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Abstract

*The Middle East, being a hub of energy and oil resources, is of great importance to China in the highly interconnected globalized world. China's recent and enhanced presence in the Middle East refers to China's BRI aimed at regional economic integration in Middle Eastern countries. BRI poses multiple prospects and critical geo-strategic challenges for China in the Middle East. The paper provides an important analysis of how China and the Middle East region are changing their course under the realm of BRI. Qualitative analysis will be used in this study to help improve the regional partnership and economic growth made possible by the BRI, as well as its hindrances. The study also aims to provide an inclusive understanding of China's strategic goals and interests in the Middle East in the framework of the BRI.*

**Keywords:** China, BRI, Middle East, Regional Economic Connectivity, Challenges

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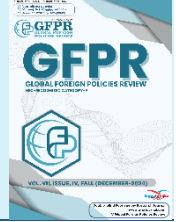
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### Title

## China's Presence in the Middle East and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

### Abstract

*The Middle East, being a hub of energy and oil resources, is of great importance to China in the highly interconnected globalized world. China's recent and enhanced presence in the Middle East refers to China's BRI aimed at regional economic integration in Middle Eastern countries. BRI poses multiple prospects and critical geo-strategic challenges for China in the Middle East. The paper provides an important analysis of how China and the Middle East region are changing their course under the realm of BRI. Qualitative analysis will be used in this study to help improve the regional partnership and economic growth made possible by the BRI, as well as its hindrances. The study also aims to provide an inclusive understanding of China's strategic goals and interests in the Middle East in the framework of the BRI.*

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**Keywords:** [China](#), [BRI](#), [Middle East](#), [Regional Economic Connectivity](#), [Challenges](#)

### Introduction

The participation of China in the region economically and socially echoes the interests and objectives that may connect the region through BRI. China establishes good relations with states such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE, as an important feature of its foreign policy and its bilateral contacts with specific countries in the Middle East (Chaziza, 2019). This type of connection needs broad collaboration in commerce and investment, discussions on politics and security, and cross-cultural relations. Furthermore, China takes an active part in regionally important multilateral institutions like the

Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Arab League, assuming a more prominent position in regional diplomacy and conflict resolution initiatives. Moreover, China's involvement surpasses conventional diplomacy, encompassing security collaboration with Middle Eastern nations in domains such as counterterrorism and pirate activities (Yang, 2018).

China, although it is positioned contrary to the Middle East, also has strong continued historical links with the region. China has also developed strong commercial and developmental partnerships. Around 60% of China's energy utilization comes from the Middle East. China's prominence in the region has notably more



than doubled compared to just a few years earlier. The BRI is China's global infrastructure-building effort to interlink Asia, Europe, and Africa using an energy-transport-communication project to fuel economic interdependence and regional development. China has moved investment relationships, FTAs, cultural and exchange programs, and other steps to strengthen political and economic dealings with Middle Eastern nations.

China's growing potential may significantly impact the future of the Middle East. Its investments and trade ties could contribute to economic growth and development in resource-rich countries, providing much-needed infrastructure and stimulating job creation (Martuscelli, 2019). Additionally, China's engagement could potentially promote regional stability, as its neutrality in many regional conflicts allows it to play a mediating role and encourage dialogue between warring parties (Sun & Zoubir, 2017). However, concerns exist regarding China's growing influence, particularly its potential leverage over resource-dependent states through "debt trap diplomacy." (Ehteshami & Horesh, 2017) Furthermore, some analysts express anxiety about China's potential to displace the US as the dominant power in the region, leading to a shift in power dynamics and potentially impacting existing security alliances (Tammen & Kugler, 2006).

This paper has been divided into four sections as follows: (1) the Importance of the Middle East for China (2) China's Presence in the Middle East and Geopolitical Calculus (3) BRI and the Middle East (4) Prospects and Strategic Concerns/Challenges and lastly conclusion.

### Importance of the Middle East for China

The Middle East holds enormous strategic importance for China, acting as a vital nexus for its economic, geopolitical, and security interests (Scobell & Nader, 2016). This region pulses with significance, serving as a critical source of oil and gas, fuelling China's economic engine and satisfying its insatiable energy demands (English, Sheehan, & Wilson, 2010). Oil is essential to China's industrial and economic growth, with the Middle East accounting for about half of its imports (Ghalayini, 2011).

Beyond resources, the Middle East's burgeoning markets present a bonanza for Chinese trade and investment (Anthony, 2013). Volumes of trade bilaterally rise greatly, creating profitable alliances, while economic interdependence increases. Investments in infrastructure projects driven by the BRI reinforce China's regional economic connections (Ren, 2019).

However, the Middle East is not only a profitable marketplace; it also forms one crucial launchpad for China's global ambitions (Gordon & Nouwens, 2022).

This strategic chessboard serves China as a challenge to the established Western order and as a channel to project its vision for international relations (Jisi, 2013). This geopolitical power play move enables China to reshape the global dynamics of power and assert its presence on the world stage.

However, the Middle East is not without problems. The region faces a perpetual threat of instability and extremism, which has cast a dark shadow over its potential (Lennon, 2007). To secure its energy needs, guard its lifeline trade routes, and ensure the safety of its investments, China actively works with regional actors in counterterrorism (Hoh, 2019). Because piracy and instability are the reality of the region's lifeline waterways and it acts as a conduit for international trade to China, this cooperation also covers maritime security projects (Storey, 2008).

China's maneuverability through this complex geography will define its future in the Middle East. It will need to tread carefully with a balancing act between political and economic interests, be careful in maintaining regional stability while warding off threats, and negotiate through the dynamic changing landscape of competition against the US (Tramballi & Talbot, 2020). The delicate dance of this relationship will determine China's destiny, and its outcome will greatly affect the future of the region and the larger global order.

China's interest in the Middle East has been categorized into four largest types. In the 1980s, Beijing decided to emerge and have a more significant role in the area, primarily because it thought that the center was necessary in the struggle for the status of the Department of a Great Power. In the 1990s, the importance of the region increased even more due to China's expanding energy needs. Finally, it has been obvious to China for a long time how these areas and states – on a cultural and religious level – affected its possibility of maintaining internal order and border security. This recognition dates to the early 2000s. Beijing has realized since the 2010s that the Middle East holds a key position in China's rebalancing since it sits at a geostrategic crossroads in the world (Ehteshami & Horesh, 2017).

China's efforts to improve collaboration and fortify relations with governments in the Middle East are proof that the region is becoming increasingly important to China. China's proactive involvement, demonstrated by the publication of the Arab Policy Paper, which lays out Beijing's goals and priorities there, emphasizes this strategic change. China's commitment to fostering closer ties with Arab countries is demonstrated by this policy paper, which was presented in tandem with Chinese President Xi Jinping's first visit to the region.

The significance of synchronizing development plans with Arab countries is emphasized in President Xi

Jinping's vision for China's presence in the Middle East. Recognizing each other's talents and potential is essential to this vision, with a focus on using complementary advantages to achieve common objectives. The basis of this cooperation should be promoting global production capacity coordination to bolster economic cooperation and sustainable development in the region. In several areas, China wants to improve collaboration with the Middle Eastern countries by focusing on the Arab Policy Paper and President Xi's diplomatic efforts. It also means increasing business relationships, simplifying investment and commerce, facilitating cross-cultural dialogue, and working together on regional and global issues. By emphasizing win-win cooperation, China aims to promote calm, mutual benefit systems, and China's other societies' development and prosperity.

China's strategic priority in the region is a manifestation of its recognition of the Middle East's geopolitical importance and economic promise. In this regard, by doing business with Arab nations and creating a common policy agenda, China aims to position itself as a responsible player and actor with an interest in a rapidly changing region. China intends to play a key peaceful and stabilizing role through ongoing talks, trade, and joint projects while promoting its national strategic interests and vision.

### **China's Presence in the Middle East and Geopolitical Calculus**

In the intricate tapestry of the Middle East, China's presence looms large, fueled by a potent cocktail of economic aspirations, geopolitical ambitions, and security concerns (Scott, 2007). China's industrial engine heavily relies on the vast oil and gas reserves in this region for energy needs and sustained growth (Costea et al., 2019). Through BRI, China has actually woven a network of economic interdependence that goes beyond simple market access with its burgeoning trade relations with the region through its investments in infrastructure projects (Patey, 2021). This is coupled with the high energy supply in the region.

However, China's interests are more than economic. The Middle East acts as a platform for China to realize its global ambitions, where it can question the existing order of the West and introduce its perspective on international relations (Shaughnessy, 2022). This is the strategic chessboard from which China flexes its geopolitical muscles in vying for influence and reshaping the power dynamics in the world, often in an environment of intensifying competition with the United States (Sun, 2019).

However, beneath the great economic opportunities and geopolitical machinations lies a stark reality – instability and extremism are looming. In order to protect

its energy interests, secure its vital trade routes, and protect its investments, China proactively engages regional partners in counterterrorism cooperation and initiatives on maritime security (Heath, 2016).

Ultimately, China's true test would be in the labyrinthine landscape of negotiating its multiplicity of interests within the shifting sands of Middle Eastern politics. Its success in such a delicate dance will both decide its own fate and have important repercussions in the region and global order. As China's shadow stretches across the Middle East, the world watches with bated breath to see whether it will bring economic prosperity, geopolitical stability, or a new era of uncertainty and competition.

Due to a few calculated moves on China's part, it has been able to increase its political influence in the Middle East. China is pursuing "partnership diplomacy," as opposed to alliance politics in the region, according to Fulton. The author Fulton then divides China's relations with states in the MENA into five categories: Comprehensive Strategic partnerships, Strategic Partnerships, Comprehensive Cooperative Partnerships, Cooperative partnerships, and Friendly Cooperative Partnerships (Sharma, 2019).

At the beginning of 2014, China established its political, economic, and strategic ties with Algeria and Egypt by signing various agreements encompassing several sectors i.e. developmental projects, energy consumption and conservation, trade and transportation, mass contacts, and security collaboration, etc. China's strategic partnership with the Middle Eastern region was further facilitated by forging a comprehensive partnership with Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2016. This collaboration in energy, trade and investment, infrastructure, and security domains is in line with China's overall geopolitical ambitions in the region. Since the partners are Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is obvious that it is becoming increasingly focused on bilateral relations and less on some grander strategy.

China's pursuit of wide strategic relations with such countries demonstrates the former's status as a future regional leader in Middle Eastern politics. Through deepening its economic prominence, preserving its strategic goals in the region, and expanding its political influence, China is looking to increase its diplomatic activities in the Arab and Gulf states. These alliances give China more diplomatic options in the Middle East and a forum for multilateral collaboration on matters of shared interest on a regional and international level (Jung & Piccoli, 2001).

China's annual oil imports from the Middle East have climbed from 4.8 million to 47.8 million tons during the 20 years between 1990 and 2009. Reports from the US Energy Information Administration indicate that about

40% of China's oil imports in 2020 and 2019 were from the Gulf states. China is more dependent on Saudi Arabia than any other country, with 16% of the world's supply coming from the KSA. Iran ranked ninth among the main importers of oil to China in 2019 with daily exports of over 300,000 barrels of oil (Zhang, [1999](#)).

The large deals China has signed with Iran and Saudi Arabia are meant to be a means of keeping the peace in the region. China's "zero enemy policy," which holds that one should not have unfriendly relations with any country, is an essential component of China's foreign policy strategy. The country's diplomacy in the Middle East and elsewhere has been guided by this notion, as it has consistently sought friendly and constructive relations with all peoples.

China is determined to achieve its goals by means of diplomacy and non-military ways even though it increases military activities in the MENA region. Firstly, this activity depicts an increased military presence of China in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region even though its key goals are regional parties' cooperation, economic cooperation, and stability promotion. Instead, China is increasing its military operations in the MENA region to safeguard its interests, citizens, and their property, as well as to maintain stability and security in the region. This commitment to peace and security in the international system can be seen in China's military contributions to the region. Most of these contributions are for counterpiracy, humanitarian relief, and peacekeeping missions. One of the significant commitments by China is counterpiracy and maritime security in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Lastly, China realizes the need to use peaceful diplomatic arms in dealing with the tough and conflicting issues in the Middle East. By conducting successful dialogue, mediation, and confidence-building, China strives to reduce and diminish the level of hostility and stimulate reconciliation and positive interaction between regional stakeholders. China also utilizes relevant diplomatic channels and cooperation to address conflicts, support dialogue, and develop inclusive and sustainable development in the Middle East (Yahya, [2019](#)).

Regional geopolitics can be explained by China's expanding military connections with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran. The US's Middle Eastern partners may restrict military cooperation with China as the US prioritizes protocols, alliances, and security to curb Chinese ambitions. China will also participate in regional unconventional security initiatives and maritime drills. Beijing promotes peace via development through the creation of "common security perspectives," in opposition to the "traditional security vision" spearheaded by the West, which places a premium on

conquering the adversary and maintaining exclusive military alliances (Chen, Miao, & Li, [2021](#)).

Chinese authorities have always emphasized shared interests and avoided political confrontation in their calls for a multipolar alternative to security measures spearheaded by the United States. As attacks on regional security increase, China must defend its maritime interests and maintain peace and stability at strategic chokepoints and crossroads. China's role in the emerging security arrangement is uncertain, but it would be reluctant to replace the US. Regional governments may take on additional obligations to preserve their interests amid political and security problems in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. After the U.S. leaves Syria, proxy militias and organizations may follow Iran's lead. China's response will impact regional security and balance regional stability, commerce, and investment. That is impossible without strong, inclusive security. China may utilize its economic and political might to persuade local elites to protect its strategic objectives after striking a difficult balance. Hedging and non-interference have kept China out of regional battles, but that may soon change (Yahya, [2019](#)).

China's expanded participation in the region has the potential to be transformative and may have a major effect in terms of Chinese military advances. A school of thought asserts that as the United States withdraws its influence from the area, China may step into the United States' traditional position as a regional stabilizer. Financially shaky Middle Eastern nations are benefiting from the Chinese economic model, a substitute for the Western Model (Alsulami, [2021](#)). This is all part of China's plan to promote its economic model as a competitive alternative to that of the West. China has therefore decided to rely on the Asian Development Bank instead of the U.S.-dominated World Bank and IMF. The United States has full control over both financial institutions (Bergsten, [2008](#)). The emerging relationship between China and Iran might be an admirable case in point (Alsulami, [2021](#)).

Moreover, China has proven that it will withdraw its nationals from unsafe and war-torn countries, such as the Middle East. China's PLA showed its determination to protect its nationals overseas when it performed extensive rescue operations in Libya during the Libyan Civil War in 2011 and the Yemen crisis in 2015.

There has also been growth in China's mediation efforts about regional crises like those in Yemen and Syria. China has actively participated in diplomatic measures targeted at conflict resolution and Middle East stability promotion, even as it has maintained a cautious attitude. Notably, China showed it was capable of underpinning multilateral efforts to deal with complex security issues in the region by playing a significant role in

facilitating negotiations that eventually led to the signing of the Iran nuclear pact.

China opened its first overseas military base in 2017 in Djibouti, a Horn of Africa country that is becoming an important hub for China's anti-piracy operations and a vital component of its overall geostrategic objectives in the region. The base, hosting about a thousand Chinese troops, adds to China's maritime power and expands its footprint on crucial sea lanes while also reinforcing its rising clout in the region (Lons, 2019).

China's increasing military operations around the strategic maritime chokepoints of the Strait of Hormuz and Babel-Mandeb is made possible by the country's Gwadar port in Pakistan.

Lastly, China has provided some minor armaments to several Middle Eastern countries (Fulton, Sun, & Al-Tamimi, 2019). It has been holding military drills with Saudi Arabia and Iran, besides Russia. The nation has also been pushing for co-production of weapons. This is because the US has been hesitant to sell high-tech weapons to the Middle East and China has been responding to this by exporting its high-tech weapons like Dongfeng ballistic missiles and Wing Loong Bomber drones to different countries (Eslami & Papageorgiou, 2023).

These exports prove China's commitment to selling arms to those countries that, most of the time, are sanctioned by the rest of the world, staying true to its principle of non-interference and seeking to become a preferred supplier. Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have become members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a counterweight to the US position in Eurasia. Other countries in the Middle East have also expressed interest in joining SCO, signaling an alignment with Russia and China and a desire to contain the US influence in the broader region.

For its soft power projection, China has launched various humanitarian initiatives in the Middle East including medical aid during Covid 19 and cultural exchange programs. The establishment of Confucius Institutes (15 up till 2021) in the Middle Eastern countries is meant to promote its soft and positive image in the region.

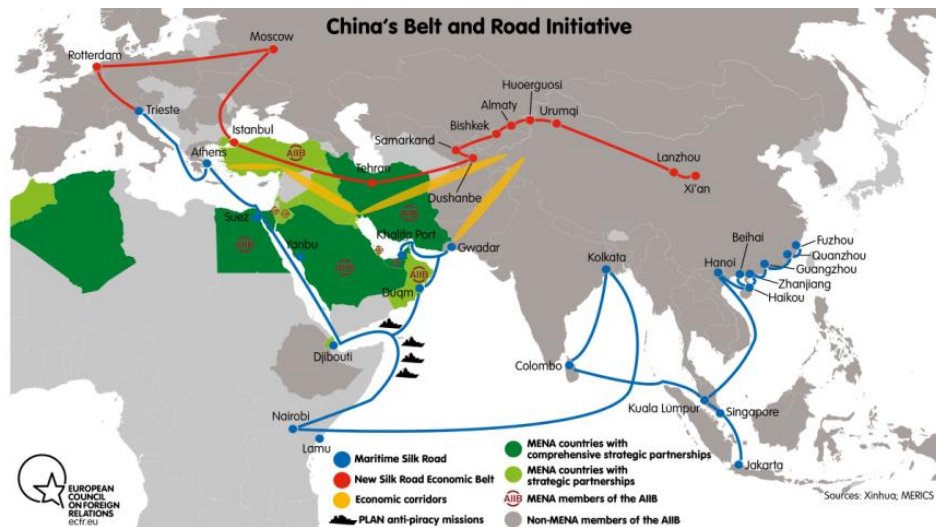
### **Belt and Road Initiative and the Middle East**

China's position in this area has shifted and it has emerged as a significant global force since the BRI was announced in 2013. BRI which connects it to nations

throughout Eurasia and the Indian Ocean, has been its most significant foreign policy endeavor. As the Middle East gains prominence in the BRI, China is taking a more ambitious and sophisticated approach to diplomatic, economic, and even security problems in the region. Two recent white papers released by the Chinese government, "China's Arab Policy Paper" and "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," indicate this. While the Middle East receives scant attention in "Vision and Actions," it does outline the five areas of cooperation that will be given top priority when establishing ties with BRI states: people-to-people ties, political coordination, unhindered trade, financial integration, and facility connectivity. China claims that the BRI project is a development-centered project rather than a geopolitical agenda; yet, the lack of military and security cooperation in "Vision and Actions" seems to contradict this claim (Annu, 2019). The success of BRI depends on China's increasing influence in the region, as the Chinese leadership is aware of this aspect. China has signed agreements on BRI projects with twenty-one Middle Eastern nations. Furthermore, China maintains extensive strategic alliances with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Egypt and UAE. China has designated Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and Jordan as strategic partners. This is on top of its all-encompassing innovation connection with Israel and its strategic cooperation engagement with Turkey. Israel has occasionally found itself in confrontation with the United States due to its well-established military technology links with Beijing and Jerusalem. China maintains a military base in Djibouti, a neighboring country. Furthermore, China has given financial assistance to Djibouti, UAE, Egypt, and Oman for the expansion and development of ports and industrial parks. The proximity of these regions to possible maritime bottlenecks, such as the Suez Canal, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Persian Gulf, makes it clear why the Chinese government would concentrate its attention there (Nader, 2022). Given that the success of the BRI is contingent on the free flow of trade via the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, these latter two bodies of water are essential to China's grand ambitions, even though the success of China's grand ambitions is by no means guaranteed due to the enormous resources that are required to implement them. Because it is strategically important for Beijing to do so, Beijing is working to deepen its connections with the major states in the region.



Figure 1



Source: [https://ecfr.eu/publication/china\\_great\\_game\\_middle\\_east/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/)

China's BRI is in line with other regional economic and social reform initiatives, such as Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia, Vision 2040 in Oman, Vision 2030 in Qatar, Vision 2035 in Kuwait, and Vision 2030 in Egypt. Through the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and Suez Canal, China's BRI uses the Maritime Silk Road to reach the Mediterranean. Beijing makes infrastructure investments in the Middle East due to the important maritime choke points along these trade routes. Beijing has a keen interest in the region because Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the UAE are its principal suppliers of crude oil.

Since 2020, China's enhanced trade with GCC has surpassed the European Union as its largest trading partner. A free trade agreement (FTA) with GCC countries has been China's agenda. In addition, UAE and Saudi Arabia are the largest non-oil trading partners of China.

China's BRI Investment Report 2021 states that most of the BRI projects were centered in Middle Eastern countries. BRI provided a huge amount of money to Iraq about \$10.5 billion for its construction projects. In addition, China planned to allocate 10.5 billion for the Kurdistan Region in Iraq to upgrade its infrastructure. Chinese collaboration and BRI involvement in Middle Eastern countries increased from 16.5 percent to 23 percent in 2022. China has actively participated in the development and management of a terminal at Jeddah Islamic Port through the Red Sea Gateway Terminal, a joint venture between Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund and China's COSCO Shipping Ports. Other projects include a new port terminal in Haifa Bay and

those under the Suez Canal Authority's TEDA division (Eslami & Papageorgiou, 2023).

The Iran-China "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" agreement is of great significance, with an estimated worth of \$400 billion, making 10 percent of the total BRI budget (Fulton, 2022). The agreement is based on the development of the Chabahar port, previously it was under a contract with India.

China is anxious to promote its digital influence through its Digital Silk Road. Its companies are inking 5G deals with the Gulf states. Additionally, China has further enhanced its cooperation with the UAE to launch local cyber strategies. These joint ventures are contributing to China's transformation into a technological and digital powerhouse, overturning its previous "copycat" reputation (Eslami & Papageorgiou, 2023). China's enhanced cooperation with Israel in the technological domain is a serious matter of concern for the US around security and defense cooperation.

Beijing has increased its role as a neutral mediator in high-profile conflict zones such as Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and the JCPOA negotiations. One of its most significant achievements has been brokering a deal between KSA and Iran in 2023, (Baghernia, 2024) which helped ease tensions in the region and strengthened Beijing's influence.

Even though the Persian Gulf is the top focus for the Chinese government, Beijing has also invested heavily in North Africa. Its comprehensive strategic partners include Egypt and Algeria, two of the major nations in North Africa. As China's primary gateway to Europe, the

Suez Canal is crucial to the manufacturing and distribution of Chinese commodities destined for the African continent. This is the primary reason Beijing has poured billions of dollars into the Egyptian economy via loans, joint ventures, and other forms of financial support. China developed the Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone and a three-square-mile industrial park at Ain Sukhna, which is thirty miles south of Suez, with a large portion of up to \$20 billion spent in Egypt between 2016 and 2019 (Sidlo, [2020](#)).

The reason China appeals to Middle Eastern leaders is that it visits the region without committing to any specific regimes or the caliber of the political and economic structures housed within them. China's strategy contrasts sharply with that of the US and the European Union, which have both, to differing degrees, anticipated that concessions would be required in exchange for aid and investment.

As Beijing's influence continues to grow, local governments in the region maintain a nuanced approach to their relationships with global powers. Though fully realizing the increasing role that China plays and appreciative of improved bilateral relations, most Middle Eastern governments continue to need the security and stability these traditional alliances, and foremost, with the United States provide. For instance, even Egyptian officials have spoken on public record regarding the central role American military power and security play in maintaining stability within this region. Even with Egyptian efforts to develop more cooperative relations with China, the country is still at the mercy of the US's security guarantees and military support. The Egyptian government unequivocally said it also was very essential to strengthen relations bilaterally with the US as well as with China but should remain totally insulated from rivalry between both countries as is in the contemporary global balance of power.

The changing involvement of China in the Middle East has opened up opportunities for Arab nations to balance their security objectives with their economic ambitions. Pursuing economic cooperation with China allows Arab countries to advance their national interests and development goals in a way that manages the complexities of global geopolitics. In this way, they can maintain strong security partnerships with the US while achieving a nuanced balance between their security needs and economic aspirations (Cook, [2021](#)).

### **Prospects and Strategic Concerns/Challenges**

China's engagement in the Middle East through BRI has several geopolitical interests and strategic challenges. China's investments through the Silk Road Economic Belt can enhance the quality of life in the Middle Eastern region. China's possible engagements may increase

economic development, energy growth, and conservation contributing to peace and stability in the area.

The Middle East is a war-torn region that hosts several geopolitical conflicts that may slow down the tempo of its projects. Weak governance structures in the region will likely delay China's implementation mechanisms. Political uncertainties, unrest, and conflicts including the Syrian Civil War, the Yemen crisis, and the Israeli-Israeli-Palestinian conflicts characterize the Middle East (Cook, [2021](#)). These issues raise security and strategic concerns for regional stability. The volatile security situation demands that China tread carefully through these complexities to protect its strategic interests.

The presence of China across the Middle East is greatly enhanced by global rivalry with main world powers like the United States and Russia. The superpower influence in the region can be highly noted by the extent of America's military bases, as well as the various strategic alliances within key states, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (Rolland, [2017](#)). China's economic diplomacy and the no-interference policy provide an alternative model of engagement with potential friction for US interests and policies.

Oil and gas energy forms the backbone of the regional economy in the MENA region. The oil and gas industry is changing due to the transitions in global oil markets with multiple challenges for China to meet its growing regional demand.

China is entangled in various domestic issues ranging from socioeconomic to governance which can hamper its potential to make strides at a larger level, particularly in the Middle East. It requires that China balance out its domestic needs with global demands.

China can still face numerous challenges vis-a-vis the BRI project along with its implementation and smooth functioning. The proposed Silk Road goes north of the Gulf through Kazakhstan, into Iran, and across to Greece. Chinese investments in Pakistan and Iran could escalate regional tensions between KSA and Iran, two rival giants in the region. The sea route passes by sensitive areas such as the Horn of Africa, up the Red Sea, and through the Suez Canal. China's US\$15 million aid to the Palestinians and US\$90 million to Syria, Jordan, and Yemen (Scobell & Nader, [2016](#)) will create tensions that could spill into a regional and global conflict between the US and China as these investments will be taken as politically motivated.

Security of maritime routes, through critical chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, is crucial to China's energy imports and trade flows (Garlick, [2019](#)). Threats such as piracy, regional conflicts, and potential blockades pose significant risks to these essential sea lanes. Such routes

would require a strong navy and cooperation with regional and global powers, which could therefore bind China to regional security matters.

China has adopted a balanced approach towards Iran and Saudi Arabia which reflects its broader strategy of maintaining neutrality and fostering good relations with all Middle Eastern countries. However, this delicate balancing act poses challenges. China's strategic partnership with Iran, especially in the energy and infrastructure sectors, may strain its relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states that view Iran as a threat.

Furthermore, China's principle of non-interference in domestic affairs appeals to many Middle Eastern governments, providing an alternative to Western conditionalities often linked to human rights and governance reforms. This pragmatic approach allows China to build strong bilateral relations based on mutual economic interests. China is determined to maintain healthy and smooth relations with all the regional stakeholders but the complexity of the issues may trigger the scenarios in a reverse manner.

Moreover, the technological progress of China, especially in the fields of telecommunications and digital infrastructure, will help the countries of the Middle East to be more advanced in their development. Projects such as the Digital Silk Road aim to increase connectivity and digital cooperation and foster innovation and economic growth in the region.

## Conclusion

The Middle East is strategically very important for China because of its crucial geographical location, vital energy/natural resources, and land/sea routes. It plays a critical position in the development and evolution of BRI all over the world. The region of the Middle East hosts more than fifty percent of oil reserves worldwide for meeting China's needs and sustainable economic growth. China's initiative, BRI was started by boosting international trade and economic activities throughout the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa through the infrastructure establishment and strengthening the trade linkages. China is seeking to establish new trade corridors and enhance its influence in terms of economics all over the world through funding and infrastructure construction. Major initiatives, such as the CPEC and investment in the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, indicate a commitment of China to regional connectivity and trade.

Properly managed, BRI could establish a web of shared prosperity that would interconnect the Middle

East into a dynamic hub of China's global network. However, if the balance tilts, the region will be caught in a cycle of fragility and reliance. The BRI in the Middle East is still an inchoate situation, and the conclusion to this colossal undertaking may go either way. It may be a story of shared success, or it could become a parable of the perils of our propensity to take the inexpediency. China's heavy dependence on the Middle East for maritime energy needs makes it strategically important for China. Its prime locations, ports, and waterways in the Middle East serve as crucial links connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa. Thus, the BRI maritime goals require necessary investments in shipping lanes, port facilities, and coordination at the marine level in the Middle East.

China has managed to extend its geopolitical, economic, and strategic relationships with most of the regimes in the Middle East over the last decade. This move has boosted China's general influence and economic relationships with the region. Thus, many of the countries in the Middle East, such as Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and many others, view China as their top trading partner. With regard to the economic links of China with the Middle Eastern countries, it is worth mentioning that the most important part is BRI. China has established extensive strategic alliances with important Middle Eastern nations, such as Egypt, Algeria, Iran, KSA, and UAE. China's involvement in the Middle East for the past ten years has become pivotal due to its diplomatic work; therefore, these partnerships demonstrate how the country's influence in this region is expanding and represents its strategic interests.

China's BRI reflects its broader goals of securing energy resources, economic engagements, and partnerships while enhancing geopolitical influence in the region. BRI is aimed at the promotion of regional stability and diplomatic ties with Middle Eastern states through trade, investments, transportation, communication, and digital networks. However, on the other hand, China's increasingly growing presence will also bring quite a few political, economic, and security challenges that could disrupt whatever status quo has been established previously while reducing the influence exerted by global powers including the United States. To sum it all up then, the impact of Chinese presence in the region should depend on how China's certain policies and actions speak against the backdrop of the elaborate geopolitical calculus. China must monitor this situation closely and strategic responses from all sides will be crucial in the way forward.

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