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China's Evolving Role in the Middle East

Lieutenant-Commander H. Carlo Amunategui

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Exercise Solo Flight

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Introduction

Current discussions on the impact of China as a great power and its implementation of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) are typically focused on events in the South China Sea. Simultaneously, the impact of the BRI in the Middle East arguably receives less attention. However, China has made considerable steps in developing diplomatic relations with traditionally western allied Middle Eastern states and western adversaries to pursue political and economic influence in the Middle East region.

This essay aims to analyze China's strategic goals in the Middle East using a realist perspective. The paper will identify the primary objectives that Beijing wants to achieve in the Middle East, and it will also review the approaches and tools that China has used to achieve their aims. Finally, the paper will examine China's progress since 2000, evaluate the results obtained, and determine why and due to what factors China is managing to achieve its strategic goals in the Middle East. Therefore, this essay will attempt to demonstrate that China's goals were to increase its influence in the Middle East through enhanced trade, incorporate the Middle East into the BRI, and secure new trade relationships and a reliable supply of energy resources. Second, China carried out its policy through aggressive diplomatic efforts, investment, and military cooperation. Third, China's extensive engagement in the Middle East was a success, as evidenced by China gaining tremendous influence in the region, new trading partners, reliable access to land and sea-based infrastructure to facilitate trade, and access to a secure supply of energy to fuel its continued economic growth.

Why is the Middle East Relevant to China's Ascendance?

The relationship between China and Arab states goes back over two thousand years. The ancient Silk Road, which facilitated economic and cultural exchange between China and the

Middle East, is being revived in the modern world. Since the China Arab cooperation forum in Jan 2004, trade has grown from USD 36 billion to \$250 billion in 2014, making Arab states China's seventh-largest trading partner. In 2013, President Xi Jin Ping announced the revival of the Silk Road in the form of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI). This massive undertaking will require unprecedented investment in land-based and sea-based infrastructure (Figure 1). Furthermore, China has developed diplomatic relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to negotiate a free trade agreement and strengthened ties with Israel and Iran.¹



Figure 1. The modern silk road.²

China's increasing influence in the Middle East is relevant to great power competition because the Middle East will remain strategically important for the foreseeable. First, China will likely remain the world's largest consumer of energy resources. It is the second-largest consumer of oil behind the US, the largest importer of natural gas, making up about 1/3 of the global demand, and the largest consumer of energy overall. Unlike the US, China has increasingly

¹ Mohamed Hamchi. "The political economy of China–Arab relations: challenges and opportunities." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 10.4 (2017): 577-579.

² *Ibid*, 582.

relied on oil imports to meet its energy needs. Half of the oil China imports are from the Middle East, with 16% from Saudi Arabia alone.³ In light of China's dependence on coal and the consequent impact on the air quality in China, the demand for cleaner energy sources, including renewable energy, nuclear power, and natural gas, will only continue to grow, and so will its reliance on the Middle East.⁴ Second, a significant portion of global trade will pass through the Middle East because of its geographic position between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. Third, the Middle East will remain culturally significant because it is the centre of Islam, the world's second-largest religion.

Although The US has been the dominant western power in the region since the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia, followed by its subsequent involvement in creating ARAMCO, the US is slowly separating itself from the Middle East. America's disengagement from the region is evident for several reasons. First, the US has withdrawn significant military forces from the Middle East after two prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Second, the US has significantly increased domestic energy production with an influx of domestically shale gas, making them less dependent on energy imports. Third, US diplomatic relations with the Middle Eastern States have become more distant, possibly because of a policy of rebalancing away from the Middle East towards the Asia Pacific region. These developments have allowed China to extend its influence into the Middle East.^{5 6}

³ Gisela Grieger. "China's policy on the Middle East." (2016). 1.

⁴ Brown, David. "Why China's Climate Policy Matters to Us all." *BBC News*, Oct 29, 2021.

⁵ Gisela Grieger. "China's policy on the Middle East." (2016). 1.

⁶ Martina Ponížilová. "Foreign Policy Activities of China in the Middle East: Establishing Energy Security or Being a Responsible Emerging Power?." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21.6 (2019): 646.

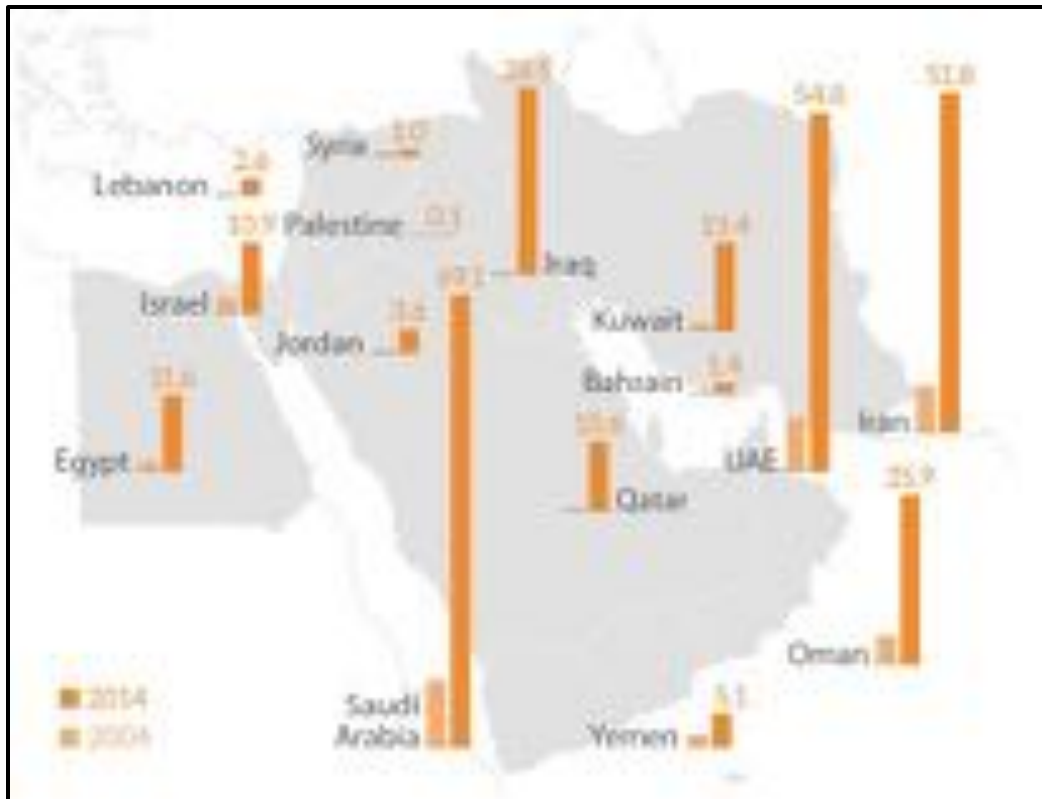


Figure 2: Trade growth in the Middle East from 2004 to 2014, USD billion.⁷

The Chinese Middle East Strategy

This section will discuss the goals that Beijing aims to achieve in the Middle East. Four broad goals can define China's Middle East strategy. First, China intends to further its economic interests by securing energy sources, opening a new market for Chinese products, and creating investment opportunities for Chinese-owned companies.⁸ Notably, China has used diplomacy instead of military means to secure alliances. In 2016 the Chinese government released the Arab policy paper. The document emphasized the importance of increased trade and cooperation and the inclusion of the Middle East into the BRI.⁹ For example, China has tremendous surpluses in construction materials such as steel and excess labour for construction. Consequently, China

⁷ Gisela Grieger. "China's policy on the Middle East." (2016). 1.

⁸ *Ibid*, 646.

⁹ Henrik Stålhane Hiim, and Stig Stenslie. "China's Realism in the Middle East." *Survival* 61.6 (2019): 159-160

needs reliable Middle Eastern trading partners to form mutually beneficial relationships. In particular, China needs its Middle Eastern partners to buy surplus Chinese resources and production capacity, while China buys energy resources from Middle Eastern partners.

Second, China wants to strengthen its relationship with regional powers by cultivating good diplomatic relations with the major players in the Middle East region, including Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.¹⁰ Notably, China is not binding itself with rigid alliances like the US. Instead, China values the flexibility of maintaining partnerships with any country they wish, including Arab and non-Arab states and Muslim and non-Muslim states. For example, China maintains relationships with opposing states, Iran and Saudi Arabia, as evidenced by Xi Jinping's official visits to both countries. During the Qatar crisis in 2017, China maintained a neutral stance between the opposing parties.¹¹ In addition, China supports Palestine's restoration, yet it maintains formal relations with Israel. While China voted with Russia to support the Assad regime in Syria, China has carefully avoided further involvement other than mediating the situation.¹²

Third, China intends to improve security in the region, protect Chinese citizens in the Middle East, and prevent violent extremist organizations from operating in China.¹³ For example, the need to protect Chinese citizens living in Libya and Yemen due to civil unrest compelled China to increase its level of military activity in the region. China's response to security threats has included naval operations in the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti, and exercises by the Chinese Air Force

¹⁰ Martina Ponížilová. "Foreign Policy Activities of China in the Middle East: Establishing Energy Security or Being a Responsible Emerging Power?." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21.6 (2019): 646.

¹¹ Bingbing Wu. "China and New Middle East." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23.3 (2021): 453.

¹² Henrik Stålhane Hiim, and Stig Stenslie. "China's Realism in the Middle East." *Survival* 61.6 (2019): 158.

¹³ Martina Ponížilová. "Foreign Policy Activities of China in the Middle East: Establishing Energy Security or Being a Responsible Emerging Power?." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21.6 (2019): 646.

in Turkey and Iran. Furthermore, China has established arms sales with Middle Eastern states, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, and Iraq.¹⁴

Fourth, engaging in the Middle East validates China's desire for recognition as a global power.¹⁵ At the same time, China is achieving this without directly challenging the authority of the US in the region. For example, China maintained diplomatic ties with Iran and supported US sanctions on Iran in the 2000s.¹⁶

In 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping conducted official visits to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in concert with the publication of China's Arab Policy Paper. The paper articulated China's strategic goals to deepen China-Arab strategic cooperative relations and strengthen China-Arab cooperation in an all-around manner.¹⁷ Furthermore, the document states China's intent to enhance its relationship with Middle Eastern states. It lays out a comprehensive vision for continued engagement, which encompasses a broad series of initiatives to promote political cooperation, investment and trade cooperation, social development, culture and people-to-people exchange, and cooperation in the field of peace and security.¹⁸

The paper acknowledges current trends in international relations towards further globalization, and information sharing, in a multi-polar world, with continuous changes in the international order. It emphasizes the commonalities between China and the Middle East as developing regions with large populations and a shared vision to strengthen their positions in the global order and their mutual need for collaboration to promote regional peace, ensure state sovereignty, and ensure economic stability. It reiterates the five principles of peaceful

¹⁴ Bingbing Wu, "China and New Middle East," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23.3 (2021): 454-455.

¹⁵ Martina Ponížilová, "Foreign Policy Activities of China in the Middle East: Establishing Energy Security or Being a Responsible Emerging Power?," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21.6 (2019): 646.

¹⁶ Henrik Stålhane Hiim, and Stig Stenslie, "China's Realism in the Middle East," *Survival* 61.6 (2019): 158.

¹⁷ Scott N. Romaniuk, and Tobias J. Burgers, "China's 'Arab Pivot' Signals the End of Non-Intervention," *The Diplomat* (2016).

¹⁸ The State Council The People's Republic of China. "China's Arab Policy Paper", Jan 31 2016. 1-10.

coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, China declared its backing for establishing a sovereign Palestinian state, establishing a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, and expressed its support for the fight against extremist organizations.¹⁹

On matters of political cooperation, China stated its intent to conduct exchanges between governments, including inter-governmental consultation and collaboration, exchanges between different levels of government, and cooperation in international affairs. Notably, China stated its commitment to the current international rules based on the principles of the UN charter to promote lasting peace.²⁰ On issues concerning investment and trade, China intends to promote the BRI as a mutually beneficial endeavour. It will focus on the supply of energy resources, including further investment in every level of oil production, the construction of new infrastructure, and the development of nuclear energy, renewable energy, and space-based technology. Additionally, China intends to help Arab countries enhance their production capacity, facilitate investment by providing loans, and promote free trade between China and Arab states.²¹

China has also pledged to further social development by sharing experiences in modern medicine and disease control to improve health care in the region. Additionally, China has promoted educational cooperation through academic exchanges, vocational exchanges, and the promotion the Chinese language in Arab states. Furthermore, China will cooperate on science and technology by setting up a network to enable the transfer of information and creating new

¹⁹ The State Council The People's Republic of China. "China's Arab Policy Paper", Jan 31 2016. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 5-6.

²¹ *Ibid*, 6.

research centers in Arab states. This includes cooperation in the agricultural sector to improve food security and cooperation in environmental protection.²²

From a cultural perspective, China intends to share expertise in media and the exchange of art and culture. In particular, China will promote joint efforts in broadcasting, television, and film. In addition, there will be enhanced cooperation in tourism resources and religious exchanges to reduce the spread of extremism. To facilitate peace and security, China calls for enhanced regional security and further efforts in military cooperation. This includes personnel exchanges between militaries, shared technology and expertise for military applications, and the establishment of regularly scheduled joint military exercises.²³

Notably, China's growing involvement in the Middle East outlined in the China-Arab policy is incompatible with its policy of non-intervention. The region's complex geopolitics will undoubtedly challenge China's ability to maintain close relationships with all of its regional partners. While China's Arab policy paper has opened up the potential for greater political and economic engagement, there is also more significant potential for military engagement, with increasing requirements for military presence and the possibility of armed conflict.²⁴

The Chinese Approach

To achieve its strategic aims, China has used a combination of diplomatic and economic overtures. China's tools and approaches have included the establishment of the China-Arab cooperation forum, creating the China-Arab policy, using Chinese banks to finance projects, and the inclusion of the Middle East into the BRI. China's regional engagement has resulted in tremendous economic opportunities for Middle Eastern states and China alike. In addition, China

²² *Ibid*, 7-8.

²³ *Ibid*, 8-9.

²⁴ Scott N. Romaniuk, and Tobias J. Burgers. "China's 'Arab Pivot' Signals the End of Non-Intervention." *The Diplomat* (2016).

has secured access to the Middle East and secured an abundant supply of Middle Eastern oil and gas to fuel China's economic growth. By 2016, increased trade had made China the second-largest trading partner in the Middle Eastern region. The combined Arab states became the seventh-largest trading partner to China and the primary oil supplier.²⁵

To fund the BRI, China has developed the means to finance investment in the Middle East through the Asian Development Banks, the Silk and Road Fund, the BRICS Group Bank, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The Silk and Road Fund is designed to fund projects in the vicinity of the BRI, while the BRICS bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank offer loans to developing countries, including Arab states. The purpose of these loans is to improve infrastructure, promote investment, and improve the standard of living in the region.²⁶

From a diplomatic perspective, creating the China-Arab Cooperation forum in 2004 has facilitated continuous engagement in the region. Since its inception, the forum has evolved into a conduit for multi-lateral cooperation. Fields of cooperation now include space-based technology and renewable energy, which indicates that all parties are looking for opportunities beyond crude oil-based resources.²⁷ In 2010, a 'comprehensive Sino-Arab cooperation and common development of the strategic partnership' further deepened China-Arab relations. During Xi Jinping's speech at the Arab League headquarters in 2010, he stated that "Instead of looking for proxy, in the Middle East, we promote peace talks, instead of seeking any sphere of influence,

²⁵ Mohamed Hamchi. "The political economy of China–Arab relations: challenges and opportunities." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 10.4 (2017). 585-586.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 585-586

²⁷ *Ibid*, 586.

we call on all parties to join the circle of friends for the BRI.”²⁸ The president’s statement shows a clear preference for diplomatic solutions in the region.

As of 2022, gulf-state officials have continued to foster cooperation with China on energy infrastructure development. In particular, China is strengthening ties with traditional American allies, specifically Saudi Arabia and Israel, and America’s adversaries such as Iran and Syria. In contrast, the US has gradually reduced its involvement in the Middle East.²⁹ While the US remains the most dominant foreign influence in the region, China is steadily continuing to buy energy from and invest in infrastructure projects in the Middle East. China’s pursuit of regional hegemony, coupled with America’s apparent withdrawal, has signalled a significant change in the region’s geopolitics. For example, state-backed companies from China are investing in the port of Chabahar in Iran, a container terminal in Abu Dhabi in the UAE, and ports in Israel.³⁰ These investments are evidence of the critical importance of the Middle East in linking supply chains from Europe to the Indian Ocean.

Currently, China is currently the world’s largest consumer of energy resources. Its steadily-growing requirement for energy to enable rapid economic growth, coupled with the abundance of hydrocarbon resources in the Middle East, makes the partnership between China and Middle Eastern states mutually beneficial for all sides. In particular, three Chinese state-owned companies, namely the China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (SINOPEC), the China National Petroleum Corporation, and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation, have

²⁸ Bingbing Wu. "China and New Middle East." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23.3 (2021): 450.

²⁹ Ben Hubbard, and Amy Qin. "As the U.S. Pulls Back from the Mideast, China Leans in." *New York Times*, Feb 01, 2022, Late Edition (East Coast).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

significantly influenced China's foreign policy in the Middle East to ensure China receives a continuous energy supply.³¹

At the same time, Middle Eastern states invest in Chinese companies outside of the fossil fuel-based energy sector, particularly in construction and renewable energy, and benefit from an influx of Chinese labour, further increasing the economic benefits of Chinese engagement in the region. In addition, China is the largest trading partner for nine Middle Eastern Countries, specifically Algeria, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE.³²

Maintaining diplomatic relations and fostering economic ties with Iran is strategically advantageous for China. First, all Middle Eastern oil producers other than Iran have close ties with the US. Therefore, should diplomatic relations between the US and China deteriorate, Iran would likely continue to supply China with oil in the event of an American-led embargo. Second, ongoing tensions with Iran divide America's attention away from China militarily. For example, if the US Navy is required to deploy a carrier strike group to the Persian Gulf, it will have less capacity to deploy to the South China Sea.

Furthermore, Iran's close diplomatic ties with China generate competition with Saudi Arabia, creating more profitable economic opportunities for China. Finally, Iran's strategically important location, large population, and economy present China with a tremendous investment opportunity with little competition. The result is that China and Iran have a markedly one-sided relationship. In particular, trade with China makes up 30% of Iran's total trade, and in comparison, trade with Iran only makes up 1% of China's imports and exports.³³ Therefore,

³¹ Martina Ponížilová. "Foreign Policy Activities of China in the Middle East: Establishing Energy Security or Being a Responsible Emerging Power?." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21.6 (2019): 646-647

³² *Ibid*, 647

³³ *Ibid*, 133

China has developed into an indispensable trading partner for Iran, further strengthening China's position in the region.

Saudi Arabia remains China's largest trading partner and the wealthiest nation in the Middle East. Conversely, China is Saudi Arabia's most important trading partner. Trade between both countries is mutually beneficial compared to China's trade relationship with Iran. For example, China has heavily invested in infrastructure projects in Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Saudi-based companies have invested in oil refineries in China designed to refine oil from Saudi Arabia. In particular, the China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (SINOPEC) and Saudi Arabian oil company ARAMCO jointly built the Yanbu Aramco SINOPEC Refining Company (YASREF). It is estimated that the refinery will produce 400,000 barrels a day, which solidifies Saudi Arabia's place as the largest oil supplier to China, further strengthening the partnership between both nations.³⁴

Additionally, diplomatic relations between both nations appear to be thriving. For example, Xi Jinping conducted an official visit to Saudi Arabia in 2016 in line with the publication of the China-Arab policy 2016. Saudi's King Salman visited in 2017, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited China in 2019 to finalize trade agreements worth USD 28 billion.³⁵ The development of a seemingly symbiotic trade relationship between Saudi Arabia and China indicates that Saudi Arabia is protecting itself against a potential decline in trade from western states. In addition, China's policy of non-interference is more suitable for Saudi Arabia, given its poor human rights record.

³⁴ Dow Jones Institutional News. "Aramco, Sinopec JV Refinery to Start Operations by End 2014 - Exec." *Dow Jones Institutional News*, Jun 27, 2013.

³⁵ Jon B. Alterman. "Chinese and Russian influence in the Middle East." *Middle East Policy* 26.2 (2019).133

In 2019, SINOPEC completed the construction of the Al-Zour refinery in Kuwait, which is reputed to be the largest refinery in the world, costing USD 1.39 billion. Notably, it can refine oil that adheres to Euro 5 emission standards, which reduces overall emissions and indicates China's desire to seek cleaner energy sources. Additionally, China emphasized using locally produced materials to benefit Kuwait's manufacturing industry during the construction phase.³⁶

In Israel, Chinese investment has sharply increased by approximately ten times from 2016 to 2017. Specifically, Chinese companies have invested USD 16 billion into rail and port infrastructure projects, thereby adding Israel to the BRI. Investments include ports in Haifa and Ashdod, coupled with agreements authorizing China to access these ports for 25 years. Notably, Israel's National Security Council has recognized the risks to Israeli national security as it opens Chinese investment. Specifically, China's access to Israel's ports enables China to track US naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea more effectively.³⁷

China has made significant progress in engaging with the UAE, and the port of Dubai is a vital hub for global commerce and, therefore, a critical link in the BRI. To solidify diplomatic relations with Dubai, Xi Jinping visited in 2018. He announced during his official visit that both nations evolved their "strategic partnership," which started in 2012, into a "comprehensive strategic partnership" which set the goal to double trade by 2022 and increase cooperation in technology, security, renewable and oil-based energy. In addition, there were over 200,000 Chinese residents in Dubai as of 2019. Notably, Chinese citizens are now authorized to enter the UAE without a visa, allowing greater freedom of movement for Chinese workers coming into the UAE, indicating a strengthened partnership between both nations.³⁸

³⁶ PR Newswire Europe. "Sinopec Completes Main Unit of the Middle East's Largest Refinery." *PR Newswire Europe Including UK Disclose*, Dec 16, 2019.

³⁷ Jon B. Alterman. "Chinese and Russian influence in the Middle East." *Middle East Policy* 26.2 (2019): 134.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 133

In Egypt, China has developed its interests to ensure continued access through the Suez Canal. Chinese companies built a port and industrial zone in Ain Sukhna and an administrative hub outside Cairo. In 2018, the Egyptian government agreed to USD 18 billion in trade deals with China. In 2019, Dr. Jon Alterman from the Center for Strategic and International Studies assessed that Egypt is attracting Chinese investment in case western investors decide to leave, which further indicates that China's partners are preparing for changes in the international order with China at the centre.³⁹

In addition to gaining access to energy imports, China also has a vested interest in securing export trade routes. Of note, a large portion of Chinese exports passes through Middle Eastern ports and waterways, specifically the Suez Canal, the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz, all of which are dominated by the US Navy. For example, China has invested heavily in Duqm, a port city and special economic zone in Oman. Duqm is essentially a new city built near the Strait of Hormuz, enabling Chinese shipping companies to operate in the region without entering the Arabia Gulf. These considerable infrastructure investments show China's desire to act outside the American sphere of influence in the Middle East.⁴⁰

Similarly, China has taken over the operation of the Gwadar Port in Pakistan. The port has been leased by China for 43 years, giving China access to the Indian Ocean and the Arabia Sea, and the Strait of Hormuz. Most of all, access to Gwadar allows China to significantly reduce the distance required to transport oil by using pipelines from Pakistan to Western China.⁴¹ In Djibouti, China established a military base in 2017 ostensibly to guard shipping lanes and protect its seaborne interests against piracy in the region. Additionally, access to Djibouti gives China

³⁹ *Ibid*, 134

⁴⁰ Oman Tribune. "China Duqm Venture 'most Ambitious Project in Mena'." *Oman Tribune*, Sep 10, 2017.

⁴¹ Chinascope. "China Took Over Pakistan's Gwadar Port." *Chinascope* no. 78 (Nov, 2015): 37.

control of the Gulf of Aden, the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb and the Red Sea, all of which are critical to global commerce.⁴²

What progress has China Made?

China has made tremendous progress in the Middle East. This can be mainly attributed to the gradual departure of the US from the region, while Middle Eastern are seeking new opportunities with another global power. The result is that China's engagement in the Middle East has yielded beneficial results from multiple perspectives. Economically, China has successfully increased trade and secured a steady supply of energy resources. By 2014, ten years after establishing the China-Arab cooperation forum, trade between China and the Arab region dramatically increased from USD 25.5 billion to USD 238.8 billion, while China increased its Middle Eastern Oil imports from 40.5 to 1333 million tons. Construction projects carried out by Chinese construction companies increased nearly tenfold from USD 2.6 billion to USD 29.6 billion.^{43 44}

From the perspective of China as a global power, China has built considerable influence by providing aid and loans for infrastructure investments related to the BRI. Several Middle Eastern states are vulnerable to pressure from China due to unmanageable levels of debt. For example, Sri Lanka has ceded access to Hambantota, its second-largest port, to China. China has also become Egypt's most important trading partner. China's influence was so strong that Egypt arrested and deported Uighur students back to China.⁴⁵ However, from a military perspective, there is pressure for China to assume a peacemaker role in the region. Notably, China has

⁴² MENA Report. "China, Djibouti: Overseas Military Base of China at Djibouti." *MENA Report* (Jan 03, 2018).

⁴³ Mohamed Hamchi. "The political economy of China-Arab relations: challenges and opportunities." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 10.4 (2017). 587.

⁴⁴ Hiim, Henrik Stålhane, and Stig Stenslie. "China's Realism in the Middle East." *Survival* 61.6 (2019): 156.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 160.

avoided the direct use of force consistent with its practice of non-interference but instead relies on political and economic engagement. The results of this approach have been varied. In particular, there is a growing presence of Uighur extremists from the Xinjiang region who have joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq, threatening domestic security in China.⁴⁶

From the lens of human security, there is a growing risk to the safety of Chinese citizens working in the Middle East. Specifically, there are approximately 600,000 Chinese workers in the Middle East to carry out China's projects. However, the task of protecting those citizens is an increasingly complex problem. For example, China evacuated about 30,000 workers from Libya during the Libyan civil war in 2011. Although China successfully carried out an evacuation operation in Libya, human security risks are ever-present in an unstable Middle East. While the sheer volume of Chinese workers in the Middle East indicates a measure of China's successful influence in the region, China will likely find it challenging to maintain its stance of non-intervention as its economic interest grow in the area.⁴⁷

In addition to China's economic interests, improved diplomatic ties have also benefitted China from a political perspective. China's policy of non-interference appears to be reciprocated by its Middle Eastern allies. For example, Middle Eastern states have not commented on China's internal struggle in Hong Kong nor questioned Taiwan's sovereignty. Most significant of all, there has been no opposition to China's campaign against its Uighur minority. Of note, there have been reports of Uighurs deported back to China from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These developments are significant given Saudi Arabia's leadership role in the Muslim world, indicating that China's investment in the Middle East has made them an indispensable partner.

⁴⁶ Gisela Grieger. "China's policy on the Middle East." (2016). 2.

⁴⁷ Jon B. Alterman. "Chinese and Russian influence in the Middle East." *Middle East Policy* 26.2 (2019): 135.

On the other hand, China's attempt to maintain selective engagement in the Middle East is fraught with difficulty. The Middle East region remains fiercely contested, and China's approach to maintaining friendships with all without fielding a significant military presence appears to be untenable. For example, Libya's National Transition Council rebuked China's request to protect Chinese projects in Libya, likely due to China's lack of military involvement. Additionally, the lack of a military presence, coupled with the lack of engagement with non-state actors in the Middle East, means that China's investments are vulnerable to attack in the event of civil unrest.⁴⁸ Although China's policy of non-intervention has been largely successful, evidence indicates that recent events will compel China to take sides and employ its military to protect its citizens and infrastructure.

Of note, China built its first foreign naval military base in Djibouti in 2017. Djibouti is a strategically significant partner in the Horn of Africa, so this move offers a clear signal of China's evolving role beyond that of a trading partner.⁴⁹ In addition, China appointed an experienced diplomat as its first special envoy to Syria to mediate the peace process, exhibiting China's evolving role in the region.⁵⁰ These steps, among others, indicate a potential end to China's policy of non-intervention and the growing realization that prioritizing relations with one state may damage ties with another.

On the whole, China's engagement in the Middle East has been largely successful. The country has made significant leaps from a diplomatic, economic, and military perspective. It has secured a consistent and abundant energy supply, connected the Middle East to the BRI,

⁴⁸ Wang Jin. "Selective Engagement: China's Middle East Policy after the Arab Spring." Strategic assessment 19.2 (2016): 114-115.

⁴⁹ Scott N. Romaniuk, and Tobias J. Burgers. "China's 'Arab Pivot' Signals the End of Non-Intervention." The Diplomat (2016).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

established trading relationships for exporting goods and human capital for infrastructure projects, and set the means to protect Chinese citizens and infrastructure.

Conclusion

China's vision for the BRI is to connect countries worldwide by land and sea, with China at its centre. Due to its strategically important location, The Middle East plays a critical role in connecting the BRI, facilitating global trade, and supplying China with most of its energy requirements. This essay aims to analyze China's strategic goals in the Middle East by first identifying the aims that Beijing wants to achieve, then reviewing the approaches that China implemented to achieve these aims, then evaluating the results of China's Middle East engagements from 2010 to the present. Based on the analysis provided, it is evident that China's goals were to increase its influence in the Middle East by enhancing trade, incorporating the Middle East into the BRI, and securing a reliable supply of energy resources. China carried out its policy through aggressive diplomatic efforts, investment, and military cooperation. China's extensive efforts in the Middle East enabled it to gain tremendous influence in the region, new trading relationships, reliable access to land and sea-based infrastructure to facilitate trade, and access to a secure supply of energy to fuel China's continued economic growth.

China's commitment to the Middle East is a critical step toward strengthening its position as a global power rivalling the US. Its increasing requirement for energy imports to fuel its continuous growth means that it will continue to rely on Middle Eastern energy resources for the foreseeable future. In addition, the geographic location of the Middle East as a crossroads for land and ocean-based commerce makes the Middle East a critical link in China's BRI. The establishment of the China-Arab cooperation forum in 2004, the release of the China-Arab policy paper in 2016, and China's evolving foreign policy under Xi Jinping's leadership indicate that

the progress of China and the Middle East will be inextricably linked. China's engagement has increased its influence in the region, but so has the level of risk. China's considerable financial investments and its need for a steady energy supply mean that China has a deeply vested interest in sustained peace and security in the Middle East. Therefore, despite China's successes, it is apparent that China must continue to increase its level of military involvement in the region. Finally, China must reconsider its longstanding policy of non-interference to become the dominant power in the Middle East and ensure the safety of Chinese people and assets in the Middle East.

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