Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa

Edited by Yahia H. Zoubir

"In this rapidly changing era, the study of China's relation with the Middle East and North Africa is determined to attract significant attention from scholars, decision makers, and arguably the general public. In reality, comprehensive and good quality research in this field since the 1970s is in extremely short supply. The current edited volume is a much-needed contribution to this deprived field. The editor has done a remarkable job by gathering an impressive group of scholars, with expertise covering subjects from IR to social anthropology, from cultural diplomacy to public policy, and from international political economy to geopolitics. The academic ambition of this volume is also manifested in its astonishingly comprehensive geographic breadth. Papers in this volume have nearly covered all the countries in the MENA region which are involved in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. For anyone interested in the growing Chinese entanglement with the MENA region and its implication to the shaping of the future global order, this volume is a must read."

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"Edited by Yahia H. Zoubir and contributed by noted scholars in the emerging fields, *Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa* is an authoritative and handy volume on China's bilateral and multilateral engagement in these important regimes of the world. Strongly recommended."

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Jon Alterman, *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), United States*

To my beloved grandchildren Haizam, Tilelli, Amala, and Isaiah, and to the memory of my mother.

ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO CHINA AND THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Focusing on China's relations with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), this Companion provides essential analysis of a complex region which threatens to become the battleground for rival powers in the future.

The *Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa* brings together China scholars from around the world, including from China, the MENA region, the United States, Asia, and Europe. The contributors, experts in their respective areas—which range from politics, military and nuclear power to economics, energy, and tourism—use different methodologies to understand China's policies in the MENA. Topics analyzed include Chinese investment in infrastructure, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Belt and Road Initiative. Divided into three Parts, the book addresses China's multidimensional presence in the MENA and its impact on the region while also explicating the MENA's relations with its traditional Western allies. Bilateral relations and people-to-people interactions are also explored and provide in-depth context to the areas of cooperation that are part of China's dealings with its partners in the region.

Combining contemporary analysis with accessible prose, the book will be of interest to students, scholars, and policy-makers active in international relations, security studies, and economics, as well to general audiences interested in the MENA region.

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ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO CHINA AND THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Designed cover image: © WANG ZHAO/AFP via Getty Images.

First published 2023
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-367-49983-9 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-367-49986-0 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-04840-4 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003048404

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Newgen Publishing UK

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank first and foremost James "Joe" Whiting, who solicited me and trusted me to undertake this project; though I initially hesitated to undertake such a challenging gigantic task, I am grateful to him for having entrusted me to carry it out as I learned immensely from the contributions of my colleagues. Miss Titanilla 'Ella' Panczel, former Senior Editorial Assistant at Routledge, was of great support. Before she left her position, she was most efficient and supportive of the book.

I would also like to thank profusely her replacement Euan Rice-Coates, the new Editorial Assistant, for ensuring a smooth transition. I owe him an immense debt of gratitude for his dedication to the project, ensuring that before going to production the book fulfilled all the requirements, including minute details. I know that all the contributors concur with my assessments. I would also like to express my utmost gratitude to Susan Dunsmore, the copy-editor of the *Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa* for Taylor & Francis. She accomplished this difficult task during the end-of-year holidays and in the most efficient manner. I wish to thank Ms. Jayashree from the Newgen's Production team who has been most helpful with the project, ensuring that deadlines were carefully observed.

I would like to express my gratitude to the contributors for living up to their commitment to participate in this project. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, including contributors to this volume, who provided useful comments. Every time I have completed an edited volume, I thought that it would be the last one because of the many difficulties in ensuring the timely return of the chapters. The undertaking of this *Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa*, during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been more demanding and exhausting than previous ones because some of the contributors contracted COVID-19 and were weakened for a time by the virus. Yet, they lived up to their commitment. I cannot thank them enough for their dedication. As has happened with other volumes, some authors who had committed to contributing chapters, like the one on China-Morocco, never delivered them.They lost a good opportunity to share their research!

I would also like to thank the management of the Middle East Center for Global Affairs (MEGCA) in Doha, Qatar, where I serve as Non-Resident Senior Fellow, for providing me with the necessary support to carry out this project and for allocating dedicated

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I extend my special thanks to three scholars at Fudan University in Shanghai. My greatest gratitude goes to Degang Sun, my old-time colleague and co-author, for his unreserved support and close friendship. Collaborating and publishing with Chuchu Zhang has been a real pleasure; she has also been supportive whenever I called on her for assistance. I would also like to thank Andrea Ghiselli for his constructive advice whenever I needed it. Emilie Tran, my co-author and friend, has been most supportive on all the projects I have undertaken, with her or alone. My sincere appreciation and esteem go to Robert Mason, who has never failed to respond without hesitation to my numerous requests on every occasion.

This project would have been impossible without the unconditional support of my family, wherever they are. My greatest gratitude goes to my wife Cynthia, who endured seeing me constantly glued to a chair in front of a computer, including most weekends. I cannot express enough the immense gratitude I owe her.

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INTRODUCTION

Yahia H. Zoubir

In the last decade, China's relations with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have grown exponentially. While political and security relations are growing at a slower place, trade relations have increased at an incredibly fast pace in the last decade. Although the pandemic has slowed those exchanges, they are still quite significant. Infrastructure works are evident throughout the entire region. Because of its continued modernization, China's imports about 50 per cent of its energy needs from the MENA, especially the Gulf region, with Saudi Arabia as the main supplier.

Since the 2010s, China has intensified its relations with most MENA states both bilaterally (Olimat, 2014) and within multilateral organizations, such as the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), founded in 2000, and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), established in 2004. After the launch in 2013 of the One Belt, One Road (OBOR), renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015, Sino-MENA ties witnessed an extraordinary acceleration which demonstrated, if need be, the importance of the MENA to China. From the onset of the BRI, China aimed to integrate the MENA region into this mammoth project that aims to create connectivity between various parts of the globe. In 2014, President Xi complained about the limited level of trade between China and the MENA arguing that this, in fact, offered opportunities for China and the MENA region (Xi, 2014). He stated:

> In 2013, China's imports from Arab nations amounted to $140 billion, accounting for a mere 7 per cent of its annual import value over the next five years; its outward foreign direct investment in Arab nations totalled $2.2 billion … The gap signals potential and opportunities. China is prepared to support Arab states in increasing employment, advancing industrialization, and pushing economic development.

Therefore, President Xi proposed the launch of a novel approach to the MENA, under the label of the '1+2+3' cooperation model, whereby the '1' stands for the main path of further collaboration, which involves closer cooperation in the energy sector. The '2' in this pattern concerns two branches of cooperation – infrastructure-building and

DOI: 10.4324/9781003048404-1

trade and investment – to deepen China's relations with the Arab governments through partnership in development plans focused on improving the quality of life there. This step also comprises the founding of institutions to boost bilateral trade and investment in numerous sectors, encompassing energy, petrochemicals, agriculture, manufacturing and services. The aim was to increase Sino-MENA trade from $240 billion in 2013 to $600 billion for the following ten years (Xi, 2014); though the trade size has not met Xi's expectation, the trade volume reached $244.3 billion by 2018, jumping 28 per cent year-on-year (*China Daily*, 2019, 6 September). Additionally, according to the 1+2+3 approach, Beijing would increase its non-financial investment stock in the Arab states from $10 billion in 2013 to over $60 billion by 2023 (Embassy of China in Iraq, 2014). In 2018, China committed an additional $23 billion in Foreign Direct Investment in the Middle East alone, that is not counting North Africa. The '3' in Xi's initiative represents the three high-technology fields of nuclear energy, space satellites, and renewable energy. One of the most interesting points relates to cooperation in technology to assist the region in developing nuclear power for civilian use, and in duplicating the Beidou Navigation Satellite System in the MENA. One of the BRI's objectives is to make these transfers of technology possible.

In 2016, to confirm the importance of the MENA to China, Beijing published the *Arab Policy Paper*. The Arab Policy Paper emphasized China's readiness to foster ties with the MENA states through 'strategic cooperative relations of comprehensive cooperation and common development', while advocating China's time-honoured Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. The Arab Policy Paper suggests many areas of cooperation that include, *inter alia*, political, legal, economic, energy, healthcare, education, science and technology, environmental, and cultural cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016).

Countries in the MENA did not figure among China's leading trade partners; nevertheless, China soon became the principal one of many of them such as Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Mauritania, Oman, and Saudi Arabia (Sun and Zoubir, 2015). Although initially commercial, these progressively strong relations with the MENA (Fulton, 2019), have been worrisome for the traditional, dominant powers in the region, primarily the US and the European Union. China's role in the MENA during the pandemic exacerbated those concerns when China deployed its health diplomacy as part of the Health Silk Road (HSR) (Zoubir and Tran, 2022). The HSR has become part and parcel of the BRI; its deployment provoked hostile reactions in both the USA and the EU (Tran and Zoubir, 2023). Undoubtedly, those reactions revealed the already intensifying 'systemic rivalry' between the People's Republic of China and the Western world prior to the pandemic (Leoni, 2021).

China's interest in the MENA has gone beyond trade, the import of oil, or the important infrastructure works. Cooperation with the MENA states has expanded to virtually all sectors, including the military, weapons, vaccines, automobile industry, and telecommunications (e.g., the Beidou navigation system whose implementation is critical for the BRI), to name but a few. However, China has avoided taking sides in regional rivalries between its major partners (Iran and Saudi Arabia, for instance) preferring to keep difficult neutrality based on its 'zero-enemy' policy. In some regional conflicts, China has resorted to quasi-mediation diplomacy to assist in resolving conflicts (Sun

and Zoubir, 2018). In other conflicts, in which outside small, middle, or big powers have intervened directly as in Libya (Zoubir, 2020), Syria (Patey, 2016), or Yemen (Salisbury, 2020), China has supported strong multilateralism. However, because of its assets in the region (large corporations, investments), as Professor Sun (2018) put it, 'China regards the Middle East as a "market" rather than a "battlefield"'; it is the largest investor in the Middle East and therefore a stakeholder of its security. China is cooperating with some states in the region to combat terrorism (Zoubir, 2022). It lost billions of dollars during the Libyan uprising in 2011 (Zhang and Wei, 2012) and is now cognizant of the necessity to protect its assets in foreign lands. In other protracted conflicts, such as the illegally Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, China has abstained from any involvement, limiting itself to generic statements at the UN Security Council. Although close to Algeria, which supports self-determination of Sahrawis based on UN resolutions, China has kept at times a questionable neutrality because of its interests in Morocco (Han, 2018; Zoubir, 2022, forthcoming). In the recent conflict between Egypt, one of its major partners in the region, and Sudan, also a major partner, China has pursued a neutral policy on the conflict over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) to avoid alienating either Egypt or Ethiopia, encouraging instead the resolution of the dispute over the GERD through negotiations (Hosny, 2022). China's heavy investment in the GERD and in Ethiopia in general partly explains the choice of this 'neutral' position. Both Egypt and Ethiopia are important partners; China is Egypt's and Ethiopia's main trading partner even if the volume of Sino-Egyptian trade is nearly three times that of Sino-Ethiopian trade.

Concerning China's attitude towards conflicts in the region, Sun captured its underpinnings, stating:

> although China adheres to a 'zero-enemy' policy with regards to the Middle East, it has engaged with the Middle Eastern security affairs to seek their support on Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, human rights and on South China Sea issues, and more importantly to safeguard its legitimate overseas interests in the Middle East.
>
> *(Sun, unpublished paper, 2018)*

This is becoming all the more important since the Sino-US crisis provoked by Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan in August 2022.

Unlike Western powers, mainly the United States, China's deployment of troops in the region is insignificant. There are about 1,000 forces in its dual logistics-military base in Djibouti, inaugurated in 2017 (Sun and Zoubir, 2021). Beijing dispatches military troops mostly on an impermanent basis to evacuate Chinese citizens from Middle Eastern areas of risk (civil wars, uprisings, riots, and terrorism). Thus, from 2008 to 2018, China evacuated 50,000 Chinese employees overseas from conflict zones in the MENA, including those from Libya, which boasted close to 40,000 Chinese citizens. Regarding terrorism, China has provided some military and financial aid to the MENA states or sold appropriate counterterrorism equipment to them.

China has also deployed soft power in the MENA not only through the BRI, but also in 'Assisting other nations through development, economic growth and connectivity' as 'a way of wielding soft power in the interest of advancing China's global standing' (Chaziza, 2019). China has promoted tourism, academic exchanges, and health diplomacy to apply soft power in the region. However, compared to Western countries' soft power, China's

soft power in the region has not been nearly as successful. Nevertheless, China's image in the region has been quite positive in recent years (Robbins, 2020). Chinese communities (companies, construction workers) cohabit peacefully in most MENA states, despite minor occasional incidents due mostly to cultural misunderstandings. The interviews of the Editor of this volume with Chinese managers suggest that the local populations in general appreciate China's contribution to their countries' development. But the presence of Chinese workers, though insignificant, generates some resentment in a region suffering from high unemployment.

The major question is what consequences the US-China rivalry will have on Sino-MENA relations. Hitherto, the MENA states have avoided taking sides, preferring to adopt neutral positions; it remains to be seen whether other regional and international geopolitical issues will preserve that neutrality or force some alignments.

The short introduction to this *Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa* has provided only a brief synopsis of some of the many issues that the contributors to this 32-chapter volume have addressed in their respective chapters. Although some contributors reneged on their commitment (some at the last minute), the Editor of this volume did his best to find replacements (successfully in most cases) or asked the other contributors to include some of the salient points that should have been covered in this collection. Thus, the chapters in this *Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa* investigate the wide-ranging issues in China-MENA relations.

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PART I

China and the MENA

1
CHINA AND THE MIDDLE EAST
An Overview

Muhamad S. Olimat

Introduction

The earliest contacts recorded between China and the so-called "Western Region" date back to 138 BC, when Chang'an sent an expedition led by Zhang Qian, a skilled diplomat and warrior, to explore potential military alliances with the Ferghana Valley kingdoms. The aim was to deter raids by the Xiongnu alliance that posed a security threat to the Xian territory. Subsequently, China sent other missions to extend its contacts as far as the shores of ancient Arabia. These expeditions took may months to reach their destination, and Chinese explorers and their large contingents traded with people along the way their most precious commodity—silk—in exchange for goods and services. Thus, the route became known as the Silk Road, a vital framework of security, trade, and culture, the lifeline of China's ties with the people of the Western Regions. Eventually the road became a symbol, particularly in modern times, of political and diplomatic partnerships and energy cooperation between China and the Middle East. This chapter provides a comprehensive survey of the five major points of interaction between China and the Greater Middle East that includes Central Asia, the traditional Middle East, and North Africa. These major points, viewed with a five-dimensional approach, take into consideration: (1) political relations; (2) trade ties; (3) energy relations; (4) cultural ties; and (5) security partnerships with the region.

Sino-Greater Middle Eastern Relations

The Qian expedition carried out in the year 138 BC was the first recorded point of contact between China and its neighbors to the west. The resulting Silk Road over time strengthened the security, trade, and cultural ties between the two regions. The second most important turning point in the history of bilateral ties between the two regions was the advent of Islam in the seventh century. It reached China in the lifetime of the prophet (PBUH) through Silk Road merchants. (Reichelt, 1951: 155). The Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) is reported to have said, "seek knowledge as far as China" (*Living Islam*, 2021), in reference to China as a source of enlightenment.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003048404-3

The Arab conquest of Persia began in 637 and concluded in 654, but in 651, Xian became aware of the rising power of Islam in the region through its contact with the Persian Empire, and China and the Islamic Caliphate State exchanged diplomatic missions. In the year 714, the Muslim army, estimated at 200,000 soldiers and led by Commander Kutaiba Ibn Muslim, marched through Central Asia into Kashgar, the capital of East Turkistan, but halted its advance after reaching a peace agreement with Emperor Gaozong. In 751 AD Chinese armies marched to the west to regain control of East Turkistan (Xinjiang) and the Ferghana Valley. The two armies met in a decisive battle at Talas, in what is currently Kyrgyzstan. Ibn Al Atheer, the Arab historian, in his book *Al Kamil*, reported that each army had roughly 100,000 solders. The Muslim armies ripped through Chinese defenses, splitting, and decisively destroying the army, with an estimated 50,000 killed, 20,000 captured, and the remaining 30,000 fleeing back to China. (Ibn Al Athir, 1160–1233; 1231: 664). The Chinese army and its allies were defeated. Within the context of the face-offs between China and the Islamic Empire, several key events need to be noted, given that they have had an enduring impact on Sino-Islamic relations ever since:

1. The Persian defeat in the Al Qadesya Battle in 637 AD prompted the Persians to alert the Chinese to the rising threat from the West. The Persian Crown Prince moved to China with a military contingent that continued to harass the Muslim armies.
2. Between 656 and 751 AD, the Islamic grip on the Western Region, or Central Asia, weakened due to infighting among the Islamic army's leadership.
3. The Islamic Empire preferred a reconciliation with China rather than a military approach, due to the status that the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) ascribed to China.
4. At Talas, the Chinese army was led by Korean General Gao Xianzhi, described as re-engaged.
5. The Talas Battle was a decisive victory for the Islamic Empire; however, the decision was taken not to pursue the fleeing army or pursue an all-out war with China. The preference was for peace and trade rather than war.
6. Islam spread in China quickly through trade and political influence.

The post-Talas Battle era was promising in terms of bilateral ties between the Islamic and the Chinese empires. The Silk Road became the main instrument for cultural, religious, and commercial contacts, and the Muslim community, of Arab and Persian origins, prospered in China. Chinese emperors were impressed by its hard work, ingenuity, management, and scientific skills. But this success created jealousy among the Han majority that eventually led to massacres in 878 AD (Hassan, 2010: 2). The Muslim community's presence decreased until the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century. Both the Chinese and Arab empires were subjected to destruction by the Mongols. However, the Mongols established the Yuan Dynasty in northern China and relied heavily on Muslims, Persians, and even some Han elements to manage the empire as they lacked the necessary administrative skills to manage an empire. Upon the defeat of the Mongols, the conditions of Muslims in China continued to deteriorate for the following century, leading to the annexation of East Turkistan, Xinjiang in 1884.

The political developments in China toward the turn of the twentieth century influenced Sino-Islamic relations and the conditions of Muslims in the country. Chinese Muslims were split in their support of nationalist and communist forces. Primarily,

Muslims supported the Republic of China (ROC), and some were influential in the ROC government. The triumph of communism in mainland China was a fundamental challenge to Muslims in the country. The official annexation of East Turkistan in 1952 was a major blow to the hopes of its independence. Within China itself, Islam was challenged: mosques were destroyed, and the practice of Islam was banned.

The status of Muslims in China was a major foreign policy issue in Sino-Arab and Islamic relations. In fact, in his first meeting with the Chinese Premier Chu En- Lai, the Saudi Foreign Affairs Minister, Prince Faisal (later King Faisal) made it clear that the PRC would not be granted recognition without improving the conditions of Muslims in the country. The Chinese premier pledged to ease the tensions with Muslims and allow the pilgrimage, which occurred from 1955–1966, until the Cultural Revolution.

The political engagement between China and the Arab and Islamic countries was a priority for the revolutionary leaders of China, Enlai, Mao, and Lin Piao. These revolutionary leaders were aware of the Middle East's geostrategic location, in particular during World War II (WWII). They feared a German-Japanese victory might lead to the encirclement of China. In fact, Mao developed his own theory of strategic "zones" and their impact on China's national security. The Middle East lay in the "intermediate zone," the control of which not only would precipitate a third world war, but also "seriously endanger the survival of the PRC" (Shichor, 1979: 35). The defeat of Germany and Japan was a relief to China, but fear of "encirclement" remained a fundamental aspect of China's foreign policy. At a later stage, this perspective developed into a fear of containment, a well-developed framework utilized by the West to suffocate the former Soviet Union within its borders from 1947 to 1991.

In post-WWII, and post-establishment of the PRC, the Middle East was a priority on China's foreign policy agenda. Chu Enlai actively engaged with Asia and Africa in particular. His goal was diplomatic recognition, solidarity against imperial powers, support of national liberation movements, and Third World development. At the Bandung Conference in 1955, Enlai met with every single delegation. In his meetings with delegations representing the newly independent countries of the Middle East, he learned the depth of the Arab Israeli conflict, the Palestinian plight, and met leading figures such as Jamal Abdul Nasser, Egypt's president. Enlai pledged to support the Palestinian cause, underlined the importance of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict peacefully, free of superpowers' interventions. China simultaneously supported Arab nationalist and communist forces battling imperialism across the Middle East, and stood by the Arab people in major confrontations with the West, as in the cases of the 1956 Tripartite War, known as the Suez Canal Crisis, the 1967 War, the Ramadan War of 1973 and the invasion of Lebanon in 1983. China intervened heavily in the civil wars in Jordan, Oman, and Yemen as well, on the side of leftist forces against monarchies and the so-called "reactionary regimes." Beijing's support of leftist forces and national liberation movements remained a major pillar of its foreign policy until the demise of the revolutionary leaders by 1976. Deng Xiaoping revised such policy in favor of dealing with the status quo, and promoting bilateral and multilateral trade relations rather than revolutionary change in the region.

One of the main developments that occurred in this period was the PRC assuming the Chinese permanent seat on the United Nation's Security Council, in September 1971. Additionally, the American rapprochement of China, a process begun in the mid-1960s that aimed to incorporate China once again into the international system, had

a fundamental impact on international relations. The Security Council's membership provided Beijing with the necessary tools to impact developments on the global scene.

In the Middle East, China continued to support Palestinian and Arab causes, national liberation causes, and anti-imperialist policies, but PRC representatives also began to examine alternative tactics for its foreign policy worldwide. By the end of the 1970s, the PRC had totally altered its foreign policy goals. It became a status quo-oriented country, much less revolutionary, and much less into supporting national liberation movements in favor of government-to-government relations. Its aim was incorporation into the international economy, technology transfer, economic reform at home, development, stability, and unity within the PRC itself after the demise of its revolutionary leadership, and its first generational leadership transformation.

Sino-Middle Eastern relations in the Economic Reform Era highlighted the PRC's priorities, namely economic transformation, trade, and energy. China disentangled itself from the Civil War in Oman (1955–1975), Jordan (1969–1973), and Yemen (1962–1970). In fact, Sino-Omani relations developed so rapidly that Oman became the first Gulf country to supply the PRC with shipments of oil as early as 1983 (Olimat, 2016: 146). Beijing pursued an all-out policy to establish diplomatic relations with Arab countries, a process that intensified in the early 1970s. Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Iran, the UAE, and other countries recognized China in the 1970s–1980s. Beijing was accepted as a capital that promotes the status quo rather than supporting Maoist movements aimed at destabilizing the Middle East. Additionally, the PRC took major stands on the security challenges confronted by the Middle East. It condemned the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the eviction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the massacres of innocent Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatila camps, called for a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and supported the peace negotiations brokered by the USA and supported by the United Nations.

During the Gulf War (1980–1988), Beijing sold weapons to both Iran and Iraq to ensure a stalemate in the war. This was the aim set forth by the leading superpowers, the USA and the former USSR. Beijing also viewed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a trap to weaken the Soviet Union, a view shared by the United States and its allies in the Middle East. This was an event that had an unprecedented impact on world politics. Beijing was one of the early external powers to provide weapons to the Mujahideen to combat Soviet forces in Afghanistan, as well as the USA, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and many other countries. The decade-long war of attrition in Afghanistan proved to be catastrophic by all standards. It contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union, the spread of terrorism, and has produced continued instability in Afghanistan ever since.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about fundamental security challenges to China, such as the demise of communist governments, and the aspiration to freedom across the communist world. A freedom wave struck the PRC itself, leading to the Tiananmen Square Massacre in the summer of 1989 where Chinese students demanded similar changes in the country. Beijing was subject to international sanctions, but Middle Eastern countries sided with China, and assisted it in overcoming some economic, diplomatic, and political sanctions imposed by the USA, the European Community, and other international organizations. Middle Eastern governments also supported China's membership in the World Trade Organization. By the end of the 1990s, China had erased the consequences of the massacre.

The demise of the Soviet Union, the end of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, the US triumph in the so-called Second Gulf War all brought optimism regarding resolving the

Arab-Israeli conflict, a process that began in the early 1990s, supported by China, that culminated in the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority.

The early twenty-first century brought about catastrophic effects on the global scene. It began with political turbulence in the United States due to the inconclusive results of the 2000 elections, and then the September 11th attacks. China portrayed itself as a victim of international terrorism and demanded that the USA classify the Islamic Movement of Xinjiang a terrorist organization, a demand that was granted. However, China made no objection when the USA invaded Afghanistan, though it called for a war on terror led by the United Nations. Instead, Beijing showed some symbolic "resistance" against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and any "regime-change policy" associated with it. Beijing opposed the so-called "Arab Spring," a wave of revolutions that struck the Middle East toward the end of 2010, viewing it as a security threat to its own national interest and national security. Beijing sided with the existing governments, exercised its veto power in the Security Council in support of its allies, especially Syria, and coordinated closely with Moscow in this regard, casting what is called a "Double Veto," where the two countries protected the Syrian regimes from international sanctions, or a UN-led military intervention.

Sino-Middle Eastern Energy Cooperation

China reached energy self-sufficiency in 1963. Three decades later it became a net oil-importing country. The decline of its domestic production was associated with its economic transformation, industrialization, and an increasing demand for energy. In order to meet such increasing demands for oil, China pursued an all-out oil diplomacy "with explicit involvement of the central government aiming to secure foreign oil and gas resources" (Shaofeng, 2008: 80). The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) demonstrated that this trend of increasing imports and declining domestic production in China was the main force behind China's relentless search for energy resources worldwide. Figure 1.1 illustrates the difference between the increasing consumption and production. The EIA maintains:

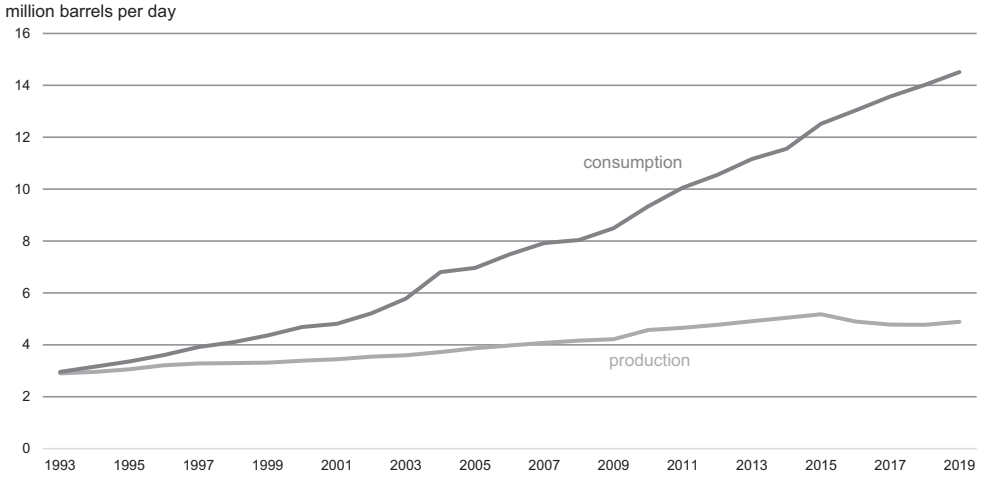

Figure 1.1 China's petroleum and other liquids' production and consumption, 1993–2019
Source: Energy Information Administration, at: www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/CHN

> China had the largest decline in domestic petroleum and other liquids production among non-OPEC countries in 2016 … it had the second-largest decline in 2017. The total liquids production in China averaged 4.8 million b/d in 2017, a year-over-year decline of 0.1 million b/d (2%) from 2016, and further declines in both 2018 and 2019 are forecasted.
>
> *(EIA, 2017)*

China approached its Middle Eastern partners and began to import crude oil from Oman in 1983. Since then, Beijing has become increasingly reliant on importing oil and gas from the Middle East, to the extent that energy has become the centerpiece of its engagement with the Middle East. Table 1.1 illustrates China's oil imports from the region, from 1993 to 2019, in terms of economic growth rates, oil production, consumption, net-imports and import-percentage from the Middle East.

The most recent comprehensive report by the EIA on China's energy outlook in 2019 (Figure 1.2) highlighted China's main oil destinations. Obviously, the Greater Middle Easter countries provide China with more than 50 percent of its energy needs, including its Central Asian partners.

In order to meet such a demand, China has launched a global energy project, a massive operation that extends across the globe, from Australia to Latin America. For that end, it has also established three major international oil corporations. These are: (1) the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC); (2) the China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (Sinopec); and (3) the National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), each of which has its own role and mandate in meeting China's increasing demand for energy. Additionally, China has built a network of international pipelines to ensure the flow of oil and natural gas from its producing partners to the end consumer: China. The Central Asia-China Oil and Gas pipeline is the most important of all China's network of pipelines. China is also increasingly becoming reliant on the Greater Middle East for natural gas, namely on Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Qatar. The region provides China with 46 percent of its imports worldwide. Figure 1.3 illustrates this trend.

This trend of increasing reliance on the Greater Middle East as a major supplier of crude oil and natural gas is expected to strengthen in the foreseeable future. The Sino-Central Asia and Middle Eastern economic integration, strategic partnership, and Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with major producers, such as Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Turkmenistan, and Iraq will only support this trend. On March 27, 2021, China signed a 25-year oil agreement with Iran, worth $400 billion. This is a replica of a 2014 agreement Beijing signed with Moscow, and it will most certainly sign a similar agreement with Saudi Arabia soon.

Sino-Middle Eastern Trade Relations

The third most important pillar of China's ties with the Middle East is trade relations. These were subordinate to the PRC foreign policy goals from 1949 to 1978. Beijing's interests were primarily political, transformed later into abstract "economic" goals in the Economic Reform Era, 1978 to the present. China's involvement in trade with the Middle East encompasses every imaginable sector of the economy, with an ambitious goal of reaching $600 billion by 2025, upon signing the Free Trade Agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In so doing, China is building on the glorious history

Table 1.1 China's growth rates, oil production, oil consumption, net imports, and oil imports from the Middle East, 1993–2019

Year	*Growth rate (%)*	*Oil production mb/d*	*Oil consumption mb/d*	*Net imports mb/d*	*Oil imports from the Middle East (%)*
1993	13.40	2,903,463.00	2,959,491.00	56,028.00	34.70
1994	11.80	2,957,310.00	3,160,605.00	203,290.00	39.70
1995	10.30	3,059,620.00	3,363,155.00	303,530.00	45.50
1996	9.70	3,211,280.00	3,610,085.00	398,780.00	52.90
1997	8.80	3,284,550.00	3,916,270.00	631,720.00	47.30
1998	7.80	3,301,740.00	4,105,835.00	804,090.00	61.00
1999	7.00	3,317,028.00	4,363,601.00	1,046,573.00	46.20
2000	8.00	3,377,527.00	4,795,715.00	1,418,188.00	53.60
2001	7.30	3,434,535.00	4,917,882.00	1,483,347.00	56.20
2002	8.00	3,529,761.00	5,160,714.00	1,630,953.00	49.60
2003	9.10	3,559,006.00	5,578,111.00	2,019,105.00	50.90
2004	9.10	3,657,452.00	6,437,484.00	2,780,031.00	45.40
2005	9.90	3,781,760.00	6,720,000.00	2,939,240.00	47.20
2006	10.50	3,844,870.00	7,201,278.00	3,356,404.00	40.22
2007	11.40	3,900,958.00	7,817,000.00	3,677,000.00	39.95
2008	9.60	3,725,000.00	7,937,000.00	4,212,000.00	46.00
2009	9.20	3,995.620.00	8,537.860.00	4,210.000.00	52.00
2010	10.3	4,071, 000.00	9,057,000.00	4,986,000.00	47.00
2011	9.20	4,100,000.00	9,510,000.00	5,410, 000.00	46.00
2012	8.10	4,300,000.00	9,963,000.00	5, 663,000.00	45.10
2013	7.70	4, 215,000.00	10, 190,000.00	5,975,000.00	51.00
2014	7.50	4,444,000.00	11,209,000.00	5,916,000.00	51.00
2015	6.90	4,309,000.00	11,986,000.00	7,677,000.00	52.00
2016	6.70	3,999.000.00	12,381,000.00	8,382,000.00	49.00
2017	6.90	3,860,000.00	12,799.000.00	8,939,000.00	52.00
2018	6.60	3,790,000.00	13,525.000.00	9,735,000.00	49.00
2019	6.10	3,980,650.00	13.980,650.00	10,100.000.00	48.00

This table is compiled from different sources: Candace Dunn; US Department of Energy (n.d.); Facts Global Energy, 2008, 2010; National Bureau of China Statistics (various years); BP (2022); EIA (2018), and author's calculations and forecasts.

of the Silk Road, and most recently on the Belt and Road Initiative, a massive framework of China's involvement in global trade, launched in 2013.

Table 1.2 illustrates the volume of trade relations between China and its partners in the Greater Middle East from 2001 to 2020. Its trade portfolio is massive and comprehensive; it includes the sectors of construction, industry, manufacturing, consumption, services, aviation, telecommunication, tourism, and energy. China's bilateral trade volume with the region exceeded $370 billion in 2019.

China and its partners in the Middle East have used the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a mechanism for boosting their trade relations, including land and sea trade routes. In fact, countries in the region are competing to become part of the BRI. For

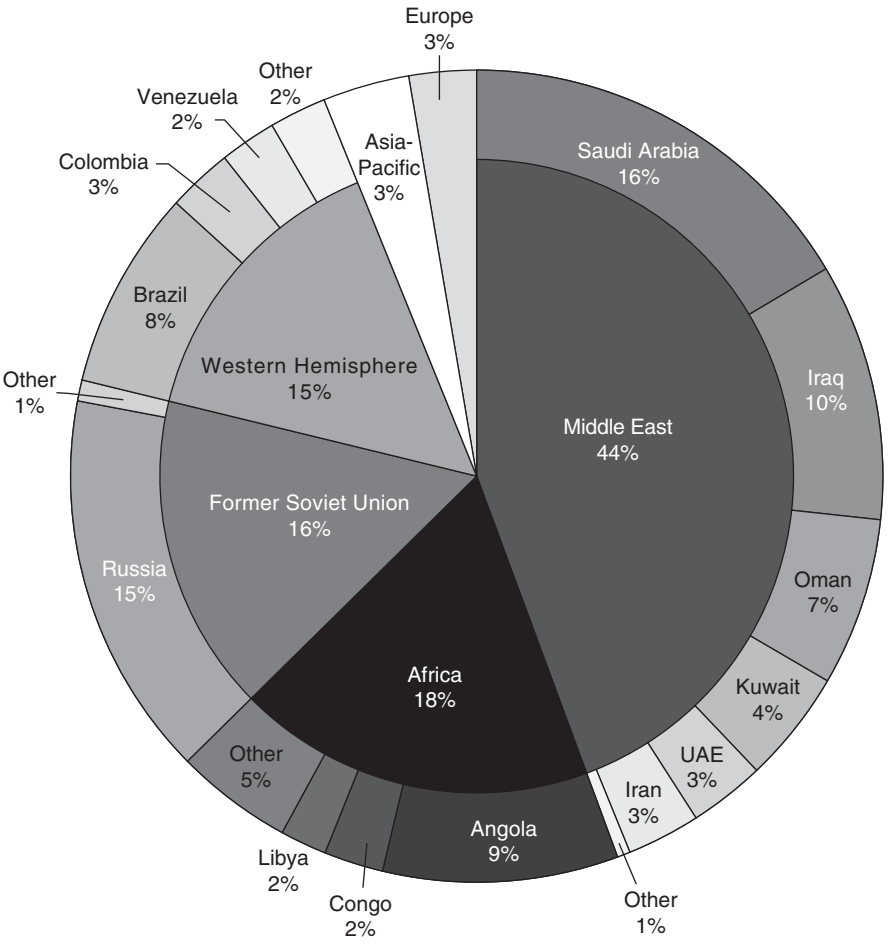

Figure 1.2 China's crude oil imports by source, 2019

Source: Energy Information Administration, available at: www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/CHN (accessed June 22, 2021).

example, the UAE hosts the largest Chinese business complex outside China, the Dragon Mart, a 175,000 m^2 complex of Chinese merchandise. Kuwait established Madinat Al Hareer (City of Silk), devoting $110 billion to the project, while Oman embarked upon an ambitious process of reviving the role of its ancient Silk Road ports such as Salalah, Suhar, and Sour. Saudi Arabia touts the role of its Red Sea ports such as Yanbu, as centers of energy and trade cooperation with China. China has extended the railroad network across Central Asia to connect with its partners in the Middle East, Eurasia, Europe, and Africa. Moreover, China has established several economic forums, councils, and organization to strengthen its trade ties with the region, such as the China-GCC Cooperation Forum, the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, the China-Arab States Technology Transfer Center, the China-Turkey Economic Cooperation Forum, the Iran-China Economic Commission, and many other entities and institutions.

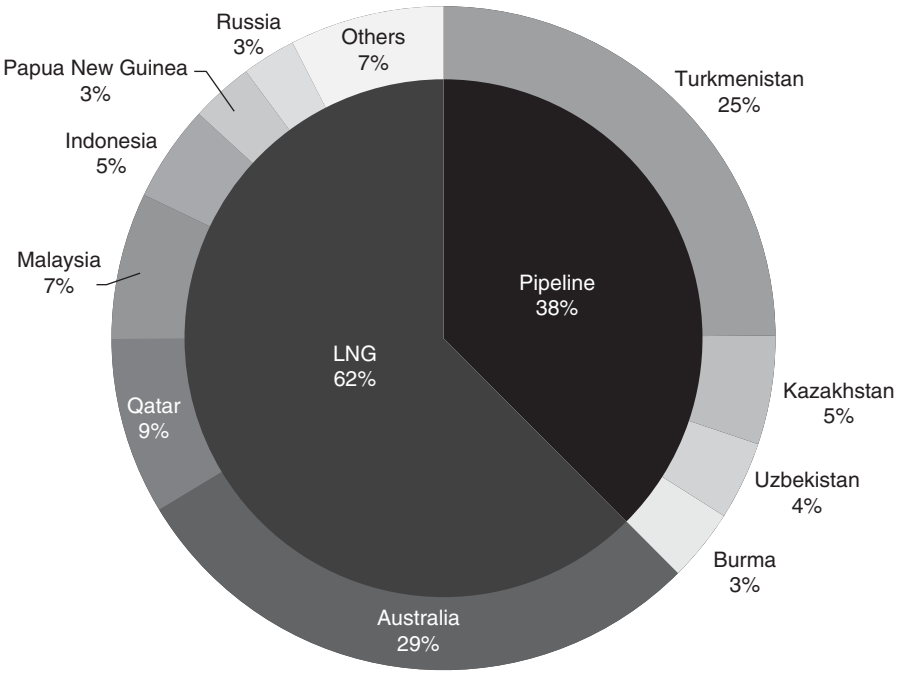

Figure 1.3 China's natural gas imports by source, 2019

Source: Energy Information Administration, available at:www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/CHN (accessed June 22, 2021).

Sino-Middle Eastern Security Relations

Security threats and opportunities originating in the Western Region were at the core of China's interests in the region. Such interests promoted sending expeditions to the West to explore the possibility of building military alliances with the Ferghana Kingdoms, to deter the threat of the Xinguno alliance as early as 214 AD. The expedition approach governed China's Western Alliances with the rising empires in the region, especially the Persian Empire, an alliance built to deter the influence of the Roman Empire. Within the same approach, the Sino-Persian alliance aimed at deterring the threat of the Arab Empire in the seventh century. Clearly, the Silk Road was primarily a "strategic road, a security, a military road," rather than a trade route in the beginning. However, while military expeditions and explorers embarked on their missions, they began to trade silk, their most precious commodity at the time, with the people they came across along the road. Eventually, the route became known as the Silk Road.

The Arab conquest of Persia in the mid-seventh century alarmed China as they feared the rising power of the Abbasid Caliphate in the Western region. Islamic forces stood at the border of China in 751 AD, preferring a peaceful engagement with the country rather than an all-out conquest, even though China's defeat in the Talas Battle (751 AD) has echoed in Sino-Islamic relations ever since.

China's security was also threatened by the rise of the Mongol Empire, while the Ottoman Empire stood at the border of East Turkistan (Xinjiang). The Chinese expansion into Xinjiang in the eighteenth century well into the present has been a major

Table 1.2 China-Greater Middle East trade volume, 2001–2019 ($ million)

Country	*2019*	*2018*	*2017*	*2016*	*2015*	*2014*	*2013*	*2012*	*2011*
Afghanistan	62908	69167	54463	43583	37359	40193	33785	46924	23441
Algeria	808303	910416	72307	798000	8,350.71	7,395.18	8,188.4	7,728.56	6,432.4
Bahrain	167948	128565	102647	85452	1,123.39	1,415.75	1,544.1	1,550.81	1,205.8
Egypt	1320142	1382973	1082758	1099049	12,876.42	11,620.03	10,214. 2	9,544.73	8,801.5
Iraq	3338866	3039860	2214453	1821145	20,583.86	28,505.08	24,878.8	17,567.59	14,268.2
Iran	2303562	3504201	3713851	3124585	33,827.33	51,842.08	39,426.5	34,65.8	45,103.4
Israel	1476915	1391557	1312470	1135396	11,417.98	10,879.74	10,826.6	9,901.45	9,778.5
Jordan	411198	318367	308279	316599	3,711.92	3,627.74	3,604.3	3,225.74	2,769.4
Kazakhstan	2200277	1987814	1794313	1309767	14,290.19	22,451.67	2859596	2568157	2496123
Kuwait	1728379	1865651	1204772	937207	11,269.74	13,433.69	12,262.1	12,556.99	11,303.6
Kyrgyzstan	634656	561112	542386	567669	4,340.69	5,297.94	513770	516232	497645
Lebanon	170561	201827	203365	211839	2,302.85	2,630.25	2,536.4	1,712.27	1,483.3
Libya	726809	620741	239063	153038	2,843.57	2,883.98	4,873.6	8,760.36	2,783.9
Morocco	466789	438781	382682	363264	3,418.71	3,481.50	3,803.07	3,690.84	3,519.3
Oman	2267100	2176312	1569973	1418911	17,163.81	25,861.24	22,941.4	18,787.02	15,874.6
Palestine	8228	7381	6918	5962	696.9	755.9	908.63	410.01	488.6
Qatar	1112279	1162880	808260	5522874	6,890.01	10,590.74	10,174.2	8,483.20	5,893.0
KSA	7807244	6328242	5013688	4228130	51,633.98	69,083.27	72,190.5	73,314.22	64,317.2
Syria	131522	127364	110415	91861	10,261.60	9,865.00	6,9485.7	1,200.36	2,446.4
Tajikistan	167469	150593	134811	175634	1,847.42	2,515.94	195812	185670	206901
Tunisia	782240	160968	152615	388294	1,421.23	1,447.70	1,439.8	1,568.90	1,332.0
Turkmenistan	911688	843630	694324	590177	8,643.13	10,470.44	1003090	1037250	547734
Turkey	2082052	2154546	2190494	1947493	21,551.48	23,010.85	22,233.2	19,095.57	18,737.3
UAE	4874963	4588902	4103512	4006689	48,534.20	54,797.86	46,234.8	40,420.29	35,119.2
Yemen	368565	259454	230300	185844	2,328.11	5,134.17	5,200.1	5,559.15	4,239.9
Uzbekistan	721287	626919	422087	361461	3,495.83	4,276.12	455145	287519	216661

Source: This table is constructed from data provided by the China Statistics Yearbook, volumes from 2001 to 2020, published by the National Bureau of China Statistics (various years).

factor in Islamo-Chinese relations over the past two millennia, an element of constant challenges to both sides.

The security threats and opportunities associated with WWII only highlighted China's traditional anxieties about the Western Region (Middle East-Central Asia), and the impact of military developments in these regions on China's national security and national interests. While China was embroiled in a civil war in the early to mid-twentieth century due to the fierce conflict between the republican and the communist forces, on the minds of Chinese revolutionary leaders were the Japanese occupation and the massacre in Manchuria, a partial European occupation of some of its territories, and fears of military developments in the Middle East. WWII was a defining event in history, and, for Beijing, the defeat of Japan, Germany, and their allies brought some solace because China feared encirclement by its foes from the Middle East.

In the post-WWII era, China made the Middle East central to its foreign policy, ensuring that no security threats would undermine its own national security. Chu Enlai launched a massive campaign to mobilize support for the communist regime in Beijing, supporting anti-imperialism forces and national liberation movements, securing diplomatic recognitions, and signing treaties with the newly independent countries in the Middle East. (Behbehani, 1981: 21). In addition to neutralizing security threats in the region, Beijing was an active participant in

Country	*2010*	*2009*	*2008*	*2007*	*2006*	*2005*	*2004*	*2003*	*2002*	*2001*
Afghanistan	21489	15432	17181	10067	5272	3452	524	62076607	1742	2529
Algeria	5177.32	5127.46	4601.13	3866.41	20906.4	1768.15	1239.6	745.15	433.81	292.34
Bahrain	1051.42	686.5	786.39	487.15	3487.3	255.94	212.97	135.28	109.68	129.77
Egypt	6958.9	5845.02	6303.2	4672.53	31922.7	2145.18	1576.37	1089.58	944.77	953.21
Iraq	9864.96	5147.95	2652.83	1453.18	144474.1	823.79	469.8	56.38	517.06	469.99
Iran	29391.08	21219.09	27757.62	20589.65	11444.3	10083.27	7045.46	5622.52	3739.57	3312.89
Israel	7644.44	5178.07	6049.82	5309.94	38757.2	3027.88	2484.85	1831.3	1417.09	1315.91
Jordan	2053.61	2070.65	1949.31	1181.36	10309.8	910.68	710.76	524.81	358.03	274.29
Kazakhstan	1412913	1755234	1387777	835775	680611	11250	21269	195475	128837	155696
Kuwait	8556.95	5043.54	6790.12	3629.26	27853.1	1648.97	1248.11	1188.24	727.33	642.49
Kyrgyzstan	533028	933338	377923	222570	97220	12488	10376	20188	11886	17761
Lebanon	1346.73	1065.84	1096.72	717.34	5080.4	476.23	493.56	370.1	280.27	238.24
Libya	6576.92	5178.66	4229.44	2410.07	23980.5	1302.22	671.74	215.68	112.75	95.18
Morocco	2937.5	2504.84	2809.98	2586.11	19289.3	1483.88	1157.56	856.76	573.41	384.23
Oman	10723.72	6158.73	12421.36	7270.29	64690.2	4329.9	4389.51	2067.72	1506.65	1676.32
Palestine	26.37	24.32	41.03	37.65	280.7	23.83	9.92	6.93	4.48	4.95
Qatar	3311.28	2253.87	2385.79	1208.88	9987.9	676.39	437.78	354.88	223.55	408.61
Saudi	43195.49	32548.39	41846.17	25366.97	201403.7	16070.14	10298.1	7319.12	5106.89	4075.19
Syria	2483.26	2220.59	2303.22	1876.74	14062.1	906.37	720.67	506.28	371.08	223.19
Tajikistan	140669	149993	52405	32378	15794	1331	646	1239	1076	1717
Tunisia	1119.8	818.66	787.17	512.23	4080.8	339.63	279.22	200.89	182.41	109.37
Turkmenistan	95744	83038	35268	17858	10996	5980	7297	8752	3271	1616
Turkey	15110.58	10094.75	12569.25	11768.02	80692.4	4875.47	3412.67	2597.81	1377.83	905.02
UAE	25686.89	21226.88	28256.94	20035.65	142015.3	10775.44	8145.61	5810.46	3896.26	2824.99
Yemen	4002.94	2405.95	4394.46	2708.34	30348.1	3214.79	1916.25	1899.23	731.1	661.05
Uzbekistan	192087	160670	112819	97209	68056	4582	6079	13177	5830	5146

security developments in the Middle East on several fronts. First, it was unwavering in its support of national liberation movements battling imperialism in Yemen, Jordan, Oman, Syria, and Lebanon.[1] Second, it supported anti-conservative regime forces by assisting revolutionary forces combatting the so-called "reactionary" regimes in the Middle East, especially in Oman, Yemen and Jordan, and the Arab Gulf region (ibid.: 141). Third, it supported the PLO battling Israel for the independence of Palestine. Fourth, it supported Arab countries in their war against Israel, while simultaneously backing the peaceful settlement of the Arab Israeli conflict, according to the UN resolutions. Fifth, it was an active participant in Great Power conflict over the Middle East. Sixth, it was an active player in responding to major wars and conflicts in the Middle East, such as the Arab-Israeli wars, the Gulf War (Iran-Iraq), the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait, the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Arab Spring wars and conflicts and their aftermath. China opposed the US-European policy of "regime change in the region," and abstained or vetoed some UN resolutions aimed at providing an international cover for Western intervention in the Middle East within the framework of the Arab Spring (Noueihed and Warren, 2012: 183). Currently, China's security interests in the Middle East revolve around combatting the so-called terrorism originating in the Middle East and Central Asia. Primarily, China needs backing to stop the Islamic Movement of East Turkistan, an organization battling for the independence of Xinjiang.

China is also accustomed to marketing its military hardware, such as jetfighters (J21), tanks, drones, and ammunition to the Middle East and Central Asia. In fact, the remarkable growth of its military industry has attracted the attention of major consumers, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran. Additionally, China has constructed defense partnerships with major defense industry producers, such as Israel and Turkey. Israel alone has over 200 large, medium, and small defense industries producing state-of-the-art military hardware. China is interested in joint-defense projects, purchasing Israeli drones, and securing access to American military hardware.

Finally, China is interested in nuclear cooperation with the countries of the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, and other countries. The international community and the countries in the region have called repeatedly on China to play a major role in resolving Middle East conflicts, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict, the civil war in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. While China seems to be reluctant to assume such a role, it has demonstrated growing interest in resolving such conflicts, sending special envoys, and supporting efforts at the level of the United Nations.

Sino-Middle Eastern Cultural Relations

Under the leadership of Chu Enlai, the PRC made culture an effective instrument of foreign policy; "an instrument of political and economic cooperation between China and the outside world" (Xinhua, 2010). In so doing, China was building on the rich tradition of the Silk Road, a cultural, economic, and security trade route that had connected China with its partners in the West for over two millennia. The underlining theme of China's cultural engagement with the world was "people-people relations." Chu Enlai invested heavily in the Middle East and Africa in particular, an investment that paid a productive dividend at a later stage. Beijing launched the first Health Diplomacy Program in 1962, toward Algeria, at a time when the country needed urgent healthcare due to the departure of most specialists in the post-independence era. Moreover, it exchanged sports delegations, organized music concerts, and regularly celebrated its partners' national days in Africa, Asia, and Middle Eastern countries. In fact, from 1949 to 1978, sports diplomacy, healthcare diplomacy, ping-pong diplomacy, and concluding cultural agreements with countries around the world were dominant themes in the PRC's foreign policy. Regardless of political differences, Beijing made sure to conclude protocols, conventions, and cultural agreements with every single Middle Eastern country. Additionally, it made sure to participate in sports tournaments on the Asian, African, and Middle Eastern scenes (Behbehani, 1981: 230).

Currently, China's cultural engagement with the Middle East is driven by its economic and political interests. It has established several institutions, notably the Confucius Institute (CI), to serve its wide range of cultural goals. The institute is a cultural entity that provides Mandarin instruction, celebrates cultural events, national days, weeks, years, organizes business workshops, etc. It is comparable in its mandate and activities to the American Amideast, the German Goethe Institute, or the Italian Dante Institute. The Greater Middle Eastern countries are competing to host the institute. Families are also keen on teaching their children Mandarin to prepare them for careers with Chinese corporations, or to pursue higher education in China. Table 1.3 illustrates the number and host counties of the CI in the Middle East.

Chinese higher education institutions are keen on teaching Middle Eastern languages like Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Kurdish and Hebrew, and conversely, they have become a major destination for university students from the Middle East, North Africa, and

Table 1.3 Confucius Institutes and classrooms in the Greater Middle East

Country	*Number of Confucius Institutes and classrooms*	*Institution*
Afghanistan	1	Kabul University, Faculty of Languages and Literature, Chinese Department
Bahrain	1	University of Bahrain
Egypt	5	Cairo University
		Suze Canal University
		Ain Shams University
		Neil Thematic Channel
		Luxor University
Iran	2	University of Tehran
		University of Mazandaran
Israel	2	Tel Aviv University
		Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Jordan	2	Talal Abu Ghazaleh Organization- Amman
		Philadelphia University
Lebanon	1	Saint-Joseph University
Morocco	3	Mohammed V University
		Hassan II University
		Abdemalek Essaadi University
Palestine	1	Al-Quds University
Saudi Arabia	1	Jeddah University
Sudan	1	University of Khartoum
Tunisia	2	University of Carthage
		Classroom at CRI in Sfax
Turkey	4	Bogazici University
		Middle East Technical University
		Okan University
		Yeditepe University
UAE	2	University of Dubai
		Zayed University
Kazakhstan	4	Eurasian University
		Aktobe State Pedagogical Institute
		National Technical University of Karaganda of Kazakhstan
		Kazakh National University
Kyrgyzstan	4	Bishkek State University
		Kyrgyz National University
		Osh State University
		Jalal-Abad University
Tajikistan	2	Confucius Institute at Tajik National University
		Confucius Institute at Mining-Metallurgical Institute of Tajikistan
Uzbekistan	2	Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies
		Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
Total	40	Insufficient demand for more centers

This table is constructed from data provided by the Confucius Institute's website at: www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html

Central Asia. In fact, the decision to pursue higher education in China is no longer marred by previous ideological reservations, i.e., fear of "communist indoctrination."

Another major aspect of bilateral Chinese-Middle Eastern cultural engagement is tourism. Prior to the coronavirus crisis, hundreds of thousands of Chinese tourists visited ancient sites in Egypt, Jordan, Iran, etc. It is expected that the recovery from the pandemic will most certainly strengthen cultural contacts between China and its partners in the Greater Middle East. Pre-Corona figures estimated that

> Chinese outbound tourists grew by double digits as a percentage each year from 2002 to 2013. In 2016, there were 135 million Chinese outbound travelers, a 6% increase from 2015. In 2012, China became the world's top spender in international tourism and has remained so ever since. Tourism expenditures from China went from $24 billion in 2006 (3% of the world's total) to $261 billion in 2016 (21%) of the world's international tourism spending.
>
> *(UNWTO, 2018)*

Two major cultural events have taken place in China in the past two decades, and they give us an indication of participation in future Chinese world cultural events: the 2008 Olympic Games, and the 2010 Shanghai International Expo. In 2008, China was accused of courting its Sudanese partner, supplying political and diplomatic support to avoid world sanctions over the Darfur Genocide. Some 150 human rights organizations launched a global campaign to boycott the games, but despite such efforts Beijing managed to organize a successful event. The credit goes to the support it received from its partners in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and other Asian partners. The second event was the 2010 Shanghai Exhibition that was described as one of the most successful world exhibitions, due to the wide participation of countries in the event, the level of organization, and the technology used.

Currently, China is accused of committing major human rights violations against the Uyghur-Muslim minority in Xinjiang, and incarcerating over a million Uyghur in concentration camps. However, the majority of Arab and Islamic countries are unwilling to criticize China over its treatment to the Uyghur, due to economic interests.

Finally, the outbreak of the corona pandemic in the winter of 2020, originating in the Chinese city of Wuhan, was alarming to the international community. China worked closely with its partners in the Middle East, especially the UAE, to develop and disseminate the Sinopharm vaccine.

Conclusion

China has made huge inroads into the Middle East. Beijing managed to build massive political engagement with the region during the Revolutionary Period, and well into the Economic Reform Era. Its diplomacy and political engagement are conducted at the highest levels; presidents have made visiting the Middle East and meeting its heads of state a major event in their presidencies. Similarly, monarchs and heads of state from the region frequently exchange visits and meet collectively with their Chinese counterparts.

In terms of energy cooperation, the Middle East provides China with over half of its consumption needs. It is expected that Chinese reliance on the region will increase in both

crude oil and natural gas imports. Sino-Middle Eastern trade relations have also witnessed a remarkable growth. Bilateral volume of trade is estimated at $370 billion, heading steadily toward $600 billion by 2025. China wants to deal in free trade agreements with the region, individually and collectively. The conclusion of the GCC-China Free Trade Agreement will most certainly strengthen bilateral trade to unprecedented levels. As for Sino-Middle Eastern security cooperation, the Middle East provides both threats and opportunities for China. Beijing's aim is to neutralize terrorism threats, and market its military hardware to major consumers in the region, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Iraq, and Libya. Beijing is also interested in close military cooperation with some defense industry producers, such as Israel and Turkey. Ultimately, China is also willing to provide nuclear energy to its partners in the region. Finally, Sino-Middle Eastern cultural cooperation represents a cornerstone of bilateral engagement. The two sides are keen on joint cultural activities, such as sports, concerts, providing scholars for higher education, and hosting the Confucius Institute across the region. In all categories, China is making its presence noticeable in the Middle East. This massive engagement is alarming to European and US interests in the region. It has intensified rivalry in several sectors, especially in the energy sector.

Note

1 Behbehani (1981: 53).

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2

CHINA'S ENERGY DIPLOMACY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE BRI ERA

Energy Security Versus Geopolitics

Janet Xuanli Liao

1 Introduction

China's energy diplomacy towards the Middle East began in the mid-1990s, after the country became a net oil importer in 1993. Driven by worries about the security of oil supply, Beijing's strategy towards the region was to avoid taking sides in the complex power struggles, but to rely on the United States to ensure regional stability (Andrews-Speed et al., 2002). Following China's growing potential and the launch of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) since 2013, however, its engagements with the Middle East have shown notable changes over the past decade. Coupled with the policy changes of the United States and the major powers in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, China's energy diplomacy has become more sophisticated and impactful.

The questions to be addressed by this chapter are two-fold: what has changed in China's energy diplomacy towards the Middle East in the BRI era? And, what are the likely implications of Beijing's new strategy on the balance of power and the regional stability of the Middle East? Two regional powers – Saudi Arabia and Iran – will be taken as case studies to show China's changing position over the past decade. The selection of the cases was partially based on their significance in China's energy diplomacy in the region, and it was also due to the delicate relationships between the two powers and their complex dealings with the United States. In Garlick and Havlová's (2020: 4) words, Beijing "aims to establish and maintain ties with Iran, but not at the expense of damaging its relations with US-backed Saudi Arabia". This strategy seems to have succeeded so far, yet how long it can be sustained may not be determined by China alone, but will also be affected by the US-China relations and the US strategy in the Gulf region.

The discussion below is comprised of four sections. Section 2 reviews China's energy diplomacy towards the Middle East over the past decade, to present the context of the analysis. It aims to show the remaining significance of the Middle East oil in China's

DOI: 10.4324/9781003048404-4

energy security agenda but will also portray China's growing political influence associated with the BRI. The two sections that follow will investigate, respectively, China's energy diplomacy towards Saudi Arabia (Section 3) and Iran (Section 4), in the BRI era, to show the changing features in Beijing's new approach towards the Gulf region. Section 5 is the conclusion.

2 The Middle East and China's Oil Supply: From the 1990s to the BRI Era

Compared with the other regions China sought for oil supplies from the mid-1990s, such as Southeast Asia, Russia and Central Asia, the Middle East was distant geographically and strange in cultural and religious terms, and therefore, had long been peripheral to China's overall map of interests. In the early 1970s, China formed diplomatic ties with a few Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, but it was not until the beginning of 1992 that China established diplomatic relations with all the Middle Eastern countries. Underpinned by the strategy to "get along with everyone", China's dealings with the region at the initial stage were focused on economic and energy cooperation, while the United States was expected to take responsibility for regional order and stability (Zhang, 1999; Chen, 2018: 18–19; Guzansky and Lavi, 2020). But China's growing economic strength since the early 1990s made its energy engagements with the Middle East alarming to many, over its likelihood of challenging the US position as the "principal external security guarantor of the region" (Andrews-Speed et al., 2002: 65, 90), long before it stretched political mussels.

Following the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 – the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – China's potential to contest US dominance in the Middle East seems to have become more a reality than a theoretical hypothesis. As China's most ambitious foreign policy scheme, the BRI was aimed to link China to Central and South Asia and onward to Europe via land and maritime connections, respectively. It was estimated that over $1 trillion of investment would be made via BRI on hundreds of infrastructure projects in more than 60 countries (Chatzky and McBride, 2020). Sitting at the juncture of Asia, Africa, and Europe, the Middle East occupies an unique position at the intersection of the BRI, especially with some vital maritime chokepoints, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal. To facilitate the success of the BRI and further ensure its oil supply, Beijing has paid greater attention to the Middle East going beyond energy supply. Between 2013 and 2019, China made investments totalling $93.3 billion in the region, mostly in the energy sector ($52.8 billion), followed by transport ($18.6 billion), real estate ($18.4 billion), and utilities ($3.5 billion) (Chaziza, 2020a). To date, China has surpassed the United States as the top trading partner in the Middle East, and is also the largest external source of direct foreign investment (Ghasseminejad, 2021).

For China, the Middle East remains a vital player in oil provision: it was Beijing's top oil supplier in 1996 and has remained so 25 years later. During this period, China's GDP has grown 18 times from $863.75 billion in 1996 to $15.42 trillion in 2020 (*Trading Economics* 2021; Xinhua, 2021), while its oil imports have increased nearly 24 times, from 22.62 million tonnes (mts) to 540 mts (Tian, 1997: 8; V boshi619, 2022). Holding 48 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves and 32 per cent of the total oil output, the Middle East has supplied around 50 per cent of China's total crude imports and the highest amount reached over 60 per cent, as indicated in Figure 2.1.

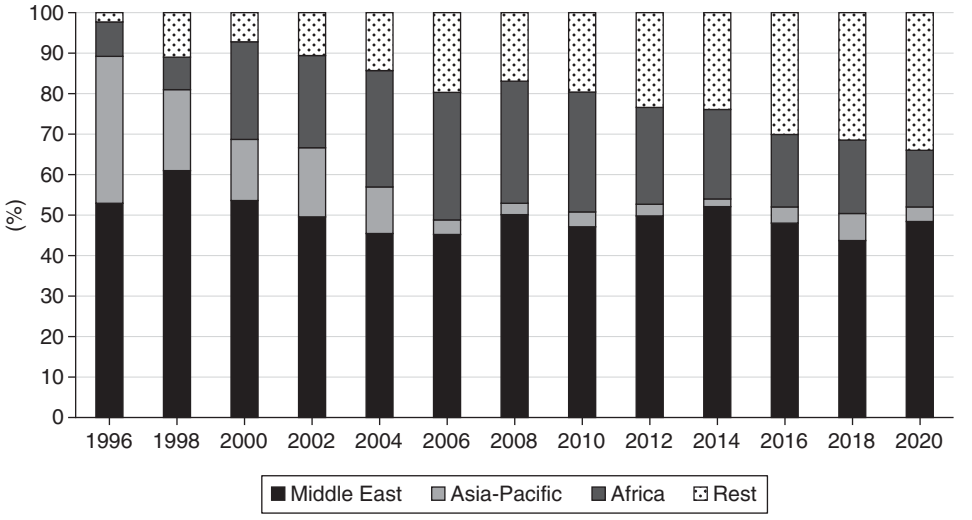

Figure 2.1 Proportion of Middle East oil in China's total imports, 1996–2020 (%)

Sources: The figures for 1996–2016 were adapted from Tian (1997) and Tian's other reports in 2001, 2007, 2013 and 2018); those for 2018–2021 were from Kunlun Consultancy (2019), V boshi619 (2022) and Yuhoucaihong 8453 (2022), respectively.

The key suppliers from the region varied to a certain extent, as shown in Figure 2.2. Saudi Arabia, for instance, supplied little crude oil to China initially but became its top supplier from 2002 and has remained so ever since. Oman used to be China's top supplier but lost such a position to Saudi Arabia pretty soon, and stayed as secondary supplier, together with Iran and, more recently, Iraq. In the old days, Beijing aimed to separate politics and business for the security of the oil supply, so the significance of the Gulf states was largely based on their capacity of oil supplies. Since the BRI era, Beijing has more often combined energy and politics in its dealings with the Middle East countries, but has still tried to work with all the countries without taking sides to avoid heavy involvement in regional disputes (Sun and Wang, 2020). Beijing has also chosen two regional giants Saudi Arabia and Iran, as strategic partners, despite the differences in their capacity of oil provision and political ambitions.

On 19–23 January 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping paid his first state visit to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran. Xi emphasized the need to further strengthen Sino-Arab relations and signed a comprehensive strategic partnership with the two regional rivalries, Saudi Arabia and Iran, in the same week (Perlez, 2016; Fulton, 2020). Prior to President Xi's departure, the Chinese government issued its first "Arab Policy Paper", on 13 January, outlining Beijing's broad policy goals towards the region. These goals included the so-called "1+2+3" formula, centring around (1) energy cooperation as the core; (2) infrastructure, trade, and investment; and (3) high-tech fields, such as clean energy and aerospace. Other initiatives include concluding a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council and Chinese efforts to combat terrorism (Wille, 2016). In July 2018, President Xi again visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE), when the two sides signed 13 agreements and MoU relating to financial, business and trade issues, including an approval for the first Chinese state-owned financial services firm to set up in Abu Dhabi

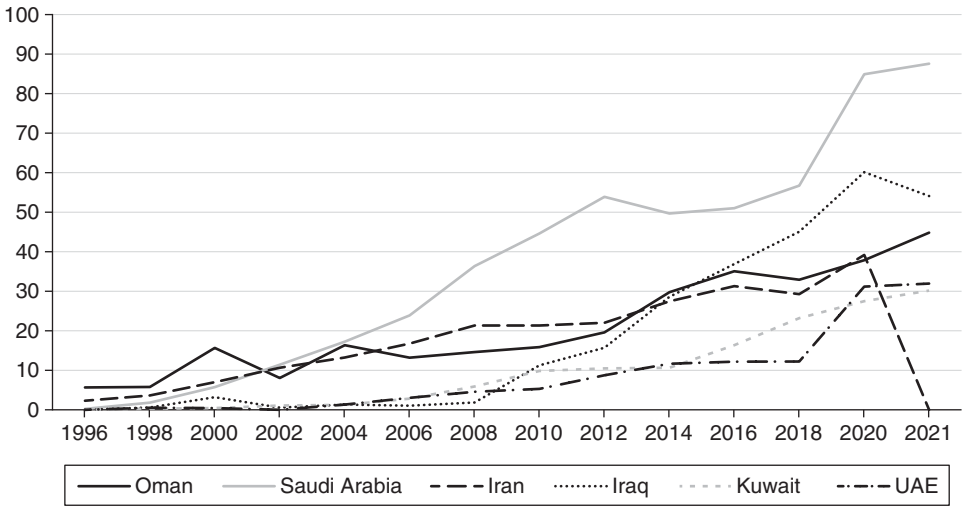

Figure 2.2 China's key oil suppliers from the Middle East, 1996–2021 (mts)

Global Market, a financial centre. The Abu Dhabi National Oil Company and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) also agreed to explore joint business opportunities within the country (Carvalho, 2018).

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing stepped up vaccine diplomacy to its Middle East partners. On 9 December 2020, the UAE became the first country in the world to approve a vaccine developed by the China National Pharmaceutical Group Corporation (Sinopharm). Bahrain followed suit and approved the vaccine on 13 December. In May 2020, Dubai and Huawei announced an initiative to expand cooperation in artificial intelligence and digital transformation (Fulton, 2020). China has also endorsed the low-carbon initiatives of the Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia's "2030 vision", though its investment in the renewable sector is still limited.

3 China's Energy Diplomacy Towards Saudi Arabia

3.1 Oil Trade Involving Little Politics: the 1990s–2014

Saudi Arabia has the world's second largest oil reserves and is also a strong economic and politic power in the Persian Gulf, but China did not establish diplomatic relationship with the Kingdom until July 1990. Prior to that, Saudi Arabia was a strong opponent of communism and kept diplomatic relations with Taiwan, though unofficial ties remained after China's "Open Door" policy in 1979 (Al-Tamimi, 2012: 4). Since China turned into a net oil importer in 1993, a more concrete relationship started to take shape bilaterally, though their oil trade did not progress as well as expected initially, as China had constrained refinery capacity in handing Saudi's "sour" crude. Thanks to the "strategic oil partnership" proposed by Chinese President Jiang Zemin, in his first state visit to Saudi Arabia in October 1999, the two sides signed a "Strategic Oil Cooperation Agreement" and agreed to open domestic refinery sectors for each other's investment. As a result, three joint-venture refineries were built and became operational, between 2008

and 2014, in China's Qingdao (Sinopec and Aramco) and Fujian (Sinopec, Aramco and ExxonMobil), and in Saudi Yanbu (Sinopec and Aramco) (Liao, 2015: 96–98). In the meantime, the "Look East" policy adopted by the Saudi government in the post-9/11 era also helped fortify the Sino-Saudi partnership, making Saudi Arabia China's No. 1 crude supplier from 2002 (Al-Tamimi, 2012: 3, 5).

Bilateral energy cooperation was further enhanced by official visits of top leaders from both countries. In January 2006, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud visited China, the first foreign visit since his succession and the first visit by a Saudi monarch to the People's Republic since their diplomatic establishment in 1990. During his two-day visit, King Abdullah was well received by Chinese President Hu Jintao and other high-ranking leaders, and the two sides signed a series of agreements on economic, technical and energy cooperation, including a $1.7 billion investment by the state-controlled Saudi Basic Industries Corp (SABIC) in an ethylene complex owned by the China Petroleum & Chemical Corp. (Sinopec) in Tianjin (Xinhua, 2006a; Reuters, 2008). Three months later, in April 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao paid a three-day state visit to Riyadh on his five-nation tour. Hu was happy to see the smooth development of the bilateral ties, especially that Saudi Arabia had already become China's largest trading partner in the Middle East (Xinhua, 2006b).

In June 2008, coinciding with Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping's first official visit to Saudi Arabia, SABIC and Sinopec signed a deal in Riyadh to expand the earlier agreed investment from $1.7 billion to $4 billion, making SABIC's first major investment in China more sophisticated, to cover the whole production of ethylene and all downstream products, instead of a partial involvement. This also helped release Sinopec's refining losses due to the Chinese government's cap of domestic fuel prices, which did not match the rapid increase in international crude prices, from $80 per barrel in 2006 to above $130 per barrel in 2008. According to Zhang Xiaodong, a Middle East expert at the China Academy of Social Sciences, "Having both oil trade ties and investment in oil-related businesses like this will be a solid partnership" (Reuters, 2008). On 14 January 2012, Saudi Aramco and Sinopec established a joint venture called Yanbu Aramco Sinopec Refinery (Yasref), holding a 62.5 per cent and a 37.5 per cent share, respectively. Involving an investment of $10 billion, Yasref was Sinopec's first international downstream investment. The project had a designed capacity to process 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) of Arabian Heavy crude oil and produce high-quality transportation fuels (*Hydrocarbon Processing*, 2016; Valori, 2016).

3.2 China and Saudi Arabia in the BRI Era

China's dealing with Saudi Arabia since the BRI era has involved more political elements, though oil trade still is the centre of the bilateral relationship. After the United States decreased its oil imports following the shale revolution, Saudi Arabia became increasingly reliant on trade with China to compensate for the loss and to maintain its market share. In 2014, Saudi was already China's largest oil supplier, whose crude demand accounted for 16 per cent of China's oil imports. The record low oil prices in late 2014 deepened Saudi reliance on the Chinese market even further, as it led the Kingdom to a deficit of over 360 billion riyals in 2015 (Wille, 2016). When Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud assumed power in January 2015, he decided to reform the Saudi economy by cooperating with non-OPEC countries via the OPEC+ mechanism, listing Saudi Aramco on international stock markets, and developing renewable energy. He also

focused on developing relations with the "key minority" countries globally and building semi-alliance regionally to contain Iran (Chen, 2020).

Against such a background, Chinese President Xi Jinping's tour visit to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran, on 19–23 January 2016, was viewed as being of strategic significance to those powers and for China's "Belt and Road Initiative". During Xi's visit, Beijing upgraded its ties with both Saudi Arabia and Iran to "comprehensive strategic partnership", despite their rivalries since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. As a matter of fact, the Saudi-Iran tensions escalated on 2 January 2016, when Iranian protesters stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran over the execution of a Shiite cleric on terrorism charges, which had broken the bilateral diplomatic relations. As President Xi stuck to his agenda of the visit, many wondered whether Beijing would mediate the Saudi-Iranian tensions. In contrast to its previous position of staying out of regional politics, the Chinese Ambassador to Tehran, Pang Sen, explicitly stated that China would be willing to play a role in helping restore peace and stability in the Middle East. According to Gordon Kwan, head of oil and gas research at Nomura, "China wants some reassurance that tensions in the Middle East will not continue to escalate, especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran" (*Tehran Times*, 2016; Wille, 2016). King Salman and President Xi also agreed that the two countries should cooperate under the BRI framework, and jointly inaugurated the new Yasref refinery. President Xi defined Yanbu as the regional point of arrival of the Silk Road and the axis of the new Saudi industrialization (Valori, 2016). Equally keen to help the Saudi regime move away from an oil-centred economy, the China Nuclear Engineering Group Corp. (CNEC) agreed to conduct research on high-temperature gas-cooled (HTGR) nuclear reactor technology with the Saudi government, which would allow CNEC to export its HTGR nuclear technology to Saudi, and 16 nuclear power plants were expected to be constructed by 2032 (Lim, 2016).

On 15–18 March 2017, King Salman paid a state visit to China at President Xi's invitation, after his tour to Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan. Faced with the post-Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Iran that now held a more robust regional role, on one hand, and with President Trump's vague policy towards the Middle East, on the other, Saudi Arabia had worries on both strategic and economic grounds. King Salman's unprecedented long trip indicated how eager he was to build ties with new friends in order to rely less on Washington, yet building ties with Japan side by side with China also showed his intention to avoid over-reliance on Beijing (Malik, 2017). Still, Saudi Arabia made political efforts to please China, by backing China's policy of handling the Muslim minority Uighurs in Xinjiang on the international stage. In July 2019, Saudi Arabia was among the 37 countries that sent the United Nations a letter of support for China and praised Beijing's policy as "remarkable achievements in the field of human rights" (Guzansky and Lavi, 2020). The Kingdom continued to expand its investment in the Chinese market as well. When Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited Beijing in February 2019, for instance, a joint venture was signed between the Saudi Aramco and North Industries Group Corp. (Norinco) and Panjin Sincen to develop a fully integrated refining and petrochemical complex in China's Liaojing Province, the Huajin Aramco Petrochemical Co.. The project was the largest Sino-foreign joint venture to date that involved a $10 billion investment, including a 300,000-b/d refinery, a 1.5mts/yr ethylene cracker, and a 1.3mts/yr paraxylene unit. The Saudi Aramco was to supply up to 70 per cent of the crude required and held 35 per cent of the stakes, with Norinco and Panjin holding 36 per cent and 29 per cent stakes, respectively (*OGJ*, 2019). Before long,

however, the Saudi Aramco suspended the planned project in August 2020, due to the uncertain market prospect caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bloomberg, 2020).

The unfortunate incident did not seem to harm much of the Sino-Saudi collaboration, though. In late 2020, the Saudi Telecom decided to build a partnership with China's Alibaba Cloud to help the Kingdom build its cloud computing infrastructure (Guzansky and Lavi, 2020; Kantor, 2021). In April 2021 again, Saudi Arabia announced the sale of 1 per cent of Aramco's stake (around $19 billion) and a pipeline of 160 projects across 16 sectors, with the aim of raising $55 billion funding over the next four years, to increase revenue and reduce the government budget deficit. This was a part of the privatization programme launched by the Saudi Council of Economic and Development Affairs to achieve the Vision 2030 objectives. Unsurprisingly, some major Chinese investors, including the sovereign wealth fund, the China Investment Corporation (CIC), were reportedly in talks with the Saudis to buy a stake (CNBC, 2021), which should not be purely for business purposes, but this attracted little attention from the outside world. What did spark more international concerns was the development in Saudi-China collaboration on civilian nuclear technology.

Saudi Arabia's nuclear energy plan was first initiated in 2006, together with the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. But it was soon changed to be a nuclear power programme on its own, as suggested by a royal decree in April 2010, "to meet the Kingdom's growing requirements for energy to generate electricity, produce desalinated water and reduce reliance on depleting hydrocarbon resources." In 2011, Riyadh declared its plan to construct 16 nuclear power reactors within 20 years at a cost of $80 billion, to generate 20 per cent of the Saudi electricity (WNA, 2022). The Saudis then signed contracts with Japan's GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy and Toshiba/ Westinghouse in September 2013, with South Korea's Atomic Energy Research Institute in March 2015, and agreed with China on nuclear energy cooperation. In August 2017, two MoUs were signed between the China National Nuclear Corp. (CNNC) and the Saudi Geological Survey (SGS), and by the Saudi Technology Development and Investment Corp. with China Nuclear Engineering Group Corp., on developing nuclear technologies for civilian purposes (Reuters, 2017; WNA, 2022). Riyadh also sought assistance from the Trump administration for its civilian nuclear programme, but the effort did not succeed as the Saudis refused to sign on to the standard International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) requirements. Therefore, when Saudi Arabia asked China to build a facility for extracting uranium yellowcake from uranium ore, a *Wall Street Journal* report, on 4 August 2020, claimed that the considerable shift in Riyadh's civilian nuclear programme had caused concerns in the US Congress, where a bipartisan group of lawmakers expressed alarm about Saudi nuclear energy plans and the intentions behind them (Chaziza, 2020b). Despite the Saudi Energy Ministry denying "categorically" having built a uranium ore facility, China's growing presence in the Middle East, together with its BRI scheme, seemed unbearable by Washington. In May 2021, the US Senate advanced legislation designed to counter China's growing global influence, including in the Middle East. The legislation included $300 million for a "Countering Chinese Influence" fund, and $100 million in funding for journalists and media companies to "raise awareness of and increase transparency regarding the negative impact of activities related to the Belt and Road Initiative" (*Wall Street Journal*, 2020; Farooq, 2021).

To be sure, Riyadh has no intention of seeing its relationship with Beijing damaging its ties with Washington, as there is no substitute for the US presence in the Gulf to

halt the Iranian expansion. In terms of China, although it has become more confident and assertive in the Gulf region and may wish to strengthen its relations with Riyad at the expense of the United States, it has neither the capacity nor the intention of displacing the USA as a strategic guarantor of the security of the region (Guzansky and Lavi, 2020). Saudi Arabia perhaps also wishes to use its relations with China for leverage on Washington, but the Biden administration has already shown its resolve to maintain strong ties with Riyadh to prevent the "autocracy" regimes, including China, from playing an upper hand in the Persian Gulf. Therefore, although Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2022 was criticized by some as compromising the US value-based foreign policy, senior officials in the White House believed that the realist turn in Biden's approach towards the Middle East was "a necessary corrective" (Heydemann, 2022).

4 China's Energy Diplomacy Towards Iran

China's energy diplomacy towards Iran since the 1990s has triggered numerous controversies and suspicions, probably more than any other oil suppliers, especially after Iran's nuclear programme was discovered. There are two main factors responsible for this situation: one was China's dealing with the Iranian nuclear crisis, and the other was the Sino-Iranian "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" that came into being in early 2021. If Beijing's dealings with Tehran in the early years could be said to be a choice that it was compelled to make, then the latest development of the bilateral relationship is certainly a preference taken by China.

4.1 China's Dealing with Iran Prior to the 2015 JCPOA: Playing a Dual Game?

Iran was one of the first Middle Eastern countries to establish diplomatic relations with China in August 1971, and it also supported China's entry to the United Nations in October the same year to replace the Nationalist government in Taiwan (Liao, 2015: 100). Yet the cordial relationship did not last long, due to Ayatollah Khomeini's policy on "Neither East, nor West – but the Islamic Republic" after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 (Therme, 2019). When China was looking for oil supplies from the Middle East in the 1990s, Iran soon became an important supplier due not so much to politics but rather to Iran's status as the fourth largest oil reserves in the world. Between 1993 and 2000, oil supplies from Iran grew ten-fold in China's crude imports, from 67,900 tonnes to 7mts, and the two sides also signed a series of treaties on trade promotion and petroleum cooperation around the time (Liao, 2015: 100). Washington was unhappy to see Beijing's dealing with Iran, which was listed by President G.W. Bush as a part of the "Axis of Evil" in 2002, but China's polite attitude at the time seemed to help the two powers avoid further tensions.

In August 2002, Iran's secret nuclear programme was revealed, which caused concerns from the international community about Iran's likelihood in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which Iran signed in July 1968 and ratified in February 1970, a month before it came into force (United States Institute of Peace, 2020). Between February 2003 and November 2004, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) made several inspections of Iran's nuclear sites and reported the discovery of highly enriched uranium. Soon after, the EU3+3 (Britain, France and Germany, the USA, Russia and China) held a series of meetings with Iran asking it to suspend all nuclear related

activities, and the United Nations Security Council also passed a number of Resolutions, between 2006 and 2009, demanding Iran suspend its uranium enrichment, plus introducing sanctions against Iran's noncompliance (Security Council Report, 2020). Yet, the process seemed to have little effect, in which Beijing aligned with the other powers politically, to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, as it never blocked the UN Security Council efforts against Tehran.

In the meantime, China resisted the US pressure to isolate Iran and continued its energy trade and cooperation with Iran to secure its own energy interest. Since 2004, the state-owned China National Petroleum Corp. (CNPC) has been operating in Iran's oil and gas sectors, together with the China Petroleum & Chemical Corp. (Sinopec), and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC). As shown in Table 2.1, Beijing committed nearly $130 billion in investment in Iran's oil and gas sector between 2004 and 2011, partially due to the forced withdrawal of Western oil majors, such as Japan's Inpex and French oil major Total. Taking Inpex as an example, which invested 75 per cent of a $2 billion plan to Iran's Azadegan, in 2004, one of the largest oil fields in the world. But after being listed by the US as one of the 41 firms dealing with Iran's oil and gas sectors, Inpex reduced its stake to 10 per cent in 2006 and withdrew from Iran completely in 2010 (UANI, 2021). This enabled the CNPC to sign two deals with the National Iranian Oil Co. (NIOC) in 2009 and 2011, respectively, on developing the North and South Azadegan oilfields to increase oil outputs, plus a technical service contract on oil field upgrading. According to Leverett and Leverett (2011), Beijing's move was part of the US-China tacit compromise whereby China would agree to the US-led multilateral sanctions against Iran, while America would agree to refrain from applying unilateral sanctions against major Chinese corporations.

Therefore, despite an MoU reached between the CNOOC and the NIOC on developing the North Pars gas field, in late 2006, the CNOOC decided in February 2008 to cancel the signing of the $16 billion contract at the last minute (AGOC, 2008), due to Iran's non-compliance with two UN Security Council Resolutions (Res. 1737 and Res. 1747). After the IAEA report, on 8 November 2011, with "credible" details showing that Iran already had obtained some of the expertise needed to build nuclear weapons, "should it decide to do so", the EU decided in January 2012 to ban oil imports from Iran, starting 1 July as part of the measures to ratchet up the pressure on Iran's nuclear programme. Beijing followed suit immediately and nearly halved its oil imports from Tehran in 2012, and CNPC as well as pulling out of the South Pars Phase 11 (SP11) in July 2012 (ACA, 2011; Bloomberg, 2012a, 2012b). China might be playing a dual game in Iran (Garver, 2010), but it was largely aimed at securing its energy supply while preventing Iran from violating its NPT obligations, rather than pursuing geopolitical advantages, as some assumed.

4.2 China and Iran in the BRI Era: "No East, No West but China?"

After a decade of negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran, the JCPOA was finally reached on 14 July 2015, under which Iran agreed to limit its sensitive nuclear activities and allow in international inspectors, in return for the lifting of sanctions imposed previously that had cost the country more than $160 billion in oil revenue from 2012 to 2016 alone. The deal would also allow Iran to gain access to more than $100 billion in assets frozen overseas and to resume selling oil on international markets and using the global financial system for trade (BBC, 2019). On 16 January 2016, the IAEA submitted a report

Table 2.1 Chinese energy-related investments in Iran, 2004–2021

Year	*Company*	*Investment amount (US$ billion)*	*Content of the Agreements*
2004	Zhuhai Zhenrong	20	Importing 110 mts of LNG over 25 years;
2004	Sinopec & NIOC	70	Sinopec helps develop Yadavaran oilfields &and buy 150k bpd of oil/yr for 25 yrs and 250mts of LNG for 30 yrs
2007	Sinopec & NIOC	2	Develop Phase 2: North Yadavaran oil field
2007	CNOOC & NIOC	16	Agreement reached for CNOOC to help develop North Pars field but the contract was not signed due to US pressure
2009	CNPC & NIOC	1.76	Help increase North Azadegan oil fields' outputs to 115k bpd within 6 yrs
2009	CNPC & NIOC	4.7	Help develop Phase 11 of South Pars but pulled out in 2012 without much progress made
2009	Chinese Consortium	2-3	Help develop capacities of Abadan & Persian Gulf Star refineries
2011	CNPC & NIOC	2.5	Help develop the South Azadegan oilfields' output from 55k bpd to 600k bpd
2017	Total, CNPC & Petropars (Iran)	4.8	Help develop Phase 11 of South Pars gas field, but Total had to pull out in Aug. 2018, selling its 50.1% stake to CNPC in Nov. 2018. Yet CNPC also pulled out in June 2019 to avoid US sanctions.
2021	Governments deal	400	The deal was agreed in 2019 but was signed in 2021. Of the total, $280 bn would be invested in Iran's oil, gas and petrochemicals sectors. The rest would be invested in dozens of fields, e.g. banking, telecom, ports, railways, health care & info technology, over 25 years, in exchange for Iranian discounted oil supply.

Sources: adapted from various sources, including *China Daily*, 2004; *Tehran Times*, 2011; Liao, 2015; *New York Times*, 2021.

to the UN Security Council confirming that Iran had taken the steps required under the JCPOA for nuclear-related sanctions to be lifted (Security Council Report, 2020).

As Iran's largest crude market since 2007 (receiving 40 per cent of Iran's crude exports), China was happy to see Iran returning to the international oil market, although this meant that China had to face more competitions from international oil majors (Perlez, 2016). More importantly, with the "Belt and Road" scheme in operation, China has placed more emphasis on Iran politically, due not only to its important geopolitical position, but also to the shared antipathy by the two countries towards Western domination of the world order (Wille, 2016). Therefore, a week after the lifting of international sanctions, on 22–23 January, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Tehran as the last stop of his tour in

the Middle East. During Xi's visit, the two sides signed 17 agreements for cooperation in areas of energy, trade and industry, etc., and also agreed to increase bilateral trade by ten-fold in the next decade to $600 billion. Prior to this, China was already Iran's top trading partner, with bilateral trade surpassing $50 billion in 2014 (CNBC, 2016).

China also resumed its energy activities with Iran soon afterwards. In November 2016, the CNPC joined an agreement signed by French oil major Total on the SP11 project, the first Western energy investment in Iran since the lifting of international sanctions earlier in the year. The SP11 project has a production capacity of 1.8 bcfd and would be pursued in two phases with an estimated investment at $4.8 billion. Total would hold a 50.1 per cent interest, with the CNPC taking 30 per cent interest and Iran's Petropars holding the rest (Dittrick, 2016). The NIOC also planned to begin supplying its domestic market in 2021 with the country's first-ever international petroleum contract (IPC), which would be applicable to SP11, to "prompt other IOCs to re-enter the country's upstream sector" (Dunnahoe, 2017). Before long, US President Donald Trump abandoned the JCPOA deal in May 2018 unilaterally and reinstated sanctions, targeting Iran in August. Consequently, Total decided to withdraw in August 2018 and sold its 50.1 per cent stake to the CNPC in November. The CNPC also had to pull out in June 2019 to avoid likely sanctions (UANI, 2021).

Following a visit by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to Beijing, in August 2019, China announced that it planned to incorporate Iran into the BRI with a pledged $400 billion of investment in 17 different projects, covering several fields of nuclear energy, port, trade and transport. Of this, $280 billion would be invested in Iran's oil, gas and petrochemicals sectors, where Chinese firms would be given the first refusal to bid on any and all petrochemical projects in Iran. The remaining $120 billion would be used to upgrade Iran's transport and manufacturing infrastructure. In return, Iran was to provide China with heavily discounted oil that its huge economy required (South Front, 2019; Talwar, 2020). The deal was confirmed on Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Tehran, on 26 March 2021, when he signed an agreement with his Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif, according to the *New York Times* (2021).

Interestingly, both Tehran and Beijing maintained a low profile on the agreement. Monshipouri and Heiran-Nia (2020: 159–160), for instance, argued that Iran's "Look East" policy was forced upon it by Tramp's "maximum pressure", as the Rouhani government would prefer a balanced relationship with both the West and East. They also saw the deal benefiting more Tehran's ruling elites rather than the Iranian population. China did not officially confirm that it was on the verge of an agreement with Iran either, trying to maintain a balance between Riyadh and Tehran. Just days before word of the China-Iran agreement leaked, Chinese and Arab League foreign ministers adopted the Amman Declaration, with Arab states endorsing China's central foreign policy concept of "a community with a shared future for mankind". Indeed, China's combined trade with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel in 2018 was 3.5 times greater than its trade with Iran ($123 billion vs $35 billion) (Vakil, 2021). While China remains Iran's top oil importer, Chinese firms have not increased investment, imports or exports at the exponential levels pledged in 2016. In fact, Chinese investment has decreased substantially since then, and there was no record of oil imports from Iran either in 2021, as shown in Figure 2.2. Some concluded that the Sino-Iranian deal would not mean a massive shift in China's international policy, and the deal was unlikely to fundamentally threaten the balance of power in the Middle East as well (Figueroa, 2021).

5 Conclusion

China's energy diplomacy towards the Middle East has a history of nearly 30 years by now. Employing a strategy of getting along with everyone in the region, China has made the Middle East not only the most important source of its oil and gas supply, but also a crucial front line for its BRI strategy. China has managed to develop a comprehensive strategic partnership with two regional rivals – Saudi Arabia and Iran – who are competing for both regional leadership and oil markets, their dealing with the United States also vary greatly. China has attempted to build solid trade and energy relationship with both powers, while maintaining a balance between them. Beijing has also learnt from this process that it is not always possible to stay out of regional politics, especially with its growing influence and the fading US interest in the Middle East.

As its growing presence in the Middle East has been viewed as achieved at the cost of American national security interests (Farooq, 2021), China has tried to pursue a strategically hedged approach to build up an economic and political presence without challenging the US dominance in the region, in particular, in the security domain (Fulton, 2020). In the BRI era, energy supply may still be a crucial pillar in China's diplomacy in the Middle East, but it is no longer dominant. Regardless whether the BRI ambition could succeed in the end, the controversies triggered so far by China's presence in the Middle East have gone far beyond oil and gas supplies, and will have geopolitical implications for the region and even the whole world.

Finally, despite the more than 15 months of talks in Vienna between Iran and P5+1, on resuming the 2015 JCPOA that was abandoned by President Trump in 2018, there has been no deal reached when the meetings ended on 8 August 2022 (Bloomberg, 2022). Although Tehran insisted that its nuclear programme is entirely peaceful, the IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi warned in early August 2022 that, Iran's nuclear programme was "growing in ambition and capacity", and the US Special Envoy for Iran, Robert Malley, also said Tehran has enough highly enriched uranium on hand to make a bomb and could do so in a matter of weeks (Voice of America, 2022). If Iran decided to go nuclear in the foreseeable future, Beijing might need to re-think its dealings with Tehran, or to play on its potential to push Iran into behaving itself. This would not only allow Iran to have better energy cooperation with a wider world, but could also enhance China's geopolitical significance in the Middle East and ultimately serve the purposes of its BRI ambition.

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