

China as an Alternative Power in Middle East: Its Outcomes for the Region's Future

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Abstract

This research considers China's Middle East policies and commitments, including international alliances, regional disputes, and trade ties. It compiles information on arms transfers to the Middle East, as well as Chinese imports and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the region. Moreover, the study applies the power transition theory to justify the choice of Middle Eastern states that how external circumstances forced them to look beyond the American umbrella to protect the sovereignty and economic interest. Besides, the primary data has mostly been incorporated from the official files, speeches and statements of the Chinese president and Middle East diplomats and policymakers. Overall, this paper examines China's overall military, economic, and foreign footprint, shedding light on the state's current and potential involvement in the Middle East.

Key Words: The Middle East, Stability, China, Policies, Military

Conceptual Background

According to the theory of power transition, nations in a transnational context are placed in a hierarchical structure based on their size of power and accepting their place in the ranking is skewed by the unacceptably high motivation of other nation-states. The state's power over the other is usually limited to its place in the hierarchy and states rationally compete with one another to brand secret goods available on a global scale. The struggle founded on this ideal can be a sign to either battle or partnership be dependent on the outstanding developments¹. Organski captured the categorized distribution of inspiration in a comprehensive facility into plentiful coverings, where the foremost government is positioned on topmost of the cottage to indicate the significant state in widespread amalgamation. The extraordinary motivation is mounted in pieces underneath the chief state and characterizes convincing conditions that partaking the projections to be dominant states in the approaching He maintained that the new-fangled power that not satisfied with the international structure would be the opponent for the existence of dominant hegemony. Therefore, facility and ranking of satisfaction transformed the authoritative motives for great influence to standardize its condition to the prevailing dominance². The pyramid's other divisions are for the middle and small powers that are enslaved by the great force, while the ties are conscripted at the bottom³. Regulator adaptation classic preserved that the variations which occur in the international network of sovereignty are the connotations of the national enlargement technique⁴. The exchange practice initiates

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at what time an undeveloped state performs its promising authority to progress and tie up the other nations that have a greater level of expansion ⁵.

On the other side, the primary specialist at the upper sheet of provocation has proficient its amplification and included the stage of power maturity, which is obvious with the heavier destined of its power development in intercontinental command ⁶. Organski necessitated that the wicked swelling of plentiful supremacy in contrast with the regulator development of leading influence reduce the power fissure and theoretically sign the adversary great power to beating the superseding state condition in worldwide construction; changes more unwilling in initiative its subsidiary interpretation in transcontinental knowledge; and augments above articulated in vernacular; its varied stances on intercontinental leadership along with global strategies by provoking the dominant influence ⁷. The disgruntled great power is proclaimed by power transition theory will fight for completing leading status, but the net benefit of the brawl is projected as to be developed acquaintances to modern provision importance. The main state, on the other hand, will effort to avoid the modification ⁸.

It is in this context; the article tries to figure out how Middle East states are taking the Chinese economic assistance seriously as the last resort. Because since 9/11, USA power has been deteriorated because of its hard foreign policy and now developing states have the option to replace it to maintain the sovereignty of their particular states. This paper is an attempt to explore the major events and economic assistance which forced Middle East states to tilt towards China. And now, the swing of power has been shifting from West to East. While China is the force to be reckoned with in the 21st Century.

China in the Middle East

In a speech to the Arab League in Cairo, Egypt, in January 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping clarified the narrative of China's position in the Middle East. He stressed that, rather than pursuing a proxy in the Middle East, we support peace talks; rather than seeking any sphere of influence, we invite all parties to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) circle of friends; and, rather than attempting to fill the power 'vacuum' of conventional power struggles and conflict, we create a cooperative cooperation network for win-win outcomes ⁹.

In the Middle East, even though great powers politics is very strong but China is emerging as a viable new alternative. Due to oil imports and machinery, textile and other exports, China has accessed economic reach in the Middle East. Now China vows to rebuild Silk Road gradually and to enhance the network of trade routes, which will be spread from China to Central Asian states and then the Middle East to African state and Europe ¹⁰. "Non-Interference" policy is maintained by China for the Middle East. The major outside player in the Middle East region is the United States, but China has cordial relations with all Middle Eastern leaders without any sort of clash.

But it is claimed that recently China moves to pave the way toward "Greater China". The first foreign military base began to construct in Yemen in 2016, which has been published in "Arab Policy Paper" first time in its history. Likewise, on the Syrian Crisis, China has appointed a special envoy. China is on 15th number of weapon suppliers to the Middle East; now, she intends to increase her sale; recently, China entered into an agreement with Saudi Arabia to start manufacturing Chinese drones. And it would be the first factory in the Middle East and only third outside China. In March 2017, King Salman paid a visit to China, during his visit; the foreign minister of China offered that "China wants to play the role of mediator in all issues between Iran and Saudi Arabia" ¹¹. Due to growing economic and military strength, it is now clear at the global stage that China has been emerging as a rising world power ¹².

China's active position in the Middle East backdrop is, in fact, a sign of an opportunistic long game to fill the "vacuum" created by the United States under the Obama Administration¹³. This 'act-of-enhancement,' on the other hand, can be better described as a large investment in a strategic area rather than an adaptation of activist engagement in the Middle East.

Is China Pivoting to the Middle East?

Regarding this, high-level scholars and analysts of China reevaluating her grand strategy, now the main focus would be East which is a more balanced approach in both directions. It can be more useful, the changing policy toward Central Asia and the Middle East, especially to check and balance all western actions in the Far East. In view of the US, China would be a revisionist power in the region; hence the US is trying to strengthen its alliances with Japan, the Philippines and Australia and also with the ASEAN states; the only reason behind this venture to unnerve China¹³.

The first "Arab Policy Paper" (APP) was released by China in January 2016, which aimed "to promote China-Arab relations to a new and higher level"¹⁴. APP research has clarified that the main objectives of China to enhance military cooperation with Arab states, and intend to increase the personnel, weapons and technology cooperation and also shown desire that China & Arab countries will counter the danger of foreign and regional terrorism together through intelligence sharing China reaffirmed its anti-piracy operations, stating that it will continue to send warships to the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters to combat pirates. China conducted a comprehensive anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden, which is one of the key reasons for the construction of an overseas naval base in Djibouti¹⁵.

Through "BRI", China intends to rebuild an old network of 'Trade Routes' known as the Silk Road, which extends from China through Central Asia and the Middle East to Africa and Europe and connects with Pakistan through the CPEC. China initiated the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with a \$40 billion investment, with the primary intention of promoting infrastructure and gas and oil pipelines in Central Asia¹⁶. Regarding this project, Gwadar port, a strategically very important location of Pakistan, took control by China in 2015, and it is the way to access the Strait of Hormuz and Arabian Gulf¹⁷. It is also a very important connectivity point to reach Middle East, Iran, Egypt and Israel as well. Geographically, Iran can also play a significant role between China and Europe. The first freight train arrived in Feb. 2016, from China to Tehran; it will boost China – Iran trade relations and also step forward to modernization of Iran's railway system¹⁸. China primary shipping route from Egypt is Suez Canal, which connects to Europe directly, and China has more opportunity to increase her trade through BRI¹⁹. China showed her interest to invest in Israel in the proposed railway route which would connect the Red Sea with the Mediterranean, this railway route known as the "Red – Med railway". Recently, Suez Canal is the only cargo route, "Red – Med" railway could serve as an alternate route²⁰. BRI is one of the mega projects through which China wants to join with the Middle East and also have the plan to invest in the rest of the region, such as Kuwait's "Silk City"²¹.

Cordial Regional Relations

Most Chinese think tanks agree that China is an economically very strong state. Because the top priority of Beijing's foreign policy is to promote its own economic interests, not only the rest of the world, especially in the Middle East. The recent visit of King Salman to China and both leaders agreed to solve regional conflicts amicably. President Xi said, "the solution to many issues in the Middle East lies in development"²². On this visit, King Salman & President Xi signed an MoU worth \$65 billion. China is one of the big exporters in the Middle East & North Africa region, and since 2010 largest importer of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) oil reserves; which can be seen in the figure.



MENA States
Source: Gulf News, 2018

China is one of the big oil importers in the world, and it has cordial relations with top oil exporter of the world like Saudi Arabia. For the last two decades, Saudi Arabia is glad to know the increasing oil demand of China. Since 2002, Saudi Arabia is one of the big sources of imported crude oil for China, but in 2016, for the first time outpaced it by Russia²³. Reports surfaced, Initial Public Offering (IPO), China is going to become a principal investor of state-owned oil company Saudi Aramco, the minimum value of this company is \$2 trillion if confirmed this company would be world's highest valued company and 5 percent shares would be sold by IPO and United States got shocked to learn that²⁴. This situation clearly shows that the US as a superpower is in decline in this region, whereas China is rising in this region as alternative power, fulfilling the power vacuum at the international level when the world is passing through the Great Power transitional period in the 21st Century²⁵. In retrospect, there is a long history of Sino-Saudi relations. In 1980, Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) sold to Saudi Arabia by China. Firstly, these missiles were ordered to the United States, which did not provide them just because of opposition from Israel. After that, Saudi Arabia purchases all weapons from China, even drones that can carry cameras and missiles. Now China is a regular weapon supplier to Saudi Arabia²⁶. In January 2017, Chinese CH-4 drones with two Chinese made missiles was unveiled by Saudi Arabia at a ceremony. Recently, China has got the biggest order of its history of its new "Wing-Loong II" drone by Saudi Arabia. The detail of the quantity and purchaser was not revealed²⁷. Though it is being assumed that it may be Saudi Arabia.

Recently, Saudi Arabia made an agreement with China to make "Chinese-made drones" now manufacture in King Abdul Aziz City for Science & Technology, and it would be the 1st factory of China in the Middle East who got license²⁸, and these would be used for both military and civilian purposes. The first joint Counter-terrorism drills were held at the end of 2016 by China & Saudi Arabia in the city of Chongqing, China²⁹. China-Iran relationships, during the years, were grown significantly. China was the biggest trading partner during the International economic sanctions imposed on Iran³⁰, and China also played a very positive role in Iran's nuclear program deal and P5+1 negotiation³¹. After the sanctions lifted in 2016, the Chinese president was the First leader to pay a visit to Iran. And during this visit, President Xi signed 17 accords with Iran and enhanced the understanding for a corporation in different fields like trade, industry, and energy. Both countries made an agreement to increase their trade up to \$600 billion in the next decade³². In BRI, Iran is trying to get the central way.

Moreover, Egypt is also one of the largest trading partners of China; in 2014, \$11.6 billion bilateral trade was reached. At the end of 2016, both countries signed a currency swap deal for \$2.6 billion just because Egypt needed to secure a \$12 billion International Monetary Front (IMF) loan³³. IMF's officially recognized currencies are the US dollar, British pound, Euro and Yen, but first time in the history of IMF,

Yuan was acknowledged as a reserve currency. Now, in the East of Cairo, a new Egyptian Capital City is being built by China because it is one of the big investors in the Suez Canal, and it's really beneficial in the future ³⁴.

Role in Regional Conflicts

In March 2017, Chinese TV took an interview of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president, in which he applauded Syrian-Chinese relations ³⁵. And China repeatedly mentioned its 'Peaceful Coexistence' policy. "Syria has seen positive progress, especially after the Aleppo battle last year, in terms of the war on terror," the Chinese ambassador to Syria recently reported ³⁶. In the United Nation Security Council (UNSC), a resolution was put forward against Syria that "Syrian authorities are using force against their civilian", and China stood with Russia by vetoing 6 out of 7 ³⁷. Furthermore, China has vowed to work with Russia and sought out the political solution to the Syrian crisis, said to special envoy to Syria, Xie Xiaoyan. China promised Syria to enhance Military Cooperation and training ³⁸. No doubt, as compare to the US and Europe's humanitarian donation to Syria, China's donations are very small because only nine Syrian refugees were accepted by China in 2015.

On the Yemen issue, the Chinese government continuously and consistently supported the Yemeni govt. Of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi against the Houthis. In 2016, the Houthi delegation approached Beijing for getting help against govt, but it proved in vain. Regarding this, Xinhua gave a statement to China's official news agency "China's concern for the Houthi-GPC government and reaffirmation of its support for Yemen's globally recognized government signalled its desire to play a larger role in restoring peace to Yemen" ³⁹. Iran, undoubtedly, is giving full support to Houthis, like training and weapons. In the Gulf of Aden, Chinese naval forces were busy in anti-piracy patrolling mission in 2015 and evacuated more than 800, including 600 Chinese, from the pirates who were afraid of fighting against the Yemeni government. It was the first time; China helped to evacuate foreigners from Conflict zone ⁴⁰.

Besides, China got a bitter experience in the Libyan conflict because before the beginning of this uprising; China had been making a huge investment in Libya. In April 2011, China stayed away from this issue and remained neutral, even abstained from the UNSC vote in which NATO gave authority to intervene in conflicted areas of Libya ⁴¹. But after that, in July 2011, it was revealed that China violated UN sanctions and provided logistics support to Gaddafi's royal forces. And that support was very useful for Gaddafi's regime. China had to launch an evacuation mission in which more than 36000 Chinese citizens were rescued from war-stricken areas, and it was one of the big evacuation missions in China's history ⁴².

Palestine-Israel issue, the most incendiary conflict of Middle East, China remained in the neutral position and many a time offered to help with negotiations. In 1988, China was 1st state to recognize Palestine; moreover, till 1992, it did not officially establish diplomatic relations with Israel ⁴³. But now, China-Israel relations are based on 'extensive economic interdependence', and China has carefully treated Israel because most of the Arab countries have not recognized it. In March 2017 Israeli Prime minister paid a visit to China, and during this visit, China's President Xi reiterated Israeli Prime minister Netanyahu to make peace with Palestinians and also added that China "appreciates Israel's ongoing attempts to use the "two-state proposal" as a framework for dealing with the Israel-Palestine conflict" ⁴⁴. According to "APP" (2016), China presented a solution to the Palestine issue by declaring East Jerusalem as Capital of Palestine ⁴⁵. In 2013 & 2014, respectively, Chinese President Xi presented five points to bring the conflict to an end, but neither has moved forward.

Military Spending and International Footprints

An overview of China's military expenditures and foreign presence helps to put its actions in the Middle East into perspective. China's military spending was \$145 billion in 2016 ⁴⁶. China remained committed to enhance and modernize its defense and military capabilities, regardless of its economic slowdown ⁴⁷. The

People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Russia have planned joint military exercises to improve security cooperation between the two countries⁴⁸. China and Central Asia states are also engaging in joint ventures regarding counter-terrorism. The first foreign base is built by China in Djibouti, which is just 20 miles across from Yemen's coast and strategically located in the Horn of Africa. Beijing sent 2400 troops to help UN peacekeeping mission to counter piracy in that area⁴⁹. In 2008, an anti-piracy operation was conducted by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) of China with the help of some other countries' ships in the Gulf of Aden and Horns of Africa. This operation successfully completed because Chinese owned cargo-ships and crewed ships, though its count comparatively less, were attacked by pirates. After the completion of this operation, Chinese troops remained there. On that route, China's daily import-export is nearly more than \$ 1 billion, half of her oil imports, which passed by the coast of Djibouti through Bab-al-Mandeb to the Suez Canal. Other than China and many other countries like the US, France, Italy, and Japan, and soon Saudi Arabia has intentions to build a military base there. AFRICOM is the vital part of the US' Camp Lemonnier, in which more than 4000 military and civilian personnel. Somalia's military base Al-Shabab is using for drones.

China, as UNSC permanent member, has got assign more peacekeepers mission in Africa as compared to other permanent members. Out of nine UN missions in the African region, China has got seven in which it participated with more than 2,500 troops, police and experts⁵⁰. Moreover, the participation of China in the African mission will be increased, said President Xi in 2015. And also giving offer for permanent peacekeeping police squad and 8,000 troops who will always be standby and further China will increase training of foreign peacekeepers and carry out ten minesweeping assistant programs over the next five years.

Recently, China is on number 15th in the list of arms suppliers to the Middle East and in coming years, it may move up due to growing interest in this region⁵¹. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China's global weapons exports have nearly doubled in the last five years⁵². Major states where arms are supplied by China to Asia and Oceania, but in Asia, Pakistan is one of the main recipients. China was one of the largest arms importers in the early 2000s, but its imports have dropped by up to 25%, indicating that it is becoming increasingly capable of manufacturing advanced weapons on its own.

Philanthropy for the Middle East

China's "pivot west" may not fully materialize as some analysts expected, but it is clear that China is an emerging economic force that is beneficial not only to China but also to the Middle East. Its economic policies may be criticized, but all initiatives which are taken by China and some states have shown 'will to participate' has proven good for this region⁵³. During the sanctions on Iran, which was placed by the UN, US & Europe; China provided a market for it and still to be its largest trading partner. And with Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, China's relations are growing more cordial, as are its relations with other Middle East states⁵⁴.

On the military front, China's increasing interest in selling weapons, especially a drone factory, is going to open in Saudi Arabia; US think-tank and policymakers watch this whole scenario closely. US has only sold armed drones to Italy & UK, but China is supplying drones includes both armed and unarmed, to Iraq, Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia⁵⁵. Actually, China is filling that vacuum for all those states which are not interested in buying arms from the US. It is one of the top three suppliers to Syria, Iran, and Algeria, trailing only Russia in each case. But at the same time, US-China will cooperate on counter-terrorism campaigns in the Middle East. Recently China has launched its first counter-terrorism operation with Saudi Arabia and also claimed that the same operation was held in Afghanistan.

Conclusions

The paper explores that the emerging role of China in the Middle East region, "It can soon gain enough clout and willingness to try its hand at diplomacy." The rapid growth of the economic objective is the need of China to work out a 'futuristic' strategy toward the Middle East region. She is supposed to be a new arbitrator of the Middle East's conflicts. China has cordial relations with Palestine and Israel, but this situation cannot continue longer because it is the bone of contention for the Middle East. China has to deal with the issue tactfully as an alternative power. Besides, China also has convivial relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. China supported Iran in a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Also, the strategy of China is to strengthen political and economic cooperation with this region, along with the international community, which would definitely help to develop peace, security and stability in the Middle East.

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