

DECIPHERING CHINA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

BRIEF / 14
Jun 2020

by

Erzsébet N. Rózsa

Professor, National University of Public Service,
BudapestSenior Research Fellow, Institute of World
Economics

GEOPOLITICALSERIES

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly perceived that the engagement of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Middle East is driven primarily by economic interests, and that it prefers to steer clear of the conflicts in the region as much as possible. Its landmark 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), launched in 2013 as a global infrastructure development strategy, contributes to this perception. This notion, however, overlooks the larger context of China's engagement, both historical and contemporary.

China's new activism in the Middle East reflects the evolution of Chinese foreign policy thinking, in line with the country's rise as an economic superpower. Its original choice of partners in the region was influenced by ideological considerations and a shared anti-colonial and anti-imperialist narrative. But its transformation into an economic powerhouse has inevitably altered its priorities and influence in the Middle East. Its economic penetration of the region is reflected in the set of cooperation agreements that it has concluded with the regional states as well as in

Summary

- › As a relative newcomer to the region, China has already made significant inroads in the Middle East: many regional states have welcomed its presence and shown eagerness to become involved in its ambitious 'Belt and Road Initiative'.
- › The fact that China does not attach any conditions to trade relationships means that its engagement is positively perceived by many states in the region, including US regional allies, much to the dismay of Washington.
- › Given its status as the second-largest economy in the world, China's economic penetration of the Middle East inevitably has far-reaching foreign policy and security implications. It remains to be seen if the region turns into an arena of struggle for a new world order between the US and China, which would also have far-reaching implications for the EU.

subregional cooperation formats, e. g. the China–Arab State Cooperation Forum.

The PRC's increasing engagement in the Middle East may well be driven by its need for resources to fuel its economic growth; however, there is inevitably a political dimension too, due not only to the fact that China has a seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) and seeks to project the image of a 'responsible' super-power but also because of the need to protect its investments and commercial interests in the region.

China's growing influence in the Middle East may generally be positively received, or even welcomed; however, the countries of the region have very different perspectives and often conflicting interests in the way they relate to the PRC. This Brief analyses these perspectives taking into account China's recent initiatives in the region at a time of growing rivalry between the US and China.

Beijing's choice of partners was originally dictated by ideological and political rather than geostrategic considerations.

THE CONTEXT OF CHINA'S MIDDLE EASTERN ENGAGEMENT

The PRC is a relative newcomer in the Middle East in spite of the fact that the imperial dynasties that ruled China for two millennia maintained relations with the kingdoms and empires of the region throughout history. Persia/Iran and the Ottoman Turkish Empire had been loosely connected to China – mostly through the mainland Silk Road – for centuries. Although China was also linked to the other peoples of the region, Chinese–Arab relations,¹ as well as China's contacts to the modern state of Israel, are new developments. Consequently, no Chinese vision of the Middle East as one, distinct geopolitical region has emerged.² Instead, the PRC has focused rather on developing bilateral relations with its regional partners there.³

The PRC's growing presence in the Middle East can be interpreted as a direct consequence of the changes in Beijing's foreign and security doctrine. Mao Zedong's military strategy ("Where the enemy advances, we retreat. Where the enemy retreats, we pursue") may still be valid,⁴ but under subsequent leaders China's foreign and security policy has gradually evolved. The advent of the present Chinese leader Xi Jinping marked a departure from the 'low profile' policy advocated by Deng Xiaoping,⁵ ushering in a new era 'that sees China moving closer to centre stage and making greater contributions to mankind.'⁶ The launch of the BRI in 2013,

the publication in 2015 of China's Military Strategy⁷ referring to the 'strategic principles of active defence' and Xi's speech at the 19th national congress of the Communist Party of China all signalled a much more active foreign policy and the readiness to defend (in an even more assertive way) Chinese interests, especially 'core interests'⁸ far away from home.

This transformation has been clearly reflected in the evolution of the PRC's relations with the Middle Eastern states: not only has China expanded its presence while prudently refraining from taking sides in the region's multiple conflicts, but it has succeeded in attracting a significant number of regional states (Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, The Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the UAE and Yemen) to its BRI project.

CHINA'S CHOICE OF PARTNERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

China has a diverse array of partners in the Middle East and its relationship with the various countries has evolved in different stages. Beijing's choice of partners was originally dictated by ideological and political rather than geostrategic considerations. The PRC's non-aligned status, its role in the Bandung Conference, the ideology of (Chinese) communist internationalism and the rejection of imperialism provided the context for 'choosing' partners in the international arena in the 1950s and 1960s (where countries with official diplomatic ties to the ROC/Taiwan were not willing or able to partner with the PRC/China).

Following the proclamation of the PRC in 1949 and the formulation of a new approach to international relations, the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence',⁹ defined by the then Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, were and to some extent have remained to this day the basic pillars of Chinese relations with the countries of the Middle East. The first Arab country to recognise the PRC was Egypt in 1956, followed in the same year by Algeria, Iraq, Morocco, North Yemen, Syria and Sudan, all of which – plus Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya and Tunisia – became members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in the 1960s. The non-intervention and non-interference principles, especially at the height of the Arab–Israeli wars and following the decolonisation wars, had special resonance for the Arab states, and provided a common ideological platform

with China. With Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policy in the early 1980s, economic goals became key criteria in the selection of partners, especially those – in the Middle East – which could provide the necessary energy resources. This heightened the importance of the relevant countries, especially in the Persian Gulf, which were the easiest to access, and made securing stable and continuous supplies a top priority on China's foreign and security policy agenda.¹⁰ Although Saudi Arabia and Iran (in the latter case, during periods of suspension or bypassing of sanctions) remain the most important sources of energy resources for China,¹¹ farther outreach, namely to Africa,¹² has become part of Beijing's strategy to diversify Chinese imports.

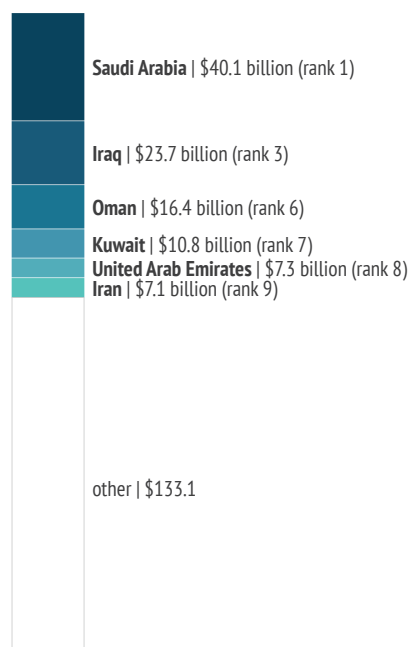
China's partnerships with Middle Eastern states broadly tend to correspond to the three main categories of strategic partnerships, comprehensive strategic partnerships, and potential partnerships,¹³ with some further 'sub-categories' designating specific attributes of the relationship in question (e.g. the comprehensive cooperative partnership with Turkey or the comprehensive innovative partnership with Israel), the distinctive feature being that these are partnerships without alignment.

China's opposition to the concept of alliance – a distinctive feature of Beijing's foreign policy doctrine and strategy – can only partly be attributed to the change in the understanding of military security and warfare following the Cold War. The fact that China's experience with the two great military alliances was not positive may also have been a contributing factor: the Soviet-Chinese alliance was a failure, while the US-led NATO – from the Chinese perspective – leaves those outside of it insecure.¹⁴

The Chinese partnerships, consequently, while offering no alignment, with their multiple formats and levels, present the advantage of flexibility. Moreover, they are firmly based on the mutual benefit of the 'Five Principles', and provide scope to cover a wide range of potential fields and topics, while leaving potentially problematic issues aside.

China's top providers of imported crude oil

in the Middle East, 2019



Data: worldstopexports.com, 2020

THE MIDDLE EAST BETWEEN THE US AND CHINA

As China steadily expands its footprint in the region, the Middle East has increasingly become a sphere of contention and competition between the US and China (and, to a lesser extent, with other actors, including the EU). Yet, both states' presence and readiness to engage is shifting within very wide margins. Although the US has been quietly reducing its presence in the Middle East – with its 'Pivot to Asia' and 'lead from behind' strategy – it cannot disengage itself from the region: on the one hand, it needs to maintain its strategic influence over the flow of energy resources; on the other hand, its local allies do not feel secure in an increasingly fragile and insecure regional order. In the past decade China, partly as a result of the necessity to secure natural resources for its expanding economy, started to 'march westwards',¹⁵ to partly fill the vacuum left by the Soviet Union/Russia.¹⁶ Although it is ready to engage with actors who the Americans and Europeans, based on their own norms and/or sanctions, keep at arm's length, it is reluctant to take on a political and military role in the region.¹⁷ China's avoiding of conflicts and policy of non-interference is also in line with traditional Chinese foreign policy principles, according to which conflicts should be settled peacefully. In this vein, China tries to maintain good relations with all conflicting partners, although this is becoming increasingly difficult (in particular, given the hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as between Iran and Israel).¹⁸

The Chinese leadership does not consider Middle Eastern events to be a primary strategic concern for China (although its increasing economic presence in the region may yet lead it to change its mind), and does not think that they pose a threat to world peace and order. As one expert has observed, Chinese leaders envision security as inextricably linked with governance and development, 'positioning China as an alternative to the US's hard power presence in the region.'¹⁹ Consequently, China hopes that its growing influence in the region will gradually displace American influence. For the moment, however, Beijing appears content to reap the economic benefits of stability and let the US take the lead in providing for peace and security in the region, as long as its own economic interests are not harmed.²⁰ In the meantime,

Hierarchy of diplomatic partnerships

China's partnerships with Middle Eastern countries falling within the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative

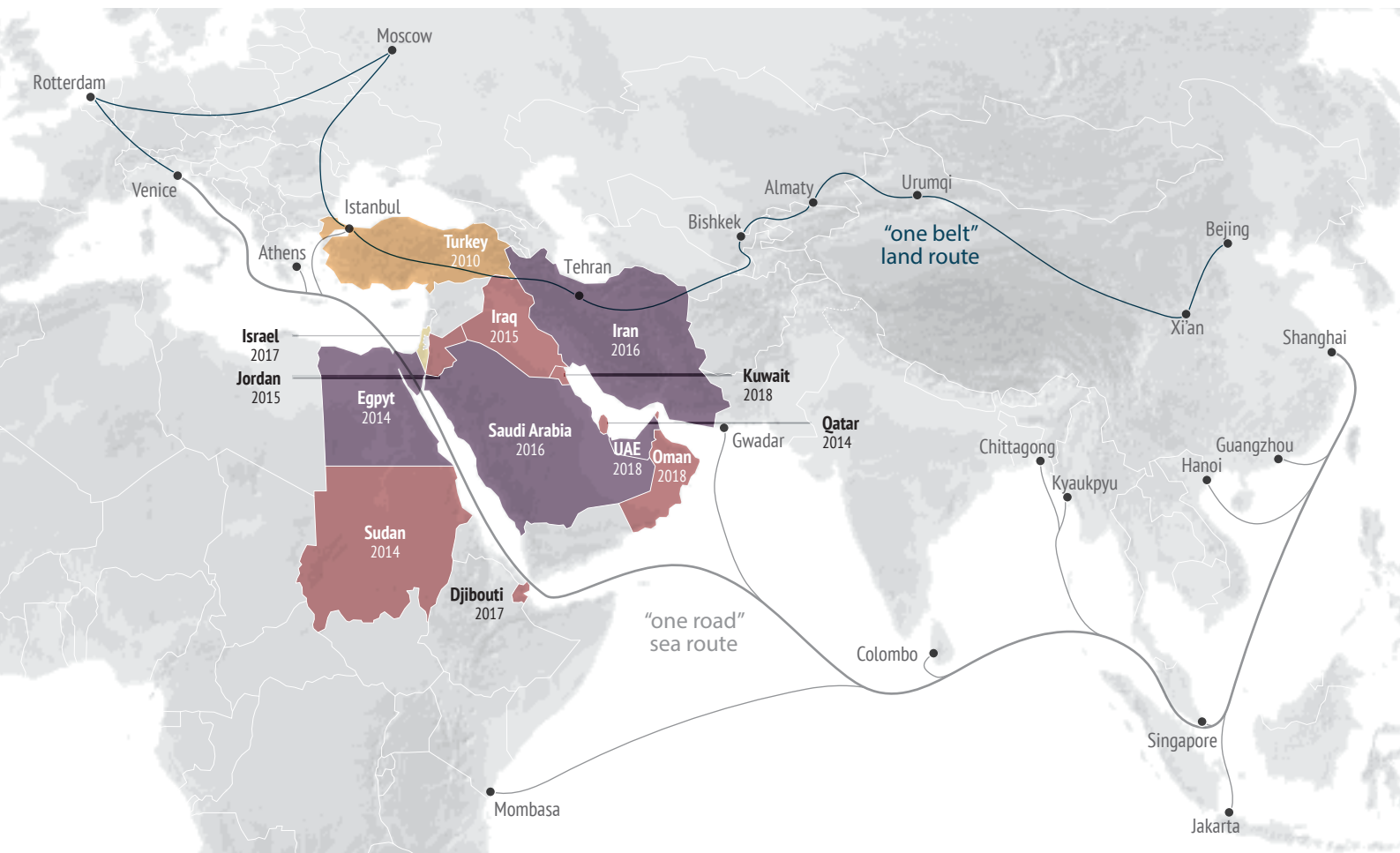
- **Comprehensive strategic partnership**

Defined by former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao as 'all-dimensional, wide-ranging and multi-layered cooperation' in various fields, transcending 'differences in ideology and social systems'. This represents the highest level of bilateral ties with China.
- **Strategic partnership**

When bilateral ties between China and a partner country are upgraded to the strategic level, the two nations co-ordinate more closely on regional and international affairs, including military ones.
- **Comprehensive co-operative partnership**

At this level, the two sides aim to maintain a robust momentum of high-level exchanges, enhance contacts at various levels and boost mutual understanding.
- **Comprehensive innovative partnership**

This basically designates the same level of ties as the comprehensive strategic partnership. But as Israel already has strategic ties to the United States, China and Israel refer to their comprehensive partnership as innovative rather than strategic.



Data: Natural Earth, 2020

China may use its permanent seat on the UNSC to hinder US and European postures and strategies in the greater Middle East region (e.g. blocking UN action on Sudan, vetoing resolutions on Syria, etc.).

The BRI, initially consisting of an overland route across Eurasia and a maritime route across the Indian Ocean region, is underpinned by a series of key infrastructure projects (e.g. the Central Asia-China gas pipeline and the Pap-Angren railway line along the overland route, the ports of Gwadar, Khalifa, Doraleh,

and the Suez Canal Economic Zone along the maritime route, among others) designed to link markets from the East China Sea to the Mediterranean, among other geoeconomic and geostrategic ambitions. This grand scheme should be analysed not only as an endeavour to counterbalance the US, but also as an initiative reflecting a common aspiration shared by China and many states in the region, whereby US influence in Asia is curbed by an Asian power. The fact that it is presented as a non-political project makes it all the more difficult for the US to directly challenge the BRI. Nevertheless,

the expanding scale and reach of the BRI, especially in the Middle East and with even US allies (the Gulf Arab states and Israel) eager to participate, has become a matter of increasing concern for Washington. Most indicative in this regard are the port projects: UAE's Khalifa Port, Oman's Duqm, Saudi Arabia's Jizan, and Egypt's Port Said and Ain Sokhna. But while the Chinese partnerships and the BRI projects themselves have developed seemingly unhindered, the hard line taken by the Trump administration towards Iran has highlighted the limits of both China's and the regional states' readiness to challenge the US. It is yet to be seen if the Middle East turns into an arena of struggle for a new world order between the US and China.

MIDDLE EASTERN PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA

China's rising presence in the Middle East comes at a time when US economic and political clout in the region is perceived to be on the wane. With the 'Pivot to Asia' announced by President Barack Obama and President Trump's selective engagement in the region, uncertainties are growing about US security commitments. Given that it has no historical baggage as a colonising power in the region and does not attach any political conditions to cooperation, China has appeared if not as a benign, then at least as a non-threatening actor.²¹

As the PRC's approach to building relations in the Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s was defined by its core political and ideological principles, so was its perception by the regional actors. Non-aligned and/or socialist states established relations with China on the basis of their ideological common understanding. However, as previously seen, China's quest for natural resources and economic opportunities in far-flung regions has led to a change in how China interacts with the Middle East.

Just as China does not conceptualise the Middle East as one region, the states in the region have not formulated a common policy towards China. China's Arab Policy Paper (2016), often hailed as articulating China's vision of its relations with the Middle East, is in fact directed at the Arab countries only, and even then without mentioning any of them specifically.²² It can only be guessed that Beijing has in mind the member states of the Arab League (AL), as was the case with the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum established in 2004 on the basis of an AL initiative.²³ In spite of this regularly operating body and some others,²⁴ joint Arab activity vis-à-vis China is rare, to the extent that it can

be stated that from the Arab side no common position has taken shape with regard to China. Interaction tends to take place at the level of decisions taken by individual Arab states, e.g. applying to become involved in the BRI, or declining to condemn China for its treatment of its Muslim minority in Xinjiang,²⁵ rather than as part of any coordinated all-Arab policy.

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the PRC share many political and ideological similarities, including their anti-imperialist stand, and their belief that US 'hegemonism' is simply the continuation of great power efforts to keep them in a subordinate position.²⁶ Yet Iran's approach to China is based on the pragmatic notion that Chinese support both in international fora, and in the framework of bilateral relations, provides a way out of isolation. In return, Iran can 'offer' its vital geostrategic position straddling two oil-rich regions, the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, which makes it not only attractive but indispensable in the BRI projects.

Tehran's 'turn to the East' policy (2005),²⁷ consequently, had its genesis in the rejection of Iran by the US and the Western powers, and the conviction that a strategic partnership with the Asian great powers, and in particular China, serves Iran's interests and can protect Iran at the international level. Iranian efforts at gaining membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation were supported by China,²⁸ while Beijing's stance on the Iranian nuclear programme as well as its call for the suspension of sanctions on Iran during the Covid-19 crisis are other examples of Chinese support.²⁹

Turkey's attitude to China is coloured, in part, by its self-perception as one of the leading powers in Asia, by virtue of its geographic location in West Asia counterbalancing Russia to the north, China (and Japan) to the east, and India to the south.³⁰ Under the leadership of President Erdoğan, Turkey has increasingly aligned itself with the Asian ambition of curbing US influence on the continent.³¹ At the same time Turkey's geo-

graphic position and its NATO membership link it firmly to the US and to the EU.³² Turkey's foreign policy doctrine of 'strategic depth' posits that its influence extends 'from the Adriatic Sea to the Chinese Great Wall'. It is in Asia, especially Central Asia, that Turkey has had to compromise with the other Asian great powers since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and most notably with China.³³ While Turkey is aware of its importance for China in the BRI, the

imbalance in China-Turkey trade, rivalry with China in Central Asia, China's treatment of its Uyghur Muslim minority,³⁴ Sino-Turkish 'competition' as providers of development aid, as well as Ankara's role in Syria, may cause friction.³⁵

It is not inconceivable that China's expansion in the region may in the future lead to the use of hard power in defence of its economic interests.

Israel's perception of China is somewhat ambiguous as China's support for the Palestinian cause and Israel's alliance with the US effectively excluded bilateral relations for decades. Deng Xiaoping's opening-up policy, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the recognition of Israel by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), however, opened the way to a more balanced Chinese policy towards Israel. For Israel, which has very limited trade relations in its own region,³⁶ the Chinese market is very attractive, while China has been keen to buy Israeli high-tech and military technologies, not only to the alarm of the United States, but also of parts of the Israeli establishment (fearing the impact on US-Israeli relations).³⁷ Israel's other attraction for China is its strategic location on the Eastern Mediterranean (i.e. along the BRI route), although this is also a source of concern to the US administration: the port of Haifa, where the Sixth Fleet of the US Navy anchors, is being developed and will be used by 'an Israeli company with Chinese shareholders'.³⁸

Middle Eastern public opinion *vis-à-vis* China can be gauged by the findings of some public opinion polls,³⁹ most of which are conducted from abroad, and by impressions garnered during field trips to the region. These, however, may reflect a wide variety of views among the regional states. It can nevertheless be inferred that China has been accepted among the Middle Eastern public both as a global power and as an economic actor increasingly engaged in the region. While its influence over the regional domestic economies as well as its investments are usually perceived positively by countries in the region, with the exception of Turkey, concerns about its military might have definitely increased in the last few years. Yet, growing engagement with China has become a priority for elites and publics alike – in spite of contentious issues such as China's treatment of its Uyghur minority, or the inflow of cheap low-quality Chinese products undercutting small local businesses, etc.⁴⁰

In spite of the relatively positive rating of China and its policies in the Middle East, very little data is available regarding attitudes to the presence of Chinese people in everyday life. There have been some indications that Chinese shopkeepers and migrants are resented,⁴¹ for example in Algeria, where some anti-Chinese protests have taken place. As overall there are still no sizeable Chinese communities in these countries, such incidents remain rare.

FROM HARD POWER TO SOFT POWER

Although the BRI has been touted by Beijing as an economic project it is clear that its combination of political, economic, geo-strategic, and strategic incentives is creating interdependencies, not just ensuring competitive advantage to Chinese companies⁴² but broadening China's soft power in the Middle East.⁴³ It is not inconceivable that China's expansion in the region may in the future lead to the use of hard power in defence of its economic interests; however, as yet Chinese military activities in or on the periphery of the Middle East are restricted to the prevention of terrorist threats (e.g. the eventual return of foreign/Uyghur fighters from Idlib) and to participation in anti-piracy missions around the Horn of Africa. The opening of the first Chinese military base in Djibouti, as well as the China-Russia-Iran joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman in December 2019, nevertheless, may signal that China is ramping up its military presence in and around the Middle East. Beijing's claim that China wishes to play a greater role in driving peace and stability in the region is a further indication.⁴⁴

Yet, economic interests may also be the basis of an expanding soft power: Chinese building and engineering programmes have been showcased in such mega-projects as the Tehran metro system, the Haramain railway between Mecca and Medina,⁴⁵ or the construction of Egypt's new administrative capital⁴⁶ in which Chinese companies also have a share. China's soft power has also been bolstered through the cultural exchange programmes and scholarships offered at Chinese universities and the network of the by now 23 Confucius Institutes in the region.⁴⁷ Yet English has remained the dominant *lingua franca*, also reflected in the popularity of English language TV channels and films, indicating that Chinese culture does not exert much appeal in the Middle East.⁴⁸

The current Covid-19 epidemic has negatively affected China's image in the Middle East, fuelling suspicion of China as the country from which the virus spread, and resentment against Chinese communities living in the region.⁴⁹ At the same time, the Health Silk Road (HSR), a project proposed by China in 2017,⁵⁰ is slowly evolving into a part of the BRI as the framework of global assistance China has started to provide and publicise.⁵¹ It cannot be assessed as yet if the impact of the HSR will be enough to counterbalance the negative perceptions elicited by the pandemic crisis.

CONCLUSION

China's 'march westwards' policy at a time when the other global powers have scaled down their presence or lost credibility in the Middle East, and the US has announced that it is shifting attention to Asia, offers Beijing a host of possibilities.

Yet, there are many question-marks with implications for both regional and external actors. So far, China's global strategy has concentrated on safeguarding China's sovereignty, maritime waters and interests. And although there have been signs of a growing Chinese readiness to step up its military presence in the region, as yet China is not overtly seeking to displace the US as the dominant power in the Middle East.

Although there is an increasing body of literature analysing the likelihood of a US-China confrontation, so far there has been little sign of a looming showdown in the Middle East. China has expanded its set of bilateral relations there and has established sub-regional frameworks of cooperation in the economic domain undisturbed. It has so far avoided both open confrontation with the US and the EU, and also avoiding taking sides in regional conflicts as much as possible in order not to antagonise any regional actors. How sustainable this posture will be in the future is an open question.

The credibility and acceptance of China's frameworks and initiatives in the region are still to be tested, especially if its projects within the BRI continue to be realised with its own capital, technology and manpower in a region where unemployment, especially among educated youth, is extremely high.

One of the biggest challenges facing China will be in the area of its soft power capability and efficiency: will it be able to bridge the gap between the monotheistic religion-based societies of the Middle East and the notion of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'? In societal and political terms, the 'Islamic social model' is far removed from the Chinese governance system. And will Beijing's 'coronavirus diplomacy' be enough to counter adverse perceptions and help divert attention from the fact that the Covid-19 global epidemic originated in China?

For Europe, however, the biggest question is what new reality has China's rising presence created in a region where the EU is still the biggest donor and has developed various cooperation frameworks. The EU will have to stand its ground against the backdrop of not only tensions between the US and China, but also between the US and a resurgent Russia and further potential geopolitical *rapprochement* between Russia and China in this context. An eventual new regional order, the territorial reach of which by definition overlaps with the geographical scope of the BRI, will have complex, if as yet unforeseen, implications for the EU's Global Strategy.

References

- 1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arab Policy Paper*, 2016, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml
- 2 Even the Chinese designations 'Greater Middle East' (consisting of the geographical units of West Asia and North Africa) and 'Lesser Middle East' are translations from Western/European terminology – the Middle East clearly being located to the west of China.
- 3 In a striking counterexample China has developed a cohesive approach towards Central and Eastern Europe in the form of the 17+1 initiative. Since here there are no conflicts among the partner states, it is easier and cheaper for China to engage with these countries as a group.
- 4 Yun Sun, "March West: China's Response to the U.S. Rebalancing," Brookings, January 31, 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2013/01/31/march-west-chinas-response-to-the-u-s-rebalancing/?fbclid=IwAR2CYSW3rfGDaeighINwI7nZCEqEo37xogA1zCVy1eox5wQVbhdwT4Z_97s
- 5 "Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership." Deng Xiaoping quoted in: Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China: A Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act Fiscal Year 2000*, Washington, 2008, <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/dod-2008.pdf>
- 6 See the speech by Xi Jinping delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf
- 7 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, 2015, http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm
- 8 Although the term 'core interests' is not new in the Chinese political narrative, especially under Xi their scope has been very much broadened. See Jinghao Zhou, "China's Core Interests and Dilemma in Foreign Policy Practice", *Pacific Focus*, vol. 34, no. 1 (April 2019), pp. 31–54.
- 9 Respect for sovereignty; non-intervention; non-interference in domestic affairs; equality and mutual benefit; peaceful co-existence.
- 10 Hany Besada and Justine Salam, "China's Energy Strategy in the MENA Region", *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2017, <https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/S2377740017500269>
- 11 In 2019, six out of China's top sources of crude oil imports were in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, as the top exporter, alone provided 16.8% of China's total imported crude oil. "Top 15 Crude Oil Suppliers to China", *World's Top Exports*, April 26, 2020, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/top-15-crude-oil-suppliers-to-china/>
- 12 "How is China's energy footprint changing?", *China Power*, <https://chinapower.csis.org/energy-footprint/>
- 13 As of March 2020, China has 'comprehensive strategic partnerships' with five MENA states (Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), and 'strategic partnerships' with another eight. Shengsong Yue, "Towards a Global Partnership Network: Implications, Evolution and Prospects of China's Partnership Diplomacy", *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2019), pp. 5–27, <https://doi.org/10.22439/cjas.v36i2.5647>
- 14 Minxin Pei, "How China and America See Each Other," *Foreign Affairs*, April 13, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/how-china-and-america-see-each-other>
- 15 Wang Jisi, "'Marching westwards': The Rebalancing of China's Geo-Strategy", Center for International and Strategic Studies, ISS Report no.73, October 7, 2012.
- 16 "In an interview with Renmin Ribao ... Bashar al-Assad said, 'China is now a superpower and is very important after the absence of the Soviet Union. China's role has expanded across the world and has become more important especially for small countries including Syria'", Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), June 21, 2004. Quoted in Jin Liangxiang, 'Energy First. China and the Middle East', *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2005, www.meforum.org/694/energy-first
- 17 As a participant at the conference "Enriching the Middle East's Economic Future" (9–11 March 2009, Doha), said: "We have no clash of civilizations among us."
- 18 China's low profile in Syria, Yemen and Libya, as well as its cautious policy regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, are good examples, in spite of the activities of China's MENA envoy, a position established in 2002. China is also the only global power which has not participated in the fight against the so-called Islamic State.
- 19 Jonathan Fulton, "China Is Becoming a Major Player in the Middle East," *BrinkNews*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.brinknews.com/china-is-becoming-a-major-player-in-the-middle-east/>
- 20 Borzou Daragahi, "China Goes Beyond Oil in Forging Ties To Persian Gulf", *New York Times*, January 13, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/13/business/worldbusiness/13oil.html>
- 21 Interviews with officials and academics conducted by the author in Egypt and Iran, and at international conferences in Europe and in the region between 2010–2020.

- 22 Shannon Tiezzi, "Revealed: China's Blueprint for Building Middle East Relations", *The Diplomat*, January 14, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/revealed-chinas-blueprint-for-building-middle-east-relations/>.
- 23 For details, see "The China Arab State Cooperation Forum" (factsheet), <http://www.bricspolicycenter.org/en/forum-de-cooperacao-china-paises-arabes/>
- 24 For more details see Katerina Sidlo et al., "The Role of China in the Middle East and North Africa: Beyond Economic Interests?", EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Study, 2020, www.euromesco.net
- 25 In August 2019 a group of Arab states supported China's crackdown on the Uyghurs, in contrast to criticism of China by European states. The fact that Qatar withdrew its support, claiming neutrality and offering mediation, shows that even a GCC joint policy is difficult to find. Haisam Hassanein, "Arab States Give China a Pass on Uyghur Crackdown", *Policywatch* 3169, The Washington Institute, August 26, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/arab-states-give-china-a-pass-on-uyghur-crackdown>
- 26 For further analysis see Erzsébet N. Rózsa, "Iran and China: a strategic partnership or a marriage of convenience?", in Michel Makinsky (ed.), *L'Iran et les grandes acteurs régionaux et globaux: Perceptions et postures stratégiques réciproques* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012), pp. 215–45.
- 27 Nasser Saghaei-Ameri and Afsane Ahadi, "Irān ve siyāsat-e negāh be-sharq" [Iran and the Look to the East Policy], Strategic Studies Research Institute Foreign Policy Studies Group, Tehran, 2008,
- 28 In July 2005 Iran was granted observer status in the organisation with Chinese support; however, in spite of all Tehran's efforts it has not yet been accepted as a full member.
- 29 Op. Cit., "Iran and China: a strategic partnership or a marriage of convenience?", pp. 215–45.
- 30 In this sense the Turkish perception is very similar to the Iranian concept of CTRI – China, India, Russia, Iran – as a regional grouping of Asia's leading powers.
- 31 Viktor Eszterhai and Fruzsina Simigh, "Kína és Törökország – stratégiai partnerség és geopolitikai realitások" [China and Turkey – strategic partnership and geopolitical realities] in Tamás Péter Baranyi and Kinga Szálkai (eds.), *Újhold. A török külpolitika útkeresése a 21. század elején* [New moon. Turkish foreign policy in the beginning of the 21st century], (Budapest: Antall József Tudásközpont, 2016), p. 240.
- 32 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratégiai mélység. Törökország nemzetközi helyzete* [Strategic depth: Turkey's international situation] (Budapest: Antall József Tudásközpont, 2016), pp. 434–36.
- 33 Ibid, pp. 173–205.
- 34 The some 10 million Uyghurs living mostly in the north-western Xinjiang province of China are of Turkic origin and mostly Muslim. China regards their independence movement as a security threat, and labels their activities as terrorism. The Chinese programme aiming at 'integrating' and 'training' them in detention centres has created huge international controversy.
- 35 Op. Cit., "Kína és Törökország – stratégiai partnerség és geopolitikai realitások", pp. 238–49.
- 36 Bernd W. Kubbig et al., "Exploring Economic Cooperation in the Middle East: A Catalyst for the Helsinki Conference?", *APOME Policy Brief* no. 26/27, November 2013, http://academicpeaceorchestra.com/?p=policybriefs#pb_26.
- 37 "Why are Chinese investments in Israeli hi-tech making Washington nervous?", *The Jerusalem Post*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/chinas-investments-in-israel-are-a-double-edged-sword-571409>
- 38 Altay Athi, "China, Israel, and the Geopolitics of Seaports", *The Diplomat*, July 16, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/china-israel-and-the-geopolitics-of-seaports/>
- 39 The conclusions here were drawn from the Arab Barometer V (2018), the PEW Research Center's study on *Attitudes towards China* (2019), and on the poll conducted by the Kadir Has University in Turkey (2019).
- 40 The Iranian government at one point had to introduce protective measures by banning 170 'low-quality' products, which was later followed by Iran and China signing a cooperation agreement to prevent the inflow of low-quality products from China to Iran. "Iran Blocks the Entry of Low Quality Products from China", *The China Times*, July 10, 2011, <http://www.thechinatimes.com/online/2011/07/327.html>
- 41 It is as yet not clear how local governments and publics will react when the details of the BRI projects become clear as so far it seems that China foresees most of the projects being done by Chinese companies and Chinese personnel. Anti-Chinese protests in Algeria are described in Jörg Friedrichs, "Explaining China's Popularity in the Middle East and Africa", *Third World Quarterly*, September 2019.
- 42 This is the case in other regions involved in the BRI, e.g. Central Europe. See Tamás Peragovics, "Protection without protectionism? Foreign investment screening in Europe and the V4 countries today: A comparative analysis", Institute of World Economics, Budapest, 2019.
- 43 Anu Sharma, "An Analysis of 'Belt and Road Initiative' and the Middle East", *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 2019, p. 36.
- 44 Quoted in Roie Yellinek, "Will China rebuild Syria?", BESA Center Perspectives Paper no. 1, 514, April 1, 2020, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/will-china-rebuild-syria/>
- 45 "Saudi Arabia opens high-speed railway linking holy cities", *BBC News*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45639285>
- 46 "China's BRI boosts Egypt's development via massive infrastructure projects: Xinhua", *Egypt Today*, April 9, 2019,
- 47 Op. Cit., "The Role of China in the Middle East and North Africa".
- 48 Jörg Friedrichs, "Explaining China's Popularity in the Middle East and Africa", *Third World Quarterly*, September 2019
- 49 Sara Ahmed, "In the Wake of Covid-19, Egypt's Asians Fall Victim to Racism", *Egyptian Streets*, April 15, 2020
- 50 Pepe Escobar, "China Rolls out the Health Silk Road", *Asia Times*, April 2, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/china-rolls-out-the-health-silk-road/>
- 51 N. Janardhan, "China's soft power makes hard gains", *Gulf Today*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.gulftoday.ae/opinion/2020/04/07/chinas-soft-power-makes-hard-gains>