

## The Importance of the Middle East in Chinese Strategy

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### Abstract

The American decline in the region has made China seek to be an important player in the Middle East. It has tried to reshape the dynamics of regional security through increased participation. Its interests in the region have gone beyond traditional energy sources to many economic, geopolitical and strategic considerations, as China has signed strategic partnerships. And memorandums of understanding for its economic activities in the Middle East, and it has established close relations with various regional organizations for peace and stability in the Middle East.

Economically, China will become the largest trading partner of the Gulf Cooperation Council. As a leading global power, China has vested interests in preserving Middle Eastern countries through its principle of non-interference and

commitment to protecting common interests. This principle is essential in diversifying China's economic and security relations. Militarily, China has increased arms sales to the Middle East, conducted military exercises with Iran, and promoted joint weapons production. These actions are crucial given the stagnation in U.S. relations with Middle Eastern countries and its refusal to sell advanced weapons. China has strengthened its soft power in the region through humanitarian initiatives, recognizing soft power as essential to its great power status.

The Middle East is a crucial region located in the heart of the world in terms of political geography. It represents a highly sensitive network of communication and transportation points, overlooks important straits, and possesses vital and strategic natural resources. These features and others have made it a

focal point for great powers and empires throughout history. The United States of America has recently aimed to reformulate the region geographically, politically, socially, intellectually, economically, and militarily in line with its policy of hegemony. However, this influence is currently facing numerous challenges, including the awareness of both Russia and China of the Middle East's significance, benefiting from the successive failures of the United States in the region.

China once considered the Middle East to be of relatively little importance, but today this part of the world occupies a much larger space in Chinese national security calculations. Its unprecedented interest and participation in the Middle East increase the possibility of launching its ambitions in the region. China strives to protect its growing interests there while avoiding taking sides in any conflicts and disputes in the Middle East. Additionally, China is very cautious about getting involved in Middle East disputes or getting too close to any country in the region. This extreme caution prevents China from announcing a specific policy or strategy for the Middle East and from making difficult commitments to any of the region's countries, other than

those necessary to maintain friendly trade relations and practical diplomatic and security ties.

In this research, we will discuss the new importance of the Middle East in Chinese strategy.

### **\* The Importance of the Middle East in Chinese Strategy**

China is striving to quickly ascend the global system hierarchy, a vision adopted by the Chinese Communist Party for development, aiming for China to become a giant country with progress at all levels in the coming years. This vision has raised concerns in the United States, which now sees China as a rival. This has transformed the U.S.-China relationship from one of partnership to one of strategic competition, prompting the U.S. to move forcefully in the Middle East to restore global balance in the region. The importance of the Middle East in Chinese strategy is highlighted as follows:

#### **1- The Importance of the Middle East to China**

China views the Middle East as strategically important and occupies a significant position due to its broad regional influence, which has enabled China to conclude economic and military agreements and alliances. Since the Communist Party took over in 1949, China has made significant

commercial and industrial leaps, becoming the largest exporter of consumer and industrial goods in the world and ranking second in terms of industrial power after the United States<sup>1</sup>.

The Middle East is considered one of the most important regions globally and within Chinese strategy. It is the heart of the world and a link between the West and the East, distinguished by shipping lanes through which global trade passes. It is a vital cultural and historical storehouse compatible with Chinese civilization and a source of global wealth, especially oil and energy. This has made the Middle East a source of conflicts and competition during the Cold War. China now views the Middle East as the most important source of oil globally and a key pillar of Chinese economic influence due to its geographical location through which a large portion of global trade passes. This region is crucial for confronting American influence, leading China to build alliances with countries that oppose the American presence in the region, such as Iran, with which

China has concluded long-term agreements to secure a foothold.

China has maintained important and historical relations with the Middle East due to geographical proximity and continuous trade movement. With China's economic leap, Middle Eastern countries have enjoyed significant technological, economic, and developmental relationships with China, relying heavily on energy supplies from the Middle East. At least 60% of China's rising industrial production depends on these supplies<sup>2</sup>. The Middle East also provides geographic support and market value for projects connecting global countries. It is strategically vital to China because it lies at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa and is surrounded by significant bodies of water such as the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Arabian Sea. Thus, China aims to connect with Middle Eastern and European countries through the "Belt and Road" project to meet its growing energy needs and market its expanding production.

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<sup>1</sup> Sabah Shenafa, Chinese power, the challenge of the historical process and its position in the orbit of global powers, *Journal of Political Science*, No. 46, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> Alaa Abdel Wahab Abdel Aziz, Energy Security in Chinese Foreign Policy, *Political and International Journal*, No. 41, 2019, p. 588.

## 2- China's Economic Growth in the Middle East

The Middle East serves as potential markets for China in terms of resources and gateways to other markets globally. China has increased its economic, strategic, and diplomatic cooperation in the region to support the interests of Middle Eastern countries before its own. These countries are improving and strengthening their economies to achieve collective stability.

The Middle East is near four key sea canals: the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles, Bab al-Mandab, and the Strait of Hormuz, which are vital Chinese trade routes. The region plays an essential role in security, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges under the “Belt and Road” initiative. It represents more than 40% of China’s oil imports and is the main supplier of natural gas”<sup>3</sup>.

To advance its economy, China relies heavily on energy imports from the Middle East, which provides more than half of its crude oil imports and 20% of its natural gas

imports. Approximately 51% of China's oil imports come from the Arab Gulf countries, with Saudi Arabia being the primary supplier, followed by Angola and then Iran<sup>4</sup>.

China’s focus on the Arabian Gulf region is driven by its growing geopolitical importance. China's progressive march in the region assumes adopting a strategic policy to expand influence by using strategic tools such as economics to strengthen relations with regional countries. China advocates for an international community based on peaceful coexistence principles and the United Nations Charter's principles, promoting benefit and development and seeking to build a new international order beneficial to all countries, especially developing ones<sup>5</sup>.

The American withdrawal from the region and a shift towards Asia, gives China an opportunity to build partnerships with Gulf countries and integrate into many investment activities, creating a foothold for influence and broader

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<sup>3</sup> Muhammad Mahmoud Sabry, The Role of Oil in Chinese Foreign Policy, Master's Thesis, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Al-Azhar University 2014, p. 82

<sup>4</sup> Previous reference, p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> Zhui Yihuang, Chinese Diplomacy, translated by Zheng Bohrun et al., China Essentials Series, China Transcontinental Publishing House, Beijing, 2005, p. 45.

strategies in establishing regional relationships. Recent contractual agreements with Gulf Cooperation Council countries reflect China's interests and those of Gulf states, helping them protect against the negative effects of potential Cold War extensions in the East, which threaten energy security, sea routes, the “Belt and Road” initiative, and China’s commercial and economic interests in the region”<sup>6</sup>.

China's strategic relations in the Middle East extend beyond energy cooperation to broader regional and global goals, such as expanding free trade and harmonizing investment strategies with regional countries. This development of relations between China and the Gulf, and increasing Chinese role and activity in the region, was highlighted during the Arab-Chinese summit in Saudi Arabia in 2022, amid geopolitical developments in the region.

China's strategy towards Gulf states involves identifying economic

interests and investments as primary determinants of relations and through limited military participation, whether through military cooperation or selling military systems and equipment. These aspects form the basis of China's strategy in relations with the region, including Arab-Chinese intelligence cooperation for regional security”<sup>7</sup>.

Chinese-Gulf relations encompass strategic aspects, not just economic, which has displeased the United States. In 2021, the U.S. opposed the construction of Khalifa Commercial Port by Chinese companies, and in 2022 intervened to halt a large Chinese arms deal to Saudi Arabia. However, China succeeded in making Saudi Arabia a partner in the “Shanghai Cooperation Organization” in 2021, highlighting the depth of China's strategic cooperation with Middle Eastern countries and its new importance in Chinese strategy<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Previous reference, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup>Hussein Ismail, Is there an Arab-Chinese partnership, Strategic Studies Journal, Bahrain, Bahrain Center for Studies and Research, Issue Eleven 2008, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Sofiane Belmadi and Belkacem Boumahdi, The Geopolitics of Strategic Sea Straits and the Security of Energy Supply, the Malka Strait and its Impact on Chinese Energy Security as a Model, Algeria, Diaa Network for Conferences and Studies 2014-2015, p. 16.

### **3- The Importance of the Middle East as a Land and Sea Route for China**

A primary reason for the Middle East's focus in the Chinese "Belt and Road" initiative is ensuring trade security to and from the region. Most maritime trade between China and Europe passes through the Bab al-Mandab Strait off Djibouti and Yemen, making it vulnerable to disruptions due to piracy and regional conflicts. China's primary concern is securing trade routes while considering alternatives to avoid maritime bottlenecks and protect energy supply security.

China seeks to be an important partner in import and export to the region, with Saudi Arabia as one of its most crucial trade partners. Iran also holds significant importance for China in increasing energy sources and reducing dependence on Saudi Arabia. Cooperation with Iran mitigates the risks of disruption to maritime transport in the Strait of Hormuz, which it has often threatened to close, which would likely raise oil prices and disrupt energy supplies. China aims to transport Iranian oil by land, reducing sea shipping dependence and associated risks.

China also seeks to improve relations between regional partners,

evidenced by the China-sponsored agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran for oil transport.

### **4- China's Foreign Policy in the Middle East**

The diplomatic methods adopted by China to facilitate its neutrality involve partnership diplomacy rather than alliances in a region where conflicts abound. This strategy reduces the intensity of competition by cooperating in areas of common interest while managing potential competition. Therefore, the Chinese strategy is based on the development of the "Belt and Road" initiative, confirming that China aspires to have an important impact in the region, which is believed to be one of the most important in the world in the future. China's primary interests are to maintain its relations with great powers and enhance influence and presence in the Eastern region. The Middle East supports economic and military development without getting involved in conflicts that might disrupt the development process, constituting a model contrary to the Western model of the United States, which primarily relies

on engaging in conflicts, evident since World War II”<sup>9</sup>.

China began to create a large network of infrastructure, such as railways, transportation, and power lines, extending to Asia, Africa, and Europe, based on the “principle of peaceful coexistence.”<sup>10</sup>

This principle, based on the sovereignty of countries and non-interference in their affairs, assures cooperating countries of the possibility of achieving similar gains. Although the West views China’s projects as a new form of colonialism that can conquer the world politically and economically, China’s large loans to African countries, for example, aim to impose control over them. However, recent changes and China’s successful mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia indicate the emergence of a new era in the Middle East, potentially

forming an alliance of countries subject to U.S. pressure and sanctions. Russia and China, as new players in the Middle East and international arena, compete with the United States, which tried to form an alliance including the Gulf states and Israel to confront challenges facing the Arab region and the Middle East. Consequently, Russia and China have made the United States search for a new role in the region and globally, creating a hotbed of conflict in the Middle East, countering China’s dominance<sup>11</sup>.

The process of power transformation that China seeks to achieve peacefully will support peace and stability in the region, aiming for peaceful and sustainable development. China enjoys strong influence in the region due to its interests, particularly with Saudi Arabia, the largest importer of Saudi

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<sup>9</sup> Ahmed Diab, Sino-American relations between cooperation and conflict, *International Politics*, Issue 173, Volume 43, July 2008, p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence In 1954, China, India and Myanmar put forward these principles: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression,

mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

<sup>11</sup> Zafar Abdul Matar Al-Tamimi, The Chinese Strategy in the Middle East between Variables and Constants, *Larak Journal of Philosophy, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume One, Issue 40, Year 2021, p. 688.

oil. Between China and the regional countries, there is military, political, and economic cooperation within the “Belt and Road” framework, which China has pushed forward and implemented despite the COVID-19 crisis and global economic challenges from the Russia-Ukraine war”<sup>12</sup>.

Therefore, China's strategic moves are driven by geopolitical aspirations towards the Arabian Gulf region. The goal is to achieve strategic objectives by leveraging developments benefiting the region, expanding the scope of influence, and securing strategic interests in vital geographical areas, including the Arabian Gulf region. China works to strengthen relations with countries in the region at various levels and fields, establishing strategic partnerships, particularly with Saudi Arabia and Iran<sup>13</sup>. This has led to opposition movements restricting China's

regional behavior, making the geographical area a competition and polarization theater for regional and global powers. The centrality of the geographical factor and its contributions to reformulating international power perceptions is evident in the Arabian Gulf region, a strategic focal point for China's ambitions as a rising global power<sup>14</sup>.

The Gulf region, especially following the discovery of gas and oil in the early twentieth century, is crucial in Chinese strategy due to its geographical proximity and ideal economic, technological, and developmental relations with China. China's dependence on energy from the Middle East, at least 60% to meet the production demand, motivates Chinese economic projects and international relations, especially the “Belt and Road” initiative”<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Muhammad bin Saqr Al-Sulami, American-Chinese rivalry and its repercussions on the Middle East region, International Institute for Iranian Studies, Riyadh, 2021, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Scobell and Ali Reza Nad, China in the Middle East, RAND Corporation, California 2016, p. 59.

<sup>14</sup> Basma Abdel Mohsen, A Reading of Gulf-Chinese Relations, Hammurabi Center for Research and Studies, 2014, p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> Firas Abd Hashem and Muhammad Karim Kazem, Thorny Geography: The Gulf Cooperation Council Countries between the Equation of Growing Security Threats and National Security, Al-Warraq Publishing and Distribution Foundation, Amman 2018, p. 37.



China's expansion in the Arabian Gulf region is part of the "Belt and Road" initiative, aiming to increase economic relations with Europe, Africa, and Asia through a wide network of land and sea transport corridors. The Arabic language also forms the main pillar of China's policy towards the region and the primary axis of relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and China.

Chinese relations with the Arabian Gulf region, with its wealth and strategic positions, have become an area of conflict between competing international powers. The region's important corridors impact international shipping traffic, especially Bab al-Mandab, and with the exception of the Suez Canal. China recognizes the importance of navigation in these corridors, ensuring its presence, continued influence, and access to international markets, including the European Union, North Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean. The region's proximity to China, as compared to

the European, American, and African markets, and the availability of purchasing power, especially in oil-producing countries, may push American companies to exert pressure on Middle Eastern governments and markets"<sup>16</sup>.

China is trying to shape relations with Middle Eastern countries and create geopolitical realities reflecting its pivotal role and strength in the region. By building new cooperation and strategic partnerships with diverse nature and dimensions, China redirects issues and experiences towards national interests. This fundamental feature of Chinese policy applies not only to the Arab Gulf countries but to all Middle Eastern countries<sup>17</sup>. It strengthens China's strategic capabilities to confront the United States in vital geographical areas. China is trying to form a quasi-military alliance with Iran by building military bases on the Iranian port of "Chabahar", located in southeastern Iran in the "Sistan" and "Lushestan" province, facilitating contact with the Indian Ocean, the

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<sup>16</sup> Ahmed Abdel-Jabbar Abdullah, The Chinese strategy towards the Gulf region after 2010, Hammurabi Journal of Studies, No. 29, 2019, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Ali Hussein Bakir, Towards Chinese-Gulf Strategic Relations, Opinions on the Gulf Magazine, Gulf Research Center, Issue 18, May 2006, p. 27

Gulf, and the Sea of Oman, thus threatening American interests in the region”<sup>18</sup>.

The United States is making every effort to prevent the expansion of Chinese influence in the Arabian Gulf region and the emergence of other Asian powers challenging its influence in the Middle East. However, China has become a rising central power in the international system, politically, militarily, and economically, threatening U.S. influence and interests globally. This changing U.S. intervention in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf, challenges the Chinese presence and leads to strategic encirclement and containment efforts to secure energy and energy security, requiring cooperation with Iran. The countries of the region are trying to put Iran in control of the Strait of Hormuz's security and potentially building a military base on one of the Iranian islands<sup>19</sup>.

A new American policy to contain China in the region views strategic partnerships with regional countries at the collective or bilateral level, translating into initiatives

related to food, climate change, the energy crisis, or investment in infrastructure in low- and middle-income countries. This policy reveals Washington's new containment strategy against China in the Middle East, based on increased engagement, especially diplomatically, while maintaining a military role in the region. The United States adopts impoverishment policies by imposing harsh sanctions on China and its allies, which makes China treat it in the same way.

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<sup>18</sup> Janan Youssef and Firas Abbas Hashem, *The United States and the Reshaping of the Strategic Environment in Global Geopolitical Spaces*, p. 17

<sup>19</sup> Christina Lin, *The New Silk Road: China's Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East*, The Washington Institute, April 4, 2011.

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