as a community or nation), and this foreign policy approach, given its anti-sovereignty discourse, has engendered Chinese suspicion.

Turkey previously tolerated and supported Uyghur separatist movements until the government under Bülent Ecevit prohibited their operation in 1998 in a direct attempt to improve Sino–Turkish relations (Furtun, 2010). Thus, at the governmental level, Turkey has disassociated itself from the Uyghur separatist struggle, and major contemporary Uyghur separatist organisations such as the WUC have transferred operations to Western nations like Germany and the United States. On the popular level, however, Turkey remains inextricably tied to the Uyghurs, and government officials must take popular sentiments into account.

When unrest in Urumqi broke out in 2009, it was unsurprising that Turkey was the most vocal critic of the Chinese government's response, as demanded by Turkish public sentiment. Prime Minister Erdoğan explicitly termed the incident as an 'almost genocide'. Despite the inflammatory rhetoric, however, few visible steps were taken on the Turkish side to effectively roll back relations in any way (Shan and Weng, 2010), and this has become the paradigm as to how the Turkish government handles the Uyghur issue vis-à-vis China. The Chinese government, in turn, did not explicitly react to the rhetoric emanating out of Ankara regarding the events. Neither side desired a major break in relations over the issue, yet it was impossible for the Turkish government to remain completely silent.

Today, the Turkish approach to the status of Uyghurs in Xinjiang has become a very delicate and balanced one; they refrain from any explicit or implicit support for separatist ideologies, but do advocate for the rights of the Uyghurs within the framework of the PRC. Confrontation is not the preferred

means by which to change the behaviour of the PRC, rather, Turkey prefers a policy of quasi-critical engagement. This permits them to cater to both their domestic constituencies who demand respect for the Uyghur minority, as well as maintaining good relations with PRC when discussing the most difficult issues between the two sides. Turkish public opinion, however, mandates that Turkey confronts the issue in some manner, regardless of the diplomatic consequences and bilateral relations.

While any concerns from Beijing regarding Turkey's position on Chinese territorial integrity in Xinjiang have largely been alleviated, the problem of Uyghur migrants from Xinjiang remains contentious. China has actively sought the return of many Uyghurs around the world; it deems them criminals. Other countries, such as the United States, have refused to repatriate Uyghurs that it had detained, on the grounds that they would be tortured and/or executed upon their return. As a primary destination for Uyghur emigrants and with massive public support for their asylum in the country, Turkey is incapable of coming to any common ground with China on this issue. In 2015, Beijing alleged that Turkey played an active role in assisting the illegal emigration of Uyghurs from China, an allegation that the Chinese government originally kept private in an attempt to avoid damaging relations (Clarke, 2017). The fact that the PRC was willing to avoid drawing attention to such activity is emblematic of how important the bilateral relationship has become.

The early months of 2019 demonstrated the thin line the Turkish government must tread in regards to balancing both its desire to maintain cordial relations with China and demands from their own constituencies: the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs felt compelled in February to denounce the 'policy of systematic assimilation' of Uyghurs after unconfirmed reports of the death of a famous Uyghur poet (Karadeniz and Toksabay, 2019). Released very close to local elections that were due the following month, this statement catered to domestic constituencies critical of Turkey's relative silence on the subject of Uyghurs. Unusually critical of China, it sparked a fierce response from Beijing; the main Chinese diplomat in Turkey implied that economic relations could be adversely affected by such public statements ('QA-6, 2019') .[1] No statements to a similar effect have been issued since.

Though sympathy for Uyghurs, as fellow Turkic people, permeates the entirety of the Turkish political landscape, different Turkish political parties grant the issue different levels of priority. Due to its pan-Turkic ideology,

1 This Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hami Aksoy was in response to a question regarding serious human rights violations perpetrated against Uighur Turks and the passing away of folk poet Abdurehim Heyit'.

Turkey's Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) has traditionally held Sinophobic views in response to perceived oppression of Uyghurs within China. Members of the MHP, especially its militant wing, the Grey Wolves, have attacked Chinese properties and tourists within Turkey in the past. One especially notable case was in 2015 when tourists were attacked in response to reports that Uyghurs were prohibited from following Islamic traditions in Xinjiang (Girit, 2015).

The constitutional reforms in 2017 altered domestic political alignments and the MHP contested the 2018 general elections jointly with the ruling AKP under the banner of the People's Alliance. With the AKP primarily concerned with maintaining good relations with China and the MHP seeking to cater to an intensely pan-Turkic constituency that will intensely advocate for Uyghurs, the resulting foreign policy dynamic appears thus far to be an amalgamation between the two positions that pleases no one, with the 2019 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) statement and subsequent silence being an example.

10.6 Military Relations

For Western nations, Turkey's growing relationship with China in the realm of military affairs has become a serious cause for concern. Wielding the second largest contingent of troops within NATO, its importance to the continued strength, and ultimately, relevance of the alliance cannot be underestimated. Turkey's alliance with Western countries was also the cause for its first confrontation with China, as a party alongside the United States in the Korean War. Before the end of the Cold War, this historical experience was the most potent factor in determining the nature of the relationship; the Chinese government viewed Turkey as an extension of US power, while Turkey viewed China as a communist menace acting detrimentally to global security (Tao Zan, 2009). Since the shift towards neoliberal economic policies on both sides, the military relationship between the two countries has changed drastically from one of enmity to one of relative cooperation. The two sides began to work together on military matters in the 1980s (Atlı, 2015), during the period when Deng Xiaoping and Turgut Özal were implementing massive economic reforms in their respective countries. These military relations were fairly sporadic and did not become entrenched until recently.

Joint military operations, though uncommon, have taken place: in 2010, China participated in the 'Anatolian Eagle' air force exercises (Kemal, 2010), traditionally a NATO operation alongside Israeli forces. The inclusion of the PLAAF (People's Liberation Army Air Force) symbolised a substantial upgrade in military ties, as well as a willingness to buck Western demands in the military

arena. The latter point was re-emphasised by the Turkish prohibition of Israeli participation in the previous year, which also antagonised the United States. Chinese participation in the exercises, therefore, served as one more 'signal' that Turkey maintains options beyond NATO, which, at least during the Cold War, had practically dictated Turkish foreign policy in every realm aside from the Cyprus issue.

The most prominent example of Turkey shifting away from its Western allies can be seen in a recent case of military procurement. Turkey has been in the market for an air-defence missile system for the lion's share of the past decade. As a NATO member, the obvious system to purchase would have been the Patriot missile system. Negotiating with both Russian and Chinese suppliers and a French–Italian firm, the Turks initially offered a contract to China's CPMIEC (China Precision Machinery Export–Import Corp) to purchase the HQ-9 defence system for $3 billion ('US-sanctioned Chinese firm wins Turkey missile defense system tender', 2013). This deal engendered fierce resistance from the United States, both on technical grounds (whether or not foreign technology can be integrated with NATO early-warning systems is unclear), and on political grounds, as CPMIEC was under US sanctions for dealing with Iran. Though the deal was eventually scrapped in 2015 in favour of Russia's S-400 system (a deal that also angered the United States), relations with NATO have been damaged by Turkey even thinking about importing Chinese military equipment.

Finally, Turkish membership in the SCO remains at the level of a dialogue partner to date, a position which was originally formalised in 2012 ('SCO Accepts Afghanistan as Observer, Turkey Dialogue Partner', 2012). This is despite Turkey seeking a higher level of membership within the organisation. From the Chinese perspective, the failed missile system contract of 2015 remains a potent negative memory in terms of how difficult interacting Turkey would be, given its complex position as a NATO member. Thus, even if the Turks seek to overcome NATO dependence through improving military ties with China, the Chinese consider Turkey's NATO ties as a factor that prevents actual cooperation by the Turkish side in military affairs. So long as Turkey remains a current member of NATO, actual military cooperation with China will necessarily remain limited.

Considering the immense support, both historical and contemporary, that Turkey has received from NATO, there would appear to be significant risks to NATO if Turkey becomes too close to China militarily. Ultimately, what the Turkish government appears to be hoping to obtain is additional options outside of its traditional Western sphere so that it is no longer totally reliant upon any single source of military hardware. This may increase its bargaining power

with its Western allies in the future by making it capable of credibly threatening to turn to China when necessary. This is a dangerous game, however, as it rapidly alienates its NATO allies and induces fear of Chinese infiltration of NATO via technological means. It raises the question as to whether Turkey is still a reliable NATO member, at a time when Turkey can ill afford to dispense with the assistance and protection that NATO offers.

10.7 Economic Cooperation and Growing Trade

With relatively stunted progress on the military front and confrontation over the Uyghur issue, bilateral trade between the two countries is the defining element of the relationship today. President Erdoğan's 2015 visit to China cemented this fact, as contentious issues were sidelined in favour of economic development discussions. Though Turkish exports to China hover around $2.5 billion, China represents Turkey's single largest source of imports. Bilateral trade peaked in 2013 at $28.29 billion ('Turkey-People's Republic of China Economic and Trade Relations', 2019); this volume of trade has fluctuated downward by as much as $5 billion in subsequent years, but without any serious, sustained drops. Given the fact that bilateral trade in 2000 only totalled $1 billion, over a longer period of time we have witnessed a substantial growth, but perhaps a plateau has been reached within the past decade.

The main source of conflict in bilateral economic relations remains the gaping trade deficit favouring China, peaking at $23 billion in China's favor in 2016 ('Turkey-People's Republic of China Economic and Trade Relations', 2019). The two economies are structured differently, and imagining a Turkish export portfolio that would alleviate this massive deficit is not simple. Turkey exports little of interest to Chinese consumers, while China, in its role as the 'factory of the world', produces immense quantities of consumer goods that flood the Turkish market. If the trade deficit is left unmanaged, it will generate both political and economic problems in Turkey. In a 2015 interview with CCTV, President Erdoğan specifically mentioned this deficit as an issue that needed to be tackled to improve trade relations.

An economic sense of nationalism is prominent among many sectors of the Turkish population, and this imbalanced relationship runs the risk of inflaming sentiments against a perceived exploitation of the Turkish economy by an 'invasion' of Chinese goods. Many Turkish traders are complaining of unjust and unequal competition due to the quantity of Chinese imports. According to Shichor, 'Each ship full of Chinese products that docks at the Turkish ports is causing the closure of a Turkish factory' ('China and the Middle East: Testimony

before the U.S–China Economic and Security Review Commission', 2013). Turkey's major economic sectors, such as textiles and clothing, have been damaged by the flooding of cheaper Chinese goods. Turkey's economy also now requires substantial intermediary goods imported from China in order to produce final products, generating a dependency. The sheer variety of goods that China is able to export to Turkey is immense, while Turkey has been unable to penetrate the Chinese market with any goods with the exception of products from the mining sector. Turkey appears completely uncompetitive and impotent to alleviate this problem unilaterally.

Significant efforts have been undertaken on the Turkish side to reduce the intolerable trade imbalance. Since Turkey has found itself unable to produce sufficient goods that are attractive to the Chinese market, this has primarily been an attempt to increase Chinese investments in the Turkish economy rather than an increase of Turkish exports to China. At the moment, however, the percentage of total foreign direct investment (FDI) in Turkey that comes from China remains relatively small. Also, the amount of total Chinese outgoing FDI that is invested in Turkey is minuscule. It is questionable as to whether or not investment projects currently being discussed would actually be sufficiently sizable so as to lessen the trade deficit, which stands at approximately $17.8 billion, down from a peak of $23 billion in 2016 ('Turkey–People's Republic of China Economic and Trade Relations', 2019).

On the Chinese side, Premier Xi Jinping has actively encouraged increased levels of Chinese investment in Turkey, particularly in renewable energy and transportation infrastructure sectors ('Xi Jinping: China Will Encourage More Companies to Invest in Turkey', 2015). Considering the fact that Turkey possesses almost no energy resources to speak of, development of renewable energy would ameliorate a substantial strategic weakness. Nuclear power has been of particular interest to Turkey. To pursue the aim of more investment projects, Turkish business associations have set up offices in Beijing, including the well-connected MÜSIAD organisation. The desired effects are yet to be visible, however, and the trade imbalance remains as insurmountable as ever for the time being.

More Chinese tourism to Turkey has been cited as a potential means to reduce the deficit as well, as the number of tourists annually has remained fairly marginal. Chinese tourists are both the most numerous in the world, at 102 million, and generate the most revenue for their receiving countries, at $109.8 billion in 2016 (Xu, Wang, and Song, 2020). The large tourist potential in Turkey is not acquiring its equitable share of this cash pool, however. In 2006, the Minister of Internal Affairs of Turkey, Kursad Tuzmen, floated the tourism option as a means of resolving the deficit problem.

> Now, there are 15 million Chinese going abroad for tourism per year, but there are only 80,000 coming to Turkey. This is a very small number. In regard to some other countries, there are more than 2 million tourists coming to Turkey every year. We are happy to invite Chinese friends to travel to Turkey. This could help to solve the problem of balance of payment.
>
> ZAN TAO, 2009

Though the total has increased over the past decade to nearly half a million tourists in a single year ('Turkey Looks to Welcome over Half a Million Chinese Tourists This Year', 2019), the actual percentage of Chinese outbound tourists choosing Turkey as their destination of choice actually fell, as the total number of Chinese outbound tourists rose to over 130 million ('Turkey Eyes 1 Million Chinese Tourists in 2018', 2017).

A rise in highly publicised hate incidents involving Chinese tourists in Turkey, or merely tourists appearing to be Chinese, as well as high-profile anti-Chinese protests has substantially reduced the appeal for Chinese citizens to travel to Turkey since 2015. The Chinese embassy in Ankara felt it was necessary to issue a travel advisory to its citizens in Turkey, alerting them to potential safety threats from anti-Chinese demonstrations. This is likely to be difficult for the Turkish government to completely prevent, due to the sensitive and politically complex nature of the Uyghur issue in Turkish domestic politics that spurs these problems.

Turkey has also been the recipient of Chinese capital through other means. For example, China invested $750 million into the Istanbul–Ankara high-speed railway project ('Ankara–Istanbul High Speed Railway Construction', 2015), which included the transfer of high-speed rail technology to Turkey. Institutionally, Turkey has actively partnered with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), beginning with a loan in 2018 in order to secure Turkish gas supplies (Lo, 2018) and reaching $1.4 billion in investment over the course of the same year ('Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank invested $1.4B in Turkey-related projects in 2018', 2019). Turkey became one of the initial investors in the AIIB, offering a sum of $2.6 billion, which placed it as the eleventh biggest shareholder. Turkey holds 2.8 per cent of the voting rights of the bank, considerably more than the 0.95 per cent that it holds as of late 2019 as a member of the IMF ("IMF Members' Quotas and Voting Power, and IMF Board of Governors", 2021), and the 1.09 per cent that it holds as a member of the IBRD ('Voting Powers', 2020). Furthermore, China has even directly transferred funds to Turkey under a currency swap agreement, one of many that China has utilised to internationalise its currency (Garcia-Herrero, and Le Xia, 2015).

With one taking place around politically sensitive local elections (Kandemir and Karakaya, 2019), these transfers could be interpreted as a political as well as an economic gesture meant to benefit the incumbent Turkish government.

10.8 Silk Road Economic Belt

Turkey's geostrategic location is an irreplaceable asset for the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), as it represents the primary gateway from Central Asia into the lucrative markets of Europe. With virtually no other feasible routes available for transporting goods into Europe from Asia, maintaining a positive, constructive relationship with Turkey is vital for China to be able to realise its ambitious economic strategy (Zan, Tao, 2016). Considering Turkey was the only Middle East country to attend the 2017 BRI Forum in Beijing at the head-of-state level, Turkey's commitment to the initiative is significant (Isik and Zou, 2019). Based on its own interests, Turkey has sought to promote its vision of a 'Middle Corridor' (Orta Koridor) along similar lines as the SREB. The two mega-projects are designed to be complementary to one another. Turkey's association with the AIIB furthers cooperation in this regard: the AIIB has become one of the primary sources of funding for BRI projects, of which the SREB is the land-based portion.

The combination of the SREB and 'Middle Corridor' provides a number of opportunities for Sino–Turkish cooperation. The SREB has generated a number of large infrastructure projects: the Ankara–Istanbul high-speed railway, the Edirne–Kars high-speed railway, and the Baku–Tiblisi–Kars railway. Other major transport projects include the Eurasia Tunnel underneath the Bosphorus, the new Istanbul airport, and the Yavuz Sultan Bridge (Kulaksız, 2019). The proposed Çanakkale 1915 bridge would be the longest suspension bridge in the world, and the new Istanbul airport already is the largest airport in the world. Furthermore, Turkey has been integrated into the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) project, the other leg of the BRI, with investments from China flowing for the purpose of upgrading port littorals to the Mediterranean Sea. Other joint projects, ranging from gas pipelines and satellites, represent the depth of cooperation that the BRI as a whole has brought to the Sino–Turkish relationship. Among more nationalist sectors of the Turkish public, however, there are concerns that Turkey is being used by China purely in a transitive capacity, in order to gain access to the European markets with little regard to the Turks themselves (Tao, 2013).

Seeking to achieve the ambitious development goals of the 2023 'Turkey Dream' for the centennial anniversary of the Turkish Republic, external

investment in Turkish infrastructure and the infrastructure of neighbouring countries is critical. Along the lines of Chinese 'win-win' rhetoric, the SREB appears to be, on the whole, a successful joint undertaking. Considering Turkey's own emphasis on infrastructure development, both domestically and regionally, Turkish and Chinese interests dovetail remarkably well in this realm.

10.9 The Taiwan Dilemma

Prior to 1971, when Turkey officially severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan, Taiwan held a preferable position to the mainland in Turkey's foreign affairs, given Turkey's tendency to tow the Western line during the Cold War. When Sino–Turkish relations thawed, one of the most important symbolic acts was the move of the embassy from Taipei to Beijing. Today, although President Erdoğan continually reaffirms his country's respect for the One-China policy, Turkey has increased economic ties with Taiwan over the course of the 2000s. Given there is no direct contact between the Turkish MFA and Taiwan, the official position of the MFA is that 'Turkey has no political relations with Taiwan, only economic, cultural and commercial contacts' ('The Recent Elections in Taiwan and Relations Between Turkey and People's Republic of China', 2000). Turkey is wary of improving ties with Taiwan too enthusiastically, lest it undermine the more critical relationship with Beijing as well as the political capital it can spend on the Uyghur issue. In this regard, the PRC holds a significant amount of leverage.

Taiwan, for its part, has been attempting to reassure Turkey that improving relations will not have a negative effect on relations with the Chinese mainland. Taiwan's prominent status as an 'Asian tiger' theoretically makes it an attractive partner for improved economic relations. Turkey reaped rewards from expanded trade relations with Hong Kong. Trade with Taiwan has remained relatively static over the course of the past decade, however, and given Taiwan's highly-developed economy, the trade deficit favours Taiwan in a similar fashion as the trade relationship between Turkey and the mainland.

The perceived similarity between Taiwan and Hong Kong extends into the political realm as well; Turkey approaches its relationship with Taiwan by treating it as an autonomous region within China rather than an independent state, on similar lines to Hong Kong and Macau. By doing so, Turkey avoids an explicit violation of its adherence to the One-China policy (Çolakoğlu and Turgut, 2011). While formal treaties cannot be signed, given the lack of reciprocal diplomatic recognition, there has been progress in developing closer relations between Taiwan and China. In May 2013, for example, Turkey eliminated

many travel restrictions with Taiwan and vice versa; Taiwanese citizens are now eligible for electronic visas rather than being required to apply for visas at a consulate, and Turkish citizens are able to receive a visa upon arrival in Taiwan. These relaxations generated a substantial increase in travel between the two countries and in April 2015 direct flights between Turkey and Taiwan began operating (Kasim, 2015). Long desired by Taiwan, these measures represent a significant upgrade in relations within the confines demanded by the One-China policy.

10.10 Conclusions

Both Turkish and Chinese high-ranking officials clearly seek deeper relations; however, structural factors continually undermine the ability for China and Turkey to actually expand their ties into new spheres. Popular, military, and economic relations all possess their own limiting factors. Thus, at the moment, relations appear to have hit a plateau of sorts. Looking at the big picture over the course of the past few decades, however, Turkey's opening up to China is part of a larger scheme to develop relationships outside its historical alliances with the West. Good relations with China offers Turkey a new power bloc to turn to when the West fails to satisfy its needs. Relations with China force the West to become more competitive, and brings them to realise that Turkey's alliance should not be taken for granted.

The economic front appears to be the most promising realm for continued progress, yet levels of bilateral trade have not grown substantially in years. In the early part of the decade, goals of $100 billion in total bilateral trade were set, yet such levels remain very far from reality. The trade relationship is also very unbalanced; the Chinese economy simply has much more to sell to Turkey than vice versa. Remedying this imbalance has taken many forms, from FDI to tourism, though with gaps as large as $23 billion there is a lot of ground to recover. Additionally, China can utilise the economic levers it controls to affect political developments in Turkey to its benefit, such as capital transfers prior to elections. This further demonstrates the unbalanced nature of the relationship.

Military ties have been established in a very general sense, but have yet to progress beyond the most superficial forms. The failed sale of an air-defence system has left a sour taste in the mouth of Turkey's Chinese counterparts, and Turkey remains only a dialogue partner in the SCO. While the Turks may consider this a signal of hedging that they retain options beyond NATO, China is not necessarily keen to integrate Turkey into the SCO either. Turkey would

by no means be able to abandon NATO tomorrow in favour of the SCO, for example.

The Uyghur issue remains the most potent issue on the popular level in Turkey undermining the expansion of ties. The Turkish public will remain distinctly sympathetic to Uyghur separatist causes, given their extensive linguistic and ethnic ties. These ties cannot be broken, and thus cannot be easily surmounted so long as the Turkish government feels it must remain accountable to its domestic constituencies. The Chinese, conversely, consider as unacceptable any criticism of what they perceive to be purely domestic policies.

People-to-people ties remain the largest gap between the two sides. Turkey is aware that greater cultural connections between the two countries will enhance Turkey's ability to better manage the relationship and maximise interests in their business dealings. Turkey's Ministry of Education supports initiatives to develop Turkish expertise in the Chinese language. Chinese is now offered in certain high schools, and Turkey has partnered with Chinese educational institutions in study abroad programmes to China. Furthermore, Turkey encouraged the establishment of Confucius Institutes within Turkish educational institutions, to teach the Chinese language and educate Turkish students about Chinese culture. The first Confucius Institutes was built in 2008 in the Middle East Technical University (Zan Tao, 2009), followed by institutes in Boğaziçi, Okan, and Yeditepe.

Both China and Turkey are willing to avoid any actions that would cause considerable damage to the bilateral relationship, even if it would bring about relative gains for their other interests. This self-restraint displays the importance each side gives to the relationship and the potential that both sides believe it has. This is clear from Ankara's attitude towards the Uyghur issue as well as its hesitance in developing relations with Taiwan. Both sides have remained relatively calm and collected, and do not wish to overtly antagonise the other. When the Turkish government feels compelled to, such as when the MFA criticised Chinese treatment of Uyghurs in 2019, differences are papered over. Gains from cooperation are simply too large to be sacrificed on the altar of political posturing.

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CHAPTER 11

Sino–Egyptian Relations and the New Regional Dynamics of the Middle East

Yossra M. Taha

11.1 Introduction

The Middle East is considered one of the most dynamic regions of the world. With major strategic importance in terms of location and resources, it has since the dawn of history been one of the heated battlefields for great and superpower rivalries. One recent very active great power entry to this battlefield is China, which has long avoided any profound involvement in the region's political and security dynamics. China has maintained a slightly shy but consistently growing economic engagement with some of the region's major countries, especially oil-producing countries, all out of its unfeigned will not to trespass the United States' interests in the region or ignite its already hyped fears about China's intentions and prospective role in the future. Yet sometime before the end of President Obama's term in office, many scholars started advocating the United States' disengagement from the Middle East as a means to correct the wrongdoings of misguided heavy military interference since 9/11 (Simon & Stevenson, 2015; Walt, 2015). Here was a moment that China had long anticipated, which it swiftly and wittedly began to use.

Starting in late 2015, Chinese and Middle Eastern officials have exchanged many visits on a very large scale and have finalised a large set of agreements. China played a major role in concluding Iran's nuclear deal, participated in negotiations about the situation in Syria, and has been actively pursuing the transformation of its own vision of international trade and cultural integration into reality, namely its new Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Different countries of the world received the BRI differently. The United States has as always raised concerns about the geostrategic intentions of the initiative and how this would be a further step towards the expansion of China's interests globally and a fortification of its intended future status as a competitive superpower. On the other hand, Russia and most of Asian and Arab countries were very supportive of the initiative and hastily declared support and willingness to be part of it. While the countries of Europe did not have

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a joint common stance regarding the initiative, they generally received it with caution (LeCore, 2017).

All of these transformations suggest an interesting research question: what would be the regional dynamics of the Middle East if China became more involved in the region? Would the addition of a Chinese element to the quagmire of the Middle East result in more complexity in the region, especially regarding Syria? Or would it actually lead to improving the region? This chapter intends to answer a variety of research questions such as what is the nature of Sino–Egyptian relations, and what are the prospects of their improvement after recent meetings and agreements? How will China's relations with other regional powers, namely Saudi Arabia and Israel, affect its relations with Egypt? What is the Chinese policy towards the situation in Syria and how can Sino–Egyptian relations help resolve the complex situation?

This chapter is based on the hypothesis that China's continued engagement in the Middle East will be in accordance with the long-lasting principles of Chinese foreign policy, namely, peaceful rise, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation; Chinese engagement in the region will be aimed at increasing peace, stability, and security and decreasing violence and instability. This chapter is also founded on the first two pillars of Chinese pragmatism. First, that more financial and economic cooperation is required with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), especially in terms of trade and investment. Second, state sovereignty must be respected and there should be no interference with the domestic affairs of nation states. In order to test the validity of the chapter's hypothesis, the nature of the new regional dynamics and the resulting new regional order post-2011 will be addressed. The chapter then moves to highlighting the nature of Sino–Egyptian relations and how they fit into a new regional order. The chapter ends by referring to Sino–Egyptian positions on Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. In terms of methodology, the chapter attempts to qualitatively analyse the content of some of the recent agreements signed between China and Egypt as well as the statements and reports issued at the conclusion of visits and negotiations, including those statements resulting from interviews with diplomats stationed in Egypt.

11.2 The Middle East Post-2011: New Dynamics and New Regional Order

In 2011, a large series of uprisings swept across different countries of the Middle East; altering the face of a region that no analyst expected would change. The Arab Spring was quick and intense. It resulted in serious regime changes and destabilisation in major Arab and Middle Eastern countries, rocking almost all

of the small regional groupings of the Middle East. These uprisings seemed to be orchestrated by solid, active, and well informed, yet scattered youth movements. Unfortunately, such movements did not care about central leaderships; they paid less attention to strategic planning and failed at playing the treacherous game of politics. Except for the case of Tunisia, this failure led to either the retreat of the democratic process or its complete disintegration.

Resorting to state and sub-state levels of analysis, this section attempts to explain the effect such regional deviations had on the MENA states and the role sub-state actors played in generating and modifying these deviations. The field of international relations can be of some assistance in explaining these major alternations in the politics of the MENA region through relying on three main paradigms, that is, the paradigms of domestic politics, systemic and materialistic approaches, and identity discourses.

Brent Sasley (2011) suggested that at the heart of the domestic paradigm are concepts of regime security and legitimacy. The Arab Spring has shaken the security and the legitimacy of the regimes of all of the countries of the MENA region, not just those that witnessed notable uprisings but also those that did not, affecting their foreign policies and shifting the balance of power on a regional level. Countries like Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, which were previously major players in the international and regional relations of the MENA region, have been severely struck in terms of security and economy. Not only has the Arab Spring changed the stability and security of the MENA region and the legitimacy of various ruling regimes but also their position, power, influence, and capability compared to some countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This led to the shifting of the regional balance of power towards some of the GCC states and the decline of leverage of the other Arab countries in the MENA region. It also led to the transformation of some of the GCC countries to becoming the navigators of the regional dynamics in MENA (Khan & Miller, 2016).

From the perspective of systemic and material approaches, it is evident that the MENA region has always been very sensitive to external intervention. Despite the fact that there have been doubts about US political disengagement from the region since President Trump came to office and his treatment of the issue of Islamic terrorism (Marcus, 2016), it could be argued that the US military intervention in the region will not going to continue. The Trump administration continued to practise persistent biased indirect intervention (PBI), that is to support US interests in the region even if they do not necessarily align with the interests of the region in peace and stability. An example is US participation in the Arab Islamic American Summit held in Saudi Arabia in May 2017 and the arms deals concluded between Saudi Arabia and the United States at

the end of the summit. The arms deals are worth US$350 billion over 10 years, aimed at enhancing the Saudis' ability in fighting terrorism and supporting their efforts in Yemen (David, 2017). Clearly, the US–Saudi arms deals are in the economic interests of the US but they have intensified the war in Yemen and are, therefore, not in the interests of peace and stability in the Middle East.

The Russian role, on the other hand, supporting the Syrian regime with Iran, is not at all different from the US role in terms of PBI, yet it is more direct. The Russians continue to financially and militarily support the Assad regime, ignoring the necessity of peace and stability in the region. Russia has been directly involved in the conflict in Syria since 2015, when it decided to send troops to support the Assad regime. Russia has also responded to the Egyptian rapprochement in 2014 by agreeing to sell arms to Egypt through a major arms sales deal, the first since the Cold War (Goldenberg & Smith, 2017), and it has played a major role in the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal, ending sanctions on Iran and avoiding it becoming a hot spot because of its nuclear programme.

While almost all the external influences on regional dynamics in the region are basically promoting confrontation, the Chinese role in the region has been more of a peace promotor and business provider: economically oriented and favouring stability. China has been promoting its BRI since September 2013, and most countries of the region fall in one way or the other on the routes of this initiative. As Lyal mentions in his series about China and the Middle East,

> … Reflecting the centrality of the Middle East to BRI designs, the Middle East was designated as a 'neighbour' region by Beijing in November 2013 at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, meaning that it now falls within Beijing's top-priority geostrategic zone. The prioritisation of the Middle East within BRI – itself the central feature of contemporary Chinese diplomacy – has seen China become the largest trading partner of the Arab League and Iran, as well as a key partner of Israel.
>
> LYALL, 2019

Yet, despite the fact that China was to a great extent successful in concluding many deals and treaties with several countries in the region, still more needs to be done by both parties to ensure a favourable context for the implementation of those treaties and the BRI in a manner that would achieve welfare and prosperity to all the beneficiaries in a context that asserts and preserves peace and stability.

The final concept that could explain the new regional dynamics of the Middle East is that of the discourses of identity. The discourses of identity are

constructivist discourses suggesting that the actions of political actors on the international and regional arenas are driven by the attributes of identity, culture, religion, and norms and values in general, even those having their roots in international law (Wendt, 2004; 1992). It is quite possible to argue that the ongoing competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as reflected in the battlefields of Syria and Yemen, has concrete explanations in the identity discourse as well. The deep religious and historical Sunni–Shia rivalry provides a very plausible explanation to the ongoing conflict taking place in both Syria and Yemen. It may not be as profound in the minds of politicians and leaders of both countries, but this rivalry is a main motivation for the recruits of the militias on both sides to join them in the first place and maybe sacrifice their lives for the cause of eliminating the other camp.

Such tilts, deviations, and dynamics have all made the weight of power fall in the Gulf area. Countries of the GCC are the only countries that came out of the Arab Spring relatively intact compared to other countries of the region; thus, in them rests the largest scope of power and influence. Their monarchies remain stable and their economies, despite some hardships, remain resilient. It has become evident that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar are now the leading key regional actors in the Arab world, while in the wider latitude of the Middle East, Turkey and Iran can be added, especially after the conclusion and signing of the nuclear deal.

Egypt, on the other hand, has lost a lot of its regional power, leverage, and influence since 2011. This is mainly due to several waves of regime change experienced in a short period of time, an escalation in terrorist security threats since 2013, and economic hardship. All three factors have forced Egypt to be internally focussed rather than regionally or internationally active.

11.3 Current Sino–Egyptian Relations and How They Fit in the New Regional Dynamics of the Middle East

Since 2011 Sino–Egyptian relations have witnessed an improving ascending trend as seen in the significant increase in the number of exchanged visits, signed treaties, and memoranda of understanding. Excluding in early 2017, when Egypt decided implement currency floating procedures and restrict imports, over the past decade there has been a substantial rise in the amount of trade and investment conducted, despite general instability in the region (Alsharif, 2017). This section of the chapter looks at the recent treaties signed by both parties, especially those concluded in 2016, qualitatively analysing their

content and reflecting on how they represent potential for further improvements in relations.

Strategically and politically, both countries are important to each other and share a common understanding on almost all major international and regional policy issues, especially the ones regarding the Middle East. For instance, according to the joint communiqués signed by both parties in 1999 and 2014,[1] both countries call for the establishment of a more democratic world order; they agree on the necessity of reform of multilateral institutions, especially the UN Security Council and they also agree on the inevitability of a peaceful resolution of regional conflicts according to UN accords and for the region to be free of all sorts of weapons of mass destruction. They also stress complete mutual respect towards the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity and mutual non-interference in their respective internal affairs. Both parties also concur on the condemnation of all acts of terrorism and express a genuine determination to fully cooperate in the fight against international terrorism in any way possible, especially through establishing connections between respective military and defence academies and reviving the mutual defence committee. Finally, they are also in accord when it comes to promoting economic development in the Global South as a way to ensure peace and stability.

The 2016 executive programme signed by both parties in January 2016 repeated the emphasis on the above principles with more detail, yet it specifically mentioned the respect of Egypt to the One-China policy and the respect of China to Egypt's right to determine its political future without interference and to secure its waters. It also stressed the importance of sustaining the frequency of mutual consultation and visits at all levels of government as a vital mechanism for preserving their strategic partnership (The Executive Programme to promote the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Relations between China and Egypt in the coming 5 years (in Arabic), 2016.

Economic and financial cooperation between both parties has witnessed a relative exponential elevation since the declaration of the BRI in 2013 (Chaziza, 2016a; 'Spotlight: Figures show growth in Egypt, China cooperation on Belt & Road Initiative', 2017). China–Egypt bilateral trade volume grew 26.7

1 The document that displays the content of the 1999 and 2014 communiques is a policy brief summarising the general orientation of Egyptian foreign policy toward Asia in general and toward China in particular, touching upon the history of relations, areas of cooperation, and a list of the recent treaties signed by both parties without the original content of treaties. The original content of the treaties was then looked up from public sources, mainly online news reports ('Full text of Joint Statement on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Relations between The People's Republic of China and the Arab Republic of Egypt', 2014).

per cent in January–August 2018 to reach $8.83 billion, according to China's State Administration of Taxation. Statistics from the administration show that China's exports to Egypt reached $7.61 billion in the first eight months of 2018, while its imports from Egypt totalled $1.22 billion.

In 2018, Chinese companies participated in an array of Egyptian exhibitions, such as the Cairo International Book Fair, Egypt Defence Expo (EDEX), which is the first international exhibition of military industries in 2018, the Cairo International Motor Show, or Automech Formula, and the 2018 Egyptian–Chinese Trade and Investment Exhibition.

Egypt has also signed a number of agreements with Chinese companies. In March 2018, the Egyptian government signed a memorandum of understanding with China State Construction Engineering Corporation on designing and constructing three closed gymnasiums in Sharm al-Sheikh, Hurghada, and Luxor in preparation for hosting the 2021 World Men's Handball Championship.

Egypt's New Urban Communities Authority (NUCA) has signed a memorandum of understanding with a Chinese construction company, the CGCOC Group, to establish the first industrial zone in the city of New Alamein. Chairman of Egypt's Arab Organization for Industrialization (AOI), Abdel Moneim al-Taras, announced that he agreed with Chairman of China Railway 20 Bureau Group Corporation (CR20G), Deng Yong, to establish an industrial facility to manufacture monorails and express trains.

Additionally, Commander of Egyptian Air Forces, Mohamed Abbas, signed an agreement during the EDEX 2018 exhibition in Cairo to purchase drones from China's National Aero-Technology Import and Export Corporation (CATIC). China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) started the main phase of the construction of a new terminal basin in the Sokhna Port to the south of the Suez Canal, while the National Bank of Egypt (NBE) signed in a loan agreement of $600 million with China Development Bank (CDB) in the Chinese capital of Beijing.

The very first statements issued jointly by China and Egypt, which helped to shape future joint declarations, are balanced and neutral. These initial statements reflect a genuine commitment to the norms and values of the international community. Even though the language of the statements lacks precision and is not confined to the comprehensive strategic cooperation relations between China and Egypt; it is of significant importance in the context of the MENA region, which is generally subjected to double standards and a disregard for these exact international norms by other international actors.

Such statements are devoid of any serious political conditionality; they reject the politicisation of human rights and treat both parties as equal partners seeking mutual benefits. It should be noted that there has been a gradual

expansion of the scope of detail between the 2014 joint communiqué and the 2016 executive programme. The latter was more detailed, comprising of eighty articles addressing all possible areas of cooperation including the political, international, and regional aspects; economic, financial, and trade aspects; security and defence aspects; cultural aspects; scientific, nuclear, communication, and technological aspects; environmental and agricultural aspects; energy aspects; health aspects; and judicial aspects. This was followed by another level of detail when separate treaties in some of the above aspects were signed.

China and Egypt signed twenty-one treaties in January 2016 in various different fields ('Egypt, China Presidents Attend Spring of 21 Agreements', 2016). It is worth mentioning that only the economic and technical cooperation agreement between China and Egypt has been ratified by the Egyptian parliament and a presidential decree has been issued to indicate the initiation of its implementation. This raises a serious challenge concerning the direct and immediate impact these agreements may have on the Egyptian economy.

The list of treaties signed covers the areas of financial and economic cooperation, investment in the energy sector (mainly electricity), infrastructure, communication, aviation, technology, and media. Despite the fact that they are essential sectors of investment and development for Egypt, it could be noted that they are not income or profit generating; they are long-term projects relying on being financed through loans or aid that despite their positive developmental impact would still leave the country indebted.

Concerning the aspect of regional policies, this chapter will focus on addressing the Sino–Egyptian stances on the conflicts in Syria and how such stances converge within such a complex regional setting, in addition to addressing the impact of China's relations with other regional powers, namely Saudi Arabia and Israel, on Egyptian national security. Generally speaking, Egypt and China share the support of the principles of the respect of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of state. And while the stance of China regarding the Syrian conflict has been consistent since its start, the stance of Egypt beheld a few tilts until it has just recently been finally formalised and has become very close to the Chinese stance.

11.4 Sino–Egyptian Positions on Syria and Relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel

Before President Xi Jinping's visit to the region, Wang Yi, China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, met with his Syrian counterpart Waleed Al-Moaleem and the president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition

Forces Alptekin Hocaoglu in two separate meetings in China. During these meetings, China was keen to play the role of mediator and urged both parties to exert maximum effort to push for a political solution to the Syrian problem. In President Xi Jinping's speech to the Arab League, he reaffirmed the notions of dialogue and peace and rejected the notions of war and military intervention for resolving conflict. He also specifically said that,

> instead of looking for a proxy in the Middle East, we promote peace talks; instead of seeking any sphere of influence, we call on all parties to join the circle of friends for the Belt and Road Initiative; instead of attempting to fill the 'vacuum', we build a cooperative partnership network for win-win outcomes.
>
> 'Chinese president offers remedies', 2016; TIEZZI, 2016

When President Al-Sisi came to power, Egypt's stance on Syria became more obvious. He clearly mentioned in an interview with Portuguese state television in November 2016 that Egypt's priority is to support the national armies of nations, as has been the case in Libya. When the interviewer followed up by asking about Syria and Iraq, President Al-Sisi affirmed the same stance (Kessler, 2017). Despite the fact that Egypt has voted for two seemingly opposing UN Security Council resolutions about Syria and has lately joined the Arab Islamic American Alliance against terrorism, such apparent contradictions to the above stance do not really change or affect it. The voting dilemma was explained in the speech given by Egypt's representative to the council after the voting, stating that Egypt supports all efforts by the international community aimed at establishing peace in Syria; since both resolutions called for peace Egypt supported them both so as to help them pass and to end the suffering of the Syrian people.

Finally, with regards to the relations of China with other regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Israel, and how it impacts Egyptian national security, recently and due to the new regional dynamics that have been addressed earlier in this chapter, there has been considerable unprecedented rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel, as they share a common interest in curbing the spread of Iranian influence in the region, especially after the conclusion of the nuclear deal and the removal of economic sanctions (Gradstein, 2017). Such rapprochement has coincided with the similar BRI agreements China has been concluding with both Saudi Arabia and Israel. These agreements include the construction of railways and massive investments in ports such as Aqaba and Eilat on the Red Sea coast and Ashdod on the Mediterranean coast in what has been termed the 'Red-Med' project (Chaziza,

2016b). Such a project could be of much benefit to Israel, yet being a complementary route to the Suez Canal, it will definitely have negative implications on the Egyptian economy and national security.

11.5 Conclusions: Where Should the Relations Go?

Reviewing the new regional dynamics of the Middle East and addressing Sino–Egyptian relations in light of these dynamics, the chapter concludes by providing a few reflections and recommendations on where the relations should be going. Analysing the list of agreements and statements reached between both parties; it could be concluded that indeed the hypothesis from which the chapter was launched is valid to a great extent. The language and the content of these statements and fields of the agreements prove the validity of the hypothesis that China is highly pacifist and pragmatic in its approach to the region and to its relations with Egypt. China is keen to cooperate with Egypt on all the different aspects of regional politics; it is keen on assisting Egypt in revitalising its role in the region and claiming the status it once had.

The review of the new regional dynamics in the region and the role of external powers and influences on them suggest that there will be no complete US disengagement from the region under the administration of President Trump. It has been clear from the final presence of the Americans in the Arab Islamic American Summit that the United States will continue to support the Arab Sunni camp in their fight against Iran, in return for their fight against terrorism and the defeat of ISIS, yet without direct heavy US involvement as it was in the past. It also suggests that the introduction of the Chinese element will not in fact increase the complexity of the situation but, rather, may lead to its simplification.

China's pragmatic and economically driven BRI needs the establishment of peace and security in the MENA region so as to preserve the economic benefits that would result from this initiative. Thus, China and Egypt should work together to focus on the interests of their people; they should resort to, and revive, their history of cooperation in the movement of the non-aligned. By making use of their almost identical stances on major regional issues like the conflict in Syria and Palestine, and by embracing the constructivist discourse of peace, values and norms, and justice, stability might be restored in the region. China should continue to support Egypt's efforts to strengthen its economy, help restore its role in the region, and work together as peace brokers and negotiators to bring peace in the major conflicts in the region.

China and Egypt can also work together on easing the identity discourse as a source of conflict in the region. Egypt, being the host of Al-Azhar, one of the most respected Sunni schools in the Islamic world, and China, having one of the largest Muslim minorities in the world, can work together to promote the moderate interpretations of Sunni Islam and help face the spread of the extremist views of ISIS.

The qualitative content analysis content in this chapter suggests that more needs to be done in terms of micro-cooperation in technical, educational, cultural, and information fields. Most of the treaties conducted address macro levels of cooperation, while ignoring the importance of small-scale cooperation between small-scale crafts and industries. The treaties concluded have no industrial aspect in them nor any profit-generating investment that has to do with production. Thus, it could be beneficial for both sides to promote the individual and private sector investments in the areas of traditional industries and crafts in local communities, establishing more joint ventures, assistance, and training opportunities to help transform Egypt into an industrial hub.

Both nations should be more focussed on touristic cooperation and development, working to increase the number of respective tourists and expanding the mutual reach of the cultural heritage of both sides through enhancing the reach of Chinese soft power in Egypt and vice versa. This could be done through more student exchange programmes, more language courses, and more academic cooperation in developing the field of China and the Middle East as a new discipline. The youth of both nations should be encouraged to establish more social networking and social integration initiatives in order to further deepen ties among the people.

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CHAPTER 12

China's Policy on the Iranian Nuclear Issue

Cooperation and Disagreements with Russia and the United States

Mher Sahakyan

12.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to critically examine Chinese foreign policy in regard to Iran's nuclear programme, arguing that China's pragmatism and contributions to the negotiations and its result, the JCPOA, improved the country's status internationally which is not only conducive to the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East but prevented the United States and Israel from starting a war against Iran. To this end, it examines China's position in regard to Iran's nuclear ambitions, its economic ties with Iran as one of the suppliers of energy to China, as well as the country's cooperation and disagreements with Russia and the US which has impacts on its foreign policy in regard to the balance of power in the Persian Gulf region.

12.2 China–Iran Nuclear Cooperation

The United States continued to support Iran's nuclear programme until 1979 when the US–Iranian strategic partnership collapsed due to the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini who toppled Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the key US partner in the region. Expressing fundamental disappointment with Tehran's nuclear ambitions, the Americans stopped helping Iran with its nuclear programme using their influence to pressure other countries to halt their cooperation with the country in the field of nuclear research.

Without Western technological support, Iran suspended its nuclear programme until the Iran–Iraq War, when the country restarted its nuclear programme, out of fear that Iraq might build and use nuclear weapons against Iran. When Iraq launched chemical weapons against Iranian forces, Tehran began to search for a new supplier of nuclear technologies and found China to be a reliable partner. During the Iran–Iraq War, China was one of Iran's suppliers of modern weapons despite US attempts aimed at convincing the Chinese government to halt its weapons export activity.

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China was also interested in cooperating with Iran in the nuclear sphere for a number of reasons. Firstly, China received oil and foreign currency from Iran in exchange for exported nuclear technologies and conventional arms. Secondly, Beijing saw Iran as a sovereign, independent state, not under the influence of Washington, that would continue to supply energy resources to China during a possible China–US confrontation. Thirdly, after neoliberal economic reforms in China, its nuclear research centres found opportunities to export their research and technologies. New markets for its nuclear centres helped Chinese to fund and develop their nuclear products.

In June 1985, Iran and China signed an agreement in which China provided four research reactors and fissile material for the Isfahan Nuclear Research Centre. China also invited Iranian nuclear specialists to attend nuclear reactor design training and assisted Iran in exploration for uranium (Garver, 2006). As Hassan Rouhani (2013, p. 41) has mentioned:

> We began negotiations with the Chinese to construct a reactor (300 megawatts). In the course of these negotiations, we proposed that they sell us the equipment for uranium enrichment. The Chinese did not have the necessary amount of this equipment ready for sale, but with some limitations, they were ready to sign a contract for the installation of the Uranium Conversion Facility (UCF) and for the construction of the Zirconium Production Plant (ZPP). We also signed a contract with the Chinese for the production of fuel tablets and for the equipment for the laser method of enriching uranium.

In September 1992, Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani negotiated another agreement, which provided an opportunity to strengthen nuclear cooperation between Iran and China (Garver, 2006).

According to Hassan Rouhani (2013), with Chinese help Iran also solved the problem of uranium enrichment and fuel production. During this period, given European reluctance to finish the Bushehr Nuclear Plant, Tehran signed an agreement with Moscow for its completion, as Russia was the only capable country which was willing to construct the facility (Rouhani, 2013). Russian specialists constructed the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant and installed the VVER-1000 reactor (Evseev, 2013), while China's specialists-built Isfahan's UCF and ZPP (Rouhani, 2013).

Washington saw the growing Sino–Iranian nuclear cooperation as a threat to its interests in the Middle East. Indeed, Beijing was attempting to use the Sino–Iranian nuclear deal to pressure Washington. In response, the Clinton administration sanctioned Chinese companies that cooperated with Tehran

on its nuclear research and missile production programmes. In 1996, the US Congress passed the Iran–Libya Sanctions Act, which imposed penalties on any foreign entity that invested more than $20 million in Iran (Miller, 2012).

Notably, despite disagreements concerning Taiwan and the Iranian and Pakistani nuclear programmes, China and the US were quite interested in improving economic relations between themselves. China intended to develop bilateral relations in order to lure investments from the US as well as modern technologies, one of the main drivers of the modernisation of its industries. The US, in turn, was interested in China's massive market and growing economy. In Autumn 1997, after lengthy negotiations, both countries made some concessions thereby facilitating a stronger economic relationship. The US agreed to continue providing China with modern technologies and Beijing, in return, approved to halt its nuclear collaboration with Tehran (Garver, 2006).

Although Beijing stopped its nuclear cooperation given economic and political pressure from the US, it had already helped Tehran reconstruct its nuclear power industry, which had been destroyed during the Iran–Iraq War. Iran had obtained Chinese nuclear technology for the production of civil nuclear energy from 1985 to 1997, allowing Tehran to complete its other equally important nuclear projects.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, China has once again been faced with a critical choice between Iran and the West and yet tries to continue cooperation with both sides. China is bound to both the US and Iran through economic interdependence. This speaks to the very foundation of the neoliberal order. As Moravcsik (2009, p. 247) argues, 'the effect of economic interdependence on security affairs varies with market incentives'.

12.3 China's Cooperation with Russia and Disagreements with the US on Iran's Nuclear Issue: Iran and the JCPOA

It is worth taking a look at how Moscow and Beijing approach the Iranian nuclear issue at the UN Security Council (UNSC). On the one hand both Russia and China urged the US to refrain from military actions against Iran and to desist from imposing sanctions on Iran's energy production. On the other hand, both Russia and China voted for resolutions which placed crippling sanctions on Iran's financial, nuclear, and military systems (UNSC, 2010). What is uniting Russia and China over the Iranian nuclear issue at the UNSC?

Firstly, Russia and China were concerned to ease sanctions on Iran but also to avoid disagreements with the US. Seemingly, the tandem were only prepared to use their vetoes if the US tried to impose sanctions on imports and

exports of Iranian energy resources, a red line drawn by the Chinese government. However, if the US did not act against Chinese interests by demanding an embargo on Iran's energy resources, China and Russia would support proposed resolutions.

Secondly, China and Russia are concerned to keep on good terms with other members of the international community that were involved in negotiations with Iran over the nuclear issue; thus, they press on Iran to continue negotiations. Moscow and Beijing keep such symmetry of pressing on Iran, so that its economic and political systems do not collapse. China and Russia[1] do not support politicians from the US and Israel who seek to change Iran's political system or start a war with Iran,[2] as political instability in the country would deepen the political crisis in the Middle East. Russian and Chinese decision makers understand that a regime change in Iran would totally shift the country's foreign policy, pushing Iran to West and ultimately limiting the ability of Russia and China to manoeuvre within the Middle East. They are intent on maintaining Iran as a regionally important player who does not act on US orders.

Accordingly, Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Ryabkov stated that Russia would not participate in a 'regime change scenario' in Iran or share the political and legal responsibility for such actions. It would not accept sanctions which aim at the collapse of Iran's political regime (Ryabkov, 2012).

Thirdly, China and Russia as two great powers are against Iran building a nuclear arsenal as it would start a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Russia does not want to see a new member, next to its southern borders, joining the nuclear club. China is also engaged in maintaining the balance of powers in the Persian Gulf region, as it is the main supplier of energy for its thriving economy and therefore is seeking stability throughout the Middle East. A major study shows that,

1 In 2012, during a meeting with Russian scholars, President Putin stated that the United States is pursuing its policy of regime change in Iran under the pretext of preventing nuclear proliferation. He explained that Russia maintained its own independent policy on Iran's nuclear issue and that despite significant pressure, Russia was able to finish construction of the Bushehr nuclear plant, and Moscow would continue its cooperation with Tehran in developing its peaceful nuclear programme (see Putin, 2012).

2 Washington considered the Iranian nuclear programme a threat to the US and Israel. US neo-conservative policymakers began to use 'nuclear holocaust' as a synonym for Iranian nuclear ambitions. In his book, the former US representative to the UN, John Bolton, quoted President Bush regarding the Iranian nuclear programme: 'I thought we are just beginning to watch the beginning of a Holocaust. There has to be no ambiguity and no rewards unless there is a complete dismantlement' (see Bolton, 2008).

> with few exceptions, China has been consistent in its opposition to sanctions – whether unilateral or multilateral – for any purpose. This position derives in part from the country's own experience as a target of such political and economic measures. Chinese analysts assert that sanctions can backfire, leading to hardened positions and loss of channels for communication.
>
> International Crisis Group, 2010

According to Shen (2006), Beijing and Moscow have the same positions on Iran's nuclear issue at the UNSC, as neither of them wants to see instability in the region due to a nuclear development against the UNSC resolutions.

It is worth mentioning that Iran attempted to derive benefits from the Sino–Russian cooperation at the UNSC as clearly explained by Hassan Rouhani (2013, p. 220): 'We knew that if we could turn Russia to our side, China would also stand next to us'.

As a result of the Sino–Russian approach to the Iran nuclear issue at the UNSC, which also corresponds with the EU position, military action against Iran has been avoided. Finally, on 14 July 2015, the US and China, together with other members of the P5+1 and Iran, were able to conclude the JCPOA as they shared one aim, preventing Iran from building a nuclear arsenal. On 20 July 2015, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2231 (UNSC, 2015), a clear message to other countries that they must maintain the terms and conditions of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Additionally, it signalled that peaceful negotiations and the roadmap for Iran's compliance were ad hoc solutions that cannot be used for other nuclear issues that might threaten world security.

An important matter to consider is that what Iran gained from the JCPOA. Iran's main achievement was the future elimination of sanctions on its economic, financial, and oil and gas production systems which has crippled it economy. Additionally, Iran maintains the right to conduct research on enriching and developing uranium; Iran also acquired full nuclear fuel cycle for peaceful purposes. The main achievement for Iran is that the US abandoned the idea of using a military invasion to resolve Iran's nuclear issue and to seek regime change. The UNSC would close Iran's nuclear file if, in 2023, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) submits a report stating that the IAEA has reached the broader conclusion that all nuclear material in Iran is used for peaceful activities. Hence, ten years after the adoption of Resolution 2231, the UNSC will announce the termination of the above-mentioned resolution, if the UNSC proves that the provisions of the previous resolutions have not been reinstated.

A study of the negotiations which resulted in the JCPOA shows that Iran made real concessions (UNSC, 2015). President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif believed that if they made concessions, they would be able to avert the final collapse of the country's economy and the regime itself.[3]

The UNSC pressured Tehran to abandon its nuclear ambitions, which strengthened the regime of the NPT. Therefore, as a member of the UNSC, China's policy is to maintain and work towards a negotiated JCPOA[4] through political and diplomatic efforts (Shen, personal communication, 6 January 2016). The 'UNSC centric' policies of Russia and China on the Iranian nuclear issue prove once again the following idea of the school of liberal institutionalism: that 'modern international politics is as much institutional as intergovernmental' (Stein, 2009, p. 201).

12.4 The US Withdrawal from the JCPOA and Sino–Iranian Relations

It is also worth mentioning that even when the Trump administration radically changed the US policy on the Iranian nuclear issue, announcing its withdrawal from the JCPOA and re-imposing unilateral sanctions on Iran on 8 May 2018, Chinese authorities announced that the country would 'maintain communication with all parties and continue to protect and execute the agreement fully' ('Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's regular press conference on May 8, 2018', 2018). However, US unilateral sanctions on Iran harmed expanding Sino–Iranian cooperation, which the two parties reached to some extent after the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 and when they signed a bilateral memorandum of understanding on joint promotion of the BRI. The US repeatedly sanctioned Chinese companies for their cooperation with Iran, trying to stop further development of Sino–Iranian relations. For instance, in 2018 the US pressurised Canada to arrest the

3 During his interview with China's CCTV, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stated that Iran appreciated China's position and role in the P5+1 negotiation. He added that China had always opposed sanctions and believed in Iran's right to have nuclear technologies and to enrich uranium. He mentioned that implementing the JCPOA would provide an opportunity to lift all sanctions in Iran. As a result, Chinese companies would have a good opportunity to make investments in Iran as there would be no financial or banking restrictions. See Liu, 2015.

4 In this regard, I asked the Chinese scholar Dingli Sheng what China had gained from the JCPOA. He answered that Iran would not develop nuclear weapons, and the approach to this end is not confrontational (Shen, personal communication, 6 January 2016).

chief financial officer of Huawei Technologies, blaming her for breaching its sanctions on Iran. Many Chinese companies have had to stop their business activities and leave Iran (Sahakyan, 2020). The effect of US unilateral sanctions on Sino–Iranian relations was immediate. The bilateral trade volume between China and Iran had dramatically decreased. If in 2017 it reached $37 billion, in 2019 (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo haiguan zong shu, 2019) it decreased to $23 billion and in 2020 (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo haiguan zong shu, 2020), it was already $14.9 billion.

As a result of elections in the US in 2020 Trump was replaced by President Biden, but the US policy against China and Iran still remains. In March 2021, the Biden administration published Interim National Security Strategic Guidance in which China and Iran were identified as challenges to US national security. The interim guidance does not propose a wholesale change of policy with respect to Iran and China but rather a continuation of the current approach such that the US may 'prevail in strategic competition with China' (Biden, 2021b). Biden decided to keep some sanctions on Iran. In his letter to the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate on the continuation of the national emergency with respect to Iran, Biden wrote:

> The actions and policies of the Government of Iran continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States. For these reasons, I have determined that it is necessary to continue the national emergency declared in Executive Order 12957 with respect to Iran and to maintain in force comprehensive sanctions against Iran to respond to this threat.
>
> BIDEN, 2021a

Thus, both faced by US pressure, Tehran and Beijing on 27 March 2021 signed a Document of Comprehensive Cooperation between Iran and China which aims bring two sides closer to each other. China and Iran have resolved to strengthen their cooperation in political, economic, cybersecurity, military, and energy spheres. In sum, by signing the aforementioned document with China, Iran decisively implements its 'look to the east' policy, trying to align with the Eastern axis being built by China and Russia. The explosion in the Natanz nuclear facility by foreign forces in April 2021 was an attempt to destroy the JCPOA and will likely give added impetus to Iran to continue to strengthen its cooperation with the Chines and Russian duo.

12.5 Conclusion

China remains interested in the stability of Iran as it is a crude oil exporter to China. Additionally, Iran is the main guarantor for the security of the Persian Gulf region, something critical for China's energy security. China seeks the stability of Iran so as to ensure its supply of Middle Eastern energy resources. China commits to keeping the status quo between the main powers of the Middle East, with the purpose of maintaining stability in the region. This is the main reason that China is against the alleged Iranian nuclear weapons programme, which could, in turn, start a nuclear arms race, impacting the stability of the region.

China played a pragmatist and constructive role at the UNSC by directing concerns over Iran's nuclear programme towards negotiations and by preventing sanctions of Iran's energy production sector. China attempted to weaken sanctions so as to avoid conflict with the US. China was prepared to support UN resolutions against Iran just as long as the US did not stand against the interests of China and did not demand an embargo on Iran's energy resources.

It is worth mentioning that the US is the first trade partner of China. The statistical data published by China's General Administration of Customs shows that the total volume of bilateral trade between China and the US in 2020 exceeded the level of $586 billion, and in 2019 it was $541 billion. In 2020, China's exports to the US totalled $451 billion, and in 2019 it was $418 billion (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo haiguan zong shu, 2020). China did not let the Iran nuclear issue force it to take sides at the UNSC and was not prepared to confront its primary economic partner. China's position is to prevent nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and to maintain security and stability in the region so as to protect its main source of energy.

China is also developing economic relations with Iran so as to grow the BRI in the Middle East. Using the BRI China has sought to weaken Russian and US influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. Independent players like Iran, who have foreign policies developed without US interference, are welcomed by China. Iran's independence of the US guarantees that Iran would supply China with energy resources in the event of a Sino–US confrontation.

At the UNSC, China introduced and defended its own position while keeping its relations with the US and Iran, despite increasing pressure from both sides. In some aspects, China and the EU hold different positions about putting unilateral sanctions on Iran, as Beijing was against the EU's decision to put any kind of unilateral sanctions on Iran without consensus at the UNSC, but both sides seek to solve Iran's nuclear issue only through diplomacy and negotiations.

China's pragmatism and its constructive contributions to negotiations regarding the Iranian nuclear issue and commitment to the JCPOA improved China's international status, which, on the one hand, is committed to the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East and, on the other hand, is united with Russia in preventing the US and Israel from starting a war against Iran. China is, therefore, a responsible power in that it is against nuclear proliferation and continues to strengthen world security without a dual-track approach.

Within the framework of rethinking China's policy on the Iranian nuclear issue in the age of neoliberalism, one has to note that China is actively working towards keeping the resolution on the Iranian nuclear issue in the context of the following institutions: the UNSC, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the JCPOA, the NPT, and the Missile Technology Control Regime. With this policy, Beijing strengthens these neoliberal institutions, in which China has a special role.

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CHAPTER 13

Chinese Engagement with the MENA Region: Exploring Sino–MENA Event Data

Michael McCall

13.1 Introduction

The first of the three 'pillars' of contemporary Sino–Middle East relations, energy, trade and investment, is the most empirically demonstrable indication of deepening ties. China is one of the largest consumers of energy exports from the Middle East and the domestic Chinese demand for energy continues to increase exponentially. This lopsided energy dependence suggests the Middle East is a vital strategic region for Chinese foreign policy but is it possible to draw a direct causal link between this deepening reliance on Middle Eastern energy and an increase in cooperative relations? Or are other factors more relevant for understanding China's growing footprint? Through the use of quantitative proxies it should be possible to gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between these crucial variables in Sino–Middle East relations, and potentially uncover other notable trends in the relationship that deserve further scrutiny.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, one of the key transitions marking a change in Chinese foreign policy was when the country became a net petroleum importer in 1993. The demand for foreign energy imports has multiplied in the time since, sourced largely from Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) exporters (Salman & Geeraerts, 2013). While the dependence on Middle Eastern energy exports is an important aspect of the relationship, is it actually *the* driving factor in China's increasing diplomatic and commercial outreach to the region, and can this be measured? A common narrative within academic literature regarding Sino–Middle East relations describes a transactional relationship where the preeminent national concern of China is the acquisition of adequate supplies of energy to meet the needs of a rapidly growing economy (Alterman, 2009; Keskin & Braun, 2016). This narrative is buttressed by the fact that domestic energy production within China cannot maintain pace with consumption, thus the gap between domestic production and total consumption has been widening and generating an ever-increasing need for energy imports (Leverett & Bader, 2005).

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To answer the question regarding China's motivation for increased cooperation with Middle Eastern countries, this chapter seeks to empirically determine whether this commonly cited energy-first paradigm driving Chinese foreign policy in the region is valid or overly simplistic, contrasting the importance of energy production with other pertinent variables in the forecasting of Chinese behaviour. Through a quantitative analysis of dyadic event data, we can determine the extent to which energy is a factor in Sino–Middle East relations compared to other relevant factors and thus whether this perception of Chinese foreign policy priorities actually stands up to statistical scrutiny.

13.2 Chinese Dependence on Middle Eastern Energy

With over half of all Chinese oil imports sourced from the Middle East (Beng & Li, 2005), the Chinese economy has a critical stake in maintaining good relations with the energy-rich countries of the Middle East. The real question at hand is how these potent factors influence Sino–MENA cooperation, and whether they are more influential than other predictive variables. The increasing levels of bilateral trade and oil imports alone are cited as evidence of growing ties with oil-rich states, and these figures are certainly formidable. These metrics alone are insufficient, however, to act as proxies for the *quality* of a bilateral relationship. China and the United States have enormous levels of bilateral trade, but this does not imply that the relationship is consistently cordial or cooperative; indeed, these high levels of trade can and do carry mixed diplomatic ramifications.

When analysed from a neoclassical realist perspective, the Chinese government perceives an urgent need to maintain social stability through continued economic growth; a priority which necessitates increasing amounts of energy (Keskin & Braun, 2016). With economic growth being the principle modern basis of legitimacy for China's ruling Communist Party, the inability to acquire sufficient energy to maintain that growth could potentially endanger the stability of the party itself. From the point of view of China's national interest, the increasing ties between China and the Middle East are effectively driven by the former's existential need for energy security, which is effectively synonymous with regime security in this paradigm. Furthermore, energy is a prerequisite to pursue China's greater grand strategy in Asia and beyond; thus, Chinese policymakers consider energy diplomacy as equal in importance to big power diplomacy, making the Middle East a key region in China's 'Going Out' initiative (Friedberg, 2006). Sino–MENA relations should be considered as

at least a moderate-to-high priority for Chinese policymakers, and expansions in Chinese activity should be apparent over time.

Based on China's national interests, the logical resulting hypothesis would be that trade energy-rich countries should be prioritised by China if their main interest in MENA affairs is the acquisition of energy resources. Other indicators do appear to follow the presence of energy resources: outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) flows appear to be mainly targeted at energy-rich countries, with Algeria, Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia (in that order) receiving the lion's share of Chinese OFDI to the Middle East (Salman & Geeraerts, 2013). If energy diplomacy is prioritised above all as a national interest, bilateral cooperation would be expected to follow this trend as well.

13.3 Methodology

Relations between nations cannot be directly converted into numeric values, but event data can produce proxy indicators that describe the quantitative and qualitative aspects of a bilateral relationship through a numeric representation. Collected through the computer analysis of open-source texts, event data offers an insight into country-level behaviour (Goldstein, 1992). Event data has a few inherent ontological biases; the most basic issue is that any specific event must be notable enough to warrant a textual representation of some kind, like a newspaper article, to be coded. This means that certain types of events, for example, secret activities or those too mundane to publish, are not available. Furthermore, the gatekeepers of such information are typically journalists, who often prioritise certain types of events for commercial or political motives. Even with these disadvantages, however, the use of event data offers a more holistic, if imperfect approach to quantifying international relations than relying solely on economic data by offering a picture of what a bilateral relationship actually consists of in public discourse.

Two extensive event data sets exist: the Integrated Conflict Early Warning System (ICEWS) and the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT). Though a full explanation of the difference between the two is not possible here, GDELT was selected because it logs far more raw events than ICEWS and has grown exponentially over time in terms of the total events it covers, while ICEWS has remained relatively stable in terms of its ontology (Ward et al., 2013). Considering the low dyadic event counts of ICEWS in this subset (many dyad-years in the sample do not have a single cooperative event), the potential over-representation of GDELT is preferable compared to the substantial loss of obscure, but important information disregarded by ICEWS.

The most common taxonomy for event data, CAMEO, offers a well-defined coding mechanism that is used by both major event data sets. It is important to note that the term 'cooperation', as used in this chapter, is synonymous with the CAMEO definition of cooperation: a classification of an event on a binary cooperate–conflict spectrum, encompassing a wide variety of events that are considered 'positive' in a relationship. To avoid the mean, sum, and single scale problems described by Yonamine (2011), event counts based on the total number of directed cooperative events (both verbal and material forms of cooperation) are the most pertinent metric to function as the dependent variable in order to gauge the importance of a bilateral relationship. The actors of events are aggregated at the country level to simplify analysis. Annually aggregated data on all the variables will be collected to calculate the status of bilateral relations between China and each of the MENA states at that point in time.

The sample contains all the China–MENA dyads from 1979 to 2016. This maximises the sample size as much as possible for data aggregated annually from both GDELT and the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), resulting in 740 country-year pairs (20 countries[1] times 37 years). The limited availability of data for the other relevant variables, however, results in an unbalanced panel and lowers this number slightly in each of the relevant regressions. Being less critical than the two main variables, this is tolerable. The main variable to be tested for significance in relation to cooperation (namely, energy production) is derived from the EIA's database and reflects a country's entire primary energy production. This includes the diversity in energy production between countries, which in countries like Qatar consists mainly of natural gas rather than crude oil. Measuring energy production with this metric provides parity between the various types, given that China is one of the top export destinations for regionally produced natural gas as well (Economides & Wood, 2009).

If we accept the premise posited by Alterman (2009) that Chinese behaviour is predicated mainly on expanding economic ties, then the Chinese cooperative activity should be significantly linked to bilateral trade values and other economic indicators. Other pertinent variables that are known to affect relations on the conflict–cooperation spectrum were included for control. For each country-year dyadic pair, these variables were drawn from COMTRADE for bilateral trade data and CEPII's gravity trade model data set (Head, Mayer, & Ries, 2010) for general statistics such as GDP figures and population counts. Finally, the composite indicator of national capabilities (CINC) is derived from

1 Specifically: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the UAE, and Yemen were included.

the Correlates of War project and included due to the propensity of large hard power dyads to engage in conflict (Bremer, 1992); therefore, a higher level of national capability may discourage cooperation. Trade, on the other hand, has a complex relationship with conflict, increasing the likelihood of small-scale conflictual events while decreasing the likelihood of large-scale confrontations. More importantly, there is no known significant relationship between trade dependence and bilateral cooperation in general (Pevehouse, 2004).

The hypothesis to be tested here is that bilateral cooperation levels between China and the Middle East are significantly related to the energy production of a country, with the null hypothesis being that there is no relationship. Utilising a regression model, the predictive capacity of energy production and other pertinent variables towards this net cooperative event count will be determined. With an initial *F* test for individual effects based on the model with two variables (regression 2 in Table 13.1), a *p* value of effectively 0 indicates that the panel model with fixed effects represents a much better model than a simple regression. The use of a fixed effects panel data model provides specific benefits: country-specific constant variables, such as geographic distance, are controlled for within the model (Allison, 2009). Furthermore, the data has a degree of heteroscedasticity; to account for this, the regression coefficients are further refined through a robust covariance matrix to ensure their significance.

In summary, the net positive event count (verbal cooperation events plus material cooperation events) functions as the dependent variable, while total primary energy production, composite index of national capabilities, bilateral trade, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, and population function as the independent variables. As the various continuous variables are different in scale, logarithms will measure relative changes. These variables are aggregated into panel data following the country-year format.

13.4 Results

Beginning in 1979, the total number of cooperation events in the sample increases substantially over time. Two factors are at work: the amount of material ingested and coded by GDELT grows as the online material increases, and Chinese engagement with Middle Eastern countries has increased substantially as well. Figure 13.1 charts these two trends for comparison, and indicates that the growth in the Sino–MENA cooperation event counts closely mirrors the growth in GDELT events as a whole with some notable deviations. The global event count provides a baseline for comparison to determine the 'real

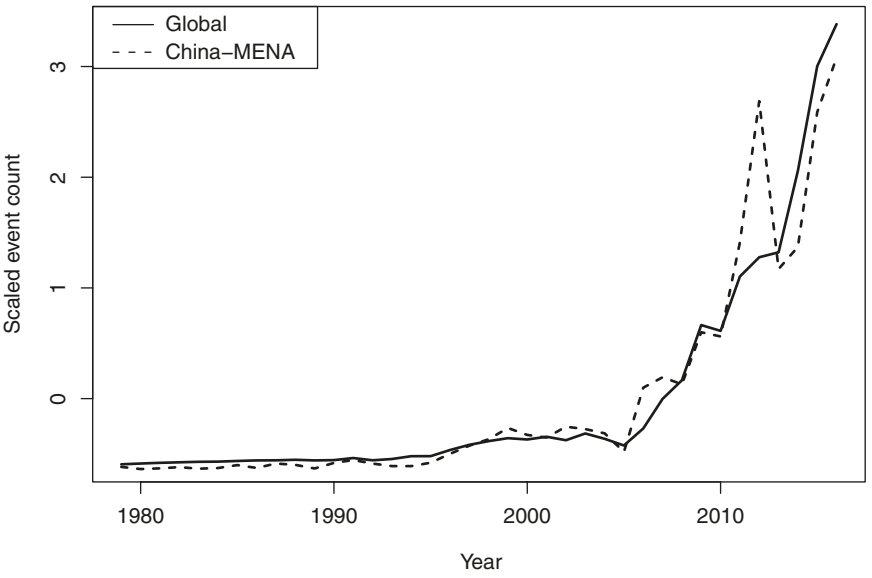

FIGURE 13.1 China–MENA GDELT events vs total events captured globally
COMPILED BY THE AUTHOR

world' increase in events rather than the increase due to the growth in GDELT's ingested data.

China–MENA event counts are lower than the scaled totals for the first period between 1979 and approximately 1997, a period which consists of almost the entirety of Deng Xiaoping's tenure. China became a net petroleum importer in 1993, yet the year does not appear to be the biggest turning point in Sino–MENA relations. Rather, from 1998 to 2009, China's increase outstrips the total by a small margin, though it still follows the general trend. The most noticeable spike that deviates from the general trend is clearly visible in 2011, which is potentially a result of the protest wave that swept the region and China's responses to those developments. The steep drop after 2011 indicates that the year was an aberration from the norm, and subsequent to that point, the exponential growth is largely in line with the global trend. The lack of major deviations (the 2011 exception notwithstanding) indicates a relatively stable collective relationship, without any seismic developments either positively or negatively.

Looking closer into the China–MENA subset of GDELT data, it is possible to determine the most commonly occurring positive dyads. This offers an insight into the countries with the strongest cooperative relationship with China. As seen in Figure 13.2, the mean of the annual cooperative event counts per

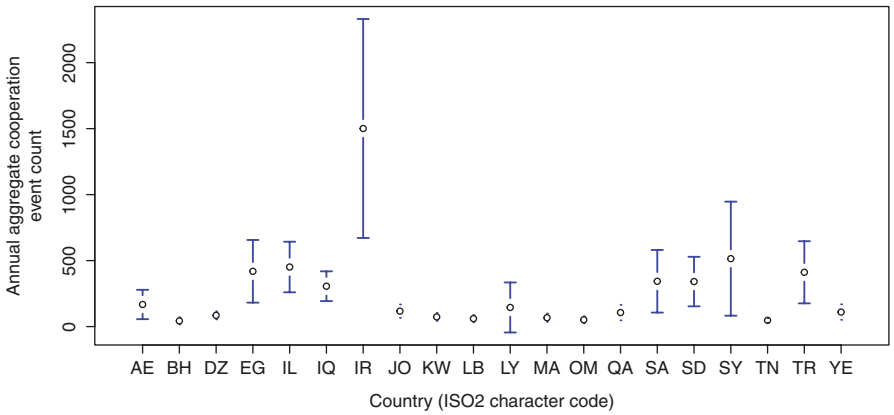

FIGURE 13.2 China–MENA bilateral cooperation events by country
COMPILED BY THE AUTHOR

country over time is averaged from 1979 to the present. Because of the temporal bias in GDELT, the earlier years generally represent the lower end of the confidence intervals and later years making up the majority of the upper confidence intervals, given the general increase in event counts.

A notable discrepancy exists between Arab and non-Arab countries, indicating on average higher levels of Chinese cooperation with non-Arab MENA countries: Iran (IR), Israel (IL), and Turkey (TR). Only three countries out of the twenty are non-Arab, but their combined event counts far exceed this ratio. This trend is even more extreme in the ICEWS data set, as the three non-Arab countries also compromise the top three partners for positive dyadic events. Iran in particular is immensely over-represented in the GDELT sample; the mean dyadic cooperative events including Iran is more than double the mean count of the next MENA country. As both data sets list Iran as the top target of Chinese cooperative events, it is possible to unambiguously claim that the Sino–Iranian relationship is the most active and cooperative of China's respective bilateral Middle East relationships. This is despite the fact that it trails Saudi Arabia's bilateral trade with China and total energy production, which would appear to undermine the hypothesis that energy production and/or trade volume are *the* most important factors influencing Chinese cooperation. This also reinforces the theory cited earlier that high bilateral trade volume and cooperative political relations are not synonymous.

Iran, therefore, represents the critical case as China's most favoured Middle Eastern country to frame the role of energy diplomacy. Leverett and Bader (2005) mention how Chinese interest in the Iranian petroleum sector has increased dramatically since the mid-1990s. Infrastructure investments into

pipelines and for the development of oil fields have taken place on a large scale (Yetiv & Lu, 2007). Saudi Arabia has continually received a larger share of total OFDI[2] than Iran between 2005 and 2010, however (Salman & Geeraerts, 2013), and even was designated as a 'strategic oil partner' by Jiang Zemin in 1999. To potentially account for this discrepancy, note that Iran straddles an incomparable geostrategic location from which China can further its greater trade agenda (Kāzemi & Chen, 2014), especially in regards to the Belt and Road mega-project. Therefore, the difference in geostrategic importance between the two countries that could explain such a vast disparity in event data is unaccounted for in this model.

Additionally, OFDI appears to have no clear correlation to event counts: Algeria and the UAE comprise nearly half of China's Middle East OFDI (Salman & Geeraerts, 2013), but each registers on the lower end of the per-country event scale. To illustrate this point further, Algeria receives more OFDI than Iran, yet Algeria trails by a wide margin in regards to the number of cooperative events.

For the continuous variables available in the sample, Table 13.1 describes the model determining the relative influence of a country's energy production on the per cent growth in cooperative events, controlling for the other factors.

Based on Table 13.1, the most notable result is that total annual primary energy production is insignificant by model 4. Further analysis through a robust covariance matrix estimator even makes this variable insignificant by regressor 3. Therefore, the significance in models prior to 4 are likely subject to omitted variable bias. Additionally, the coefficient is dwarfed by the other independent variables. One can confidently conclude, therefore, that merely producing large amounts of primary energy does not imply Chinese cooperation in foreign policy. CINC is similarly unimportant. The final three variables – bilateral trade value, GDP per capita, and population – appear to have the most impact on the incidence of cooperation.

As figure 13.3 illustrates, direct economic indicators like bilateral trade provide a more compelling statistical case for understanding them as potential predictors of Chinese cooperation. There is a visible relationship between bilateral trade and cooperation, given its statistical significance in models 3 through 6. This supports the claim that Chinese cooperation is driven by economic interests. This correlation could potentially be different for the United States, for example, where the relationship between cooperation and bilateral

2 The OFDI figures published by the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (MOFCOM) are limited for the majority of the country-years in this sample (Rosen & Hanemann, 2009) and thus were not included in the final analysis to avoid temporal bias.

TABLE 13.1 The relative influence of a country's energy production on the per cent growth in cooperative events, controlling for the other factor

	Bilateral cooperation event count					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Log energy production	3.43***	2.28***	0.52**	-0.10	0.05	0.01
	(0.20)	(0.24)	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.23)	(0.21)
Log CINC		2.29***	1.15***	0.30	0.24	
		(0.25)	(0.23)	(0.23)	(0.23)	
Log bilateral trade value			0.45***	0.26***	0.21***	0.22***
			(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Log GDP per capita					0.33***	0.37***
					(0.11)	(0.10)
Log population				2.44***	1.96***	2.01***
				(0.24)	(0.25)	(0.23)
N	700	650	650	650	634	671
*R*2	0.29	0.36	0.54	0.61	0.62	0.66
Adjusted *R*2	0.27	0.34	0.52	0.59	0.60	0.64

*$p < .1$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$

trade value is less clear. A cursory glance at the event count for the United States and MENA countries indicates that Iraq is near the top, which is very unlikely to be driven by economic concerns. Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter, herein potentially lies one of the differences between Chinese and US foreign policy towards the Middle East.

Additionally, bilateral trade value and primary energy production are themselves correlated; considering the unbalanced export portfolio of many MENA countries, this is unsurprising. The statistical relationship between a MENA country's energy production and export value to China has grown from being insignificant in 1980 to having a significant correlation in 2014, so Chinese trade has focussed on energy-rich countries as time has progressed. Therefore, it is possible to claim that Chinese regional *trade* priorities are driven by energy needs to a significant extent. The same cannot be said of bilateral *cooperation* as a more holistic concept.

Demographics seem to play a more crucial role: the most significant predictor variable is population size, but the sheer scale of the result is open to

FIGURE 13.3 China–MENA bilateral cooperation and trade
COMPILED BY THE AUTHOR

a number of potential interpretations. The nature of event data based on an ontology like GDELT would certainly be predisposed to over-represent countries with large numbers of people due to a larger quantity of content that can be textually analysed. An alternative explanation could potentially be the desire to pursue large markets for Chinese exports, which tend to be cheap and mass-produced. A small but significant correlation does exist between Chinese exports to a MENA country and the destination population. Clearly, however, countries with large populations have higher positive interaction levels, given that variable has by far the highest coefficients in models 4 through 6.

13.5 Conclusion

Considering these results, the narrative of Sino–Middle East relations being mainly driven by the pursuit of energy security may be an oversimplification of a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Sino–Middle East relations comprise more than just energy, and these results reflect that fact. While China's exponentially increasing energy consumption is important, as a global player, China's interests in the Middle East are as diverse as that of any major power.

What is clear, however, is that Chinese activity in the Middle East is growing at a substantial rate, and economic factors are key in promoting that growth.

The case of Iran represents an illustration of the missing elements in this model, and offers a good potential case study for understanding the three major pillars of Sino–Middle East relations and the potential for future growth. While Iran possesses the second largest proven petroleum reserves in the region, the disproportionate number of events cannot be explained by the variables used here. Considering this discrepancy, political-economic, rather than purely economic considerations could be more influential if integrated into a new model. The geographic utility of a country, for example in pursuit of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), likely influences the decisions of Chinese policymakers to a significant extent. Iran's strategic position between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea certainly generates interest from China, but these types of factors are harder to quantify and thus not easily available to incorporate. Furthermore, geostrategic importance cannot be considered as a country-constant variable accounted for in the panel data model, because perceptions of geostrategic importance change over time as ambitions shift. Thus, while useful for validating or refuting relatively simple assertions regarding direct causal links, there are still inherent limitations to quantitative methods.

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