

CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH MENA REGION UNDER XI JINPING: TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Hussain Abbas*

Bilal Habib†

Ronaque Ali Behan‡

Abstract

China has had historical relations with MENA region, though selective and limited to economic needs and interests. China's foreign policy and economic diplomacy activism under Xi Jinping has ushered a new era of multidirectional engagement. China's rise has made it a major actor of the international politics that has now global interests and role. This newly founded engagement in the MENA is mainly based on the Chinese compulsions of maintaining stability in the region. It includes ensuring the undisrupted supplies of energy vital for Chinese economic growth, desire of the regional partner for more financial and developmental investment. This paper endeavours to explore the recent engagement of China in the MENA region. It defines its new partnership discourse and initiatives under the Xi Jinping rule. It explains the nature, dynamics and Challenges to the Chinese ambitions and interests in the region. It concludes that China under Xi has a vision and policy to comprehensively establish relationship with the regional states on bilateral and multilateral levels but challenges to its role in the region loom large. Unless until it manages these challenges, there would be a question mark on the fulfilment of MENA dream.

Key Words: China, MENA, Chinese geo-economic ambitions, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

*Faculty Member, Department of International Relations, the Islamia University of Bahawalpur & PhD Scholar, School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR), Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

†Faculty Member, Department of International Relations, the Islamia University of Bahawalpur.

‡Lecturer, Area Study Center, Far East & Southeast Asia, University of Sindh, Jamshoro. Email: ronaq.ali@usindh.edu.pk (Corresponding Author).

INTRODUCTION

China has turned towards the Middle and the North Africa Region (MENA) for its economic overtures since the start of the 21st Century. It was the Arab Spring that has made China and the MENA countries come closer. On the one hand, China's exponential growth in its economic might and its need of energy supplies from the energy abundant region of the world made it look towards the region. Whereas, countries in the MENA region have come closer to the world's fastest growing powerful economic and trading country China and have started shifting their focus of economic relationship from the United States (US) because of their financial, infrastructural and trading needs and US's incapacity to fulfil those needs.

Historically, MENA region could not attract the Chinese focus partly because of the massive US influence and partly because China was conscious and selective about its 'going-out' engagement strategy with the other regions of the world. Engagement was primarily on the economic relations and trade in essential items particularly in energy products. It was the Arab Spring and its related issues that has made China engage with the region more actively. It was the civil unrest in Libya that forced Chinese to intervene to protect and evacuate their citizens in Libya. This Chinese move was symbolic as it showed the willingness of China to actively pursue its interests and establish presence in the region beyond the economic one. In the aftermaths of the Arab Spring, it was the political and economic stability and the financial needs to cater like the low economic growth along with the US descending interests in facilitating the regional countries to cater the challenges made the Chinese active entry into the region. China's huge financial potential and ever-expanding influence because of its new initiatives like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) along with its close partnership with Russia has made it an attractive major player that can manage the stability in the region in the eyes of the regional states.

China has been very conscious of its role in the MENA region due to the stability and security challenges (Lons, Fulton, Sun, & Al-Tamimi, 2019). Now its interests and ambitions have forced it to engage in the region at multidimensional level. Although China has made inroads to the various structures of the region from political to the security but its prime focus still has been on the geo-economic, trade and investment in the region. This paper analyses the basic questions; why China has actively engaged in the MENA region? What are the historical and recent areas of engagement of China with the region? And Why Chinese approach towards the region has changed under the leadership of Xi Jinping? In the investigation of the phenomenon, qualitative social scientific method of research has been adopted. Content and document analysis technique has been primarily used to explain the research problem by taking an insight from the primary documents, speeches of the Chinese Leaders and the secondary sources like research articles, policy reports and books.

CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH MENA REGION: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

The Sino-MENA relations demand a comprehensive analysis to understand the nature of ties because of different religious values and unshared geographical position. China- MENA relations were established soon after the formation of the People Republic of China. However, the country's leadership was incapable of developing relations with the states in the MENA region because of the then-ongoing chaos in the country and higher hunger level. At the same time, there were also factors, i.e. weak agricultural economy, Japan's occupation of China, and the then-ongoing Chinese Civil War in the country, too. Since the establishment the People's Republic of China, Sino-Arab relations can be categorized into four periods. The first breakthrough in China's diplomacy with the MENA states was in the 1950s with the Bandung Conference's success in 1955, which promoted the five principles of coexistence and initiated diplomatic ties between China and MENA states. In the beginning, China

established diplomatic relations with Egypt, Syria, and Yemen in 1956 (Yao, 2007).

While following Mao's anti-humiliation and foreign meddling ideology, the country joined the Soviet bloc against the US imperialistic camp in the bipolar world during the cold war (Cheng & Zhang, 2009). Soon after joining the Soviet camp, China approached the MENA region and actively supported various nationalists' movements regimes such as the Palestinian Liberation Movement. While staying focused on the anti-colonial policy from 1956 to 1959, China established its bilateral relations with anti-Western regimes in Algeria, Yemen, Morocco, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Sudan. However, China's relations with the rest of the MENA states were not significantly developed till the 1970s, and it kept moderate foreign policy towards the MENA region. Because developing the ties with the East Asian states was the primary objective for China during Mao's era, as the MENA region had nothing much significantly to serve in the region, for what China was looking for at that time.

Deng Xiaoping took control of China in 1978, only two years after Mao's death. Deng opened the outer world for China to bring the country out of poverty by implementing major economic reforms after deserting Mao's agricultural-based economic policies. The new president also encouraged investments influx that faster the development and industrialization in the country. Deng shifted China's foreign policy towards the Middle East form, supporting the leftist movement to a business-oriented approach (Houlden & Zaamount, 2019). Since then, China has been keeping a 'friendship and cooperation policy towards the MENA states.

Establishing relations with the other states based on economic interests is an old trend in diplomatic history. With the end of the cold war, the emergence of uni-polarity and then shifting the international system towards multi-polarity has altered the nature of bilateral ties. Since then, the big powers are more concerned about the political and strategic partnership, to dominate the world, that's states are more

interested in making new partnership, despite existing the broad economic and military power gap. One of the key benefits of strategic alliances is getting prepared for the collective efforts for regional integration. The historic words of Chinese president Jiang Zemin also pointed towards Chinese farsightedness towards this contemporary trend a long ago. In 1997, he stated, "under both global and regional profiles, and in both political and economic fields, multi-polarity is becoming a trend. Several powers or groups can no longer monopolize the world nor dominate the fate of other countries. Relations among major powers continue to change, and multi-polarization is on the horizon" (Sun & Zoubir, 2014).

The contemporary Sino-MENA relations are based on three bases, i.e. a shared traditional friendship, the win-win trade cooperation, and both sides' strategic interests. Today, the Chinese economy's continuous development has increased its dependency on fuel energy, raw materials, and overseas markets. Today, globalization had already interwoven the countries in the framework of cooperation in the economic domains. However, instead of making warm relations with the developed economies, China preferred to explore the overseas markets to reach its oversupplied products. For that, the geographical location from East Asia to West Asia, and from North Africa to West Africa, owes a significant potential for the Chinese economic rise (Sun & Zoubir, 2014).

At the beginning of the 21st century, the tragic attack of 9/11 intensified the western desire for power expansion. It posed significant challenges for the MENA states. In the continuation of US desire, NATO was expended towards the east, and the US made alliances with Japan and Australia. This expansion of NATO and US-emerging alliance negatively harmed the Chinese interests, while emerging India is another threat to the Chinese position in the region and beyond. To deal with this emerging threat and power unbalance in the international system, China and the Arab countries built a strategic partnership. In the continuation of deepening ties, China

and Arab states also established the Chinese Arab States Cooperation Agreement – a forum dialogue initiative— in 2004. Since then, the political exchange between the two-sides has also been increased. The two sides have also been opposing the hegemonies of great powers and promoting cultural diversification and multi-polarisation in the region. Today, the world is depicting the situation of 'strong west with weak east, strong north with weak south'.

CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS MENA REGION UNDER XI JINPING

China's role in the MENA region has increased under President Xi's leadership. The various projects under the BRI gave new avenues for cooperation to China and MENA states. Traditionally, the partnership was limited to the exchange of energy and daily life-essential goods. These bilateral relations were broadened under the BRI from partial collaboration to multidimensional cooperation, in which China is determined to develop infrastructure and increase trade-investments in the MENA region. Beside it, China is also assisting the MENA's states in developing the nuclear power industry, space satellites and new means of energy production. In return, MENA's states fulfil China's energy requirements to keep its economic growth at a fast pace (Ming, 2020).

Countering the US - economically and strategically and the fulfilment of energy needs are the leading Chinese interest in engaging with states in the MENA region. Yet, Beijing got these fulfilled except one related to counter the US strategically. Today, despite having a multidimensional partnership with the regional states, China still has less appetite for challenging the existing US-led security cooperation in the region (Lons, Fulton, Sun, et al., 2019). Recently, China and Iran drafted a comprehensive energy and security plan to open up ways for billions of dollars of Beijing's investments in Tehran. However, military assistance, training and intelligence sharing could be alarming for Washington (Fassihi & Myers, 2020). The proposed

agreement indicates China is not becoming a part of any actor in the MENA region's regional conflict but encouraging the Beijing-based companies to invest in Iran is also undermining the Chinese efforts to promote peace and stability in the region.

New Partnership Approach

In extra regional affairs Chinese foreign policy approach under the Xi Jinping is based on the new models of 'Community of Common Destiny' and 'New Type of International Relations.' Where China focuses on the preservation of its core interests, it has adopted the new approach towards the region of its interests particularly MENA, Latin America and Africa on the non-zero-sum basis. As it had been the victim of the imperialist power during the hundred years period before its independence as People's Republic of China, it has embarked a mission of countering imperialism and hegemonism (Jinping, 2014). These notions are also adopted to counter the China threat thesis that means that China's rise will resultantly help its expansion of influence and establishment of hegemony in the region and beyond. China's approach towards the developing world is based on the notions of common interests, mutual benefits and mutual respect (Jinping, 2014). It emphasizes on the need for peaceful co-existence, non-confrontation and non-interference principles derived mainly from five principles of peaceful co-existence:[§] the founding principles of Chinese foreign policy.

China has adopted the discourse of 'Community of Common Destiny' in its relations with the developing world. China believes that the regions in the global south share common challenges of development and hence need common efforts to advance their development path. They also have a common destiny that can be achieved with collective

[§] The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are 1. Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. 2. Mutual non-aggression. 3. Mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs 4. Equality and cooperation for mutual benefit. 5. Peaceful co-existence

efforts. Chinese common destiny discourse particularly focusses on the notions of shared, commonality and collective destiny. Analysis of various speeches of Xi Jinping provided that this discourse's basic premise is on mutual respect and collaboration and cooperation on the variety of the issues of the globe instead of the conventional model of relations linked with the cold war mentality (Jinping, 2013).

China regards the developing world and global south as the foundation for the change in the international order (Marks, 2020). Particularly, energy rich MENA region is regarded as crucial for Chinese energy needs and a strategic asset in an event of conflict with the US. MENA region is for China a zone of balance of power against the US. Under the new policy approach China has started a collaborative 'going out strategy' towards MENA region. China has focused on the expansion of its partnership network in the region. It has embarked upon a comprehensive strategy of establishing bilateral and multilateral engagement with the big regional powers and with those that are important for China geo-economically and geo-politically. It has to peacefully and amicably serve its energy and commercial interests and to dispel any potential threat from the US by neutralizing the states under American influence.

CHINESE GEO-ECONOMIC AMBITIONS AND INTERESTS IN THE MENA REGION

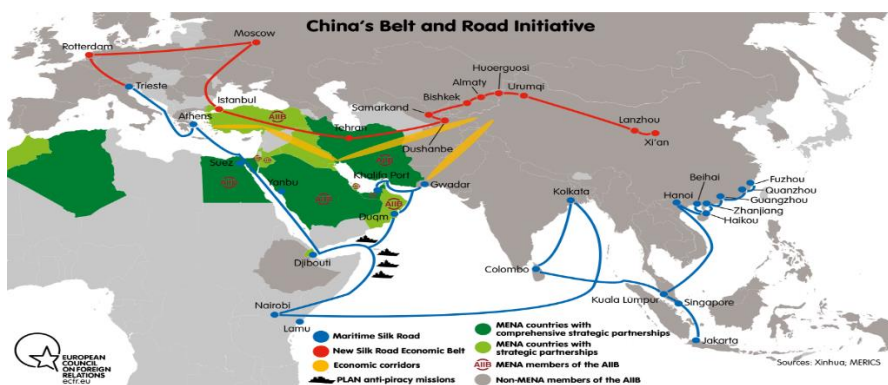
China's interests in the MENA region, have increased manifold due to which her relations with the regional actors have strengthened in the recent times. President Xi's vision to enrich more the ongoing China's rapid economic development, is compelling the policy makers to adopt holistic aggressive foreign policy approach towards MENA region, to meet dire need of required natural resources. Besides it, China is also expanding and strengthening its relations with the states in the MENA region for different factors; national security and economic concerns, desire of power influence, elimination of the regional rivalry to attain peace and the fulfilment

of power gap appeared after the Arab Spring. Xi Jinping in his speech at the Arab League headquarters outlined its vision of cooperation with the MENA region and specifically with the Arab world. He said, “we would like to be the builders of peace, promoters of development, boosters of industrialization, supporters of stability, and partners of people-to people exchanges in the Middle East.” (Jingping, 2014). This focus on the peace, stability, trade and investment, and people to people contacts are the basic pillars of Chinese interests in the region.

The Start of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has given a new height of significance to the Chinese- Middle Eastern geo-economic relationship. MENA region is now regarded as a pivot to Chinese developmental and economic ambitions through BRI as it is at the juncture of the three continents of the world and retains a geostrategic significance for China and its trade initiatives. Under this lofty initiative China aims at three overarching interests: Firstly, it wants to attain a win-win economic outcome in the region as it wants to help grow the regional partners’ economy that will in response boost demand of Chinese products in the region. Secondly, through establishing connectivity with the Middle East and other regions through western parts of China will assure reduction of imbalance between its eastern and western parts thus ensure its inclusive development and rejuvenation project. Causal rationale in this approach is that the development in the western part of China like Xinjiang region will ease tensions between Beijing and Muslim minorities and ultimately reduce extremism and separatism. Lastly, successful infrastructural and developmental projects and comprehensive partnerships with the regional states are envisioned as vital to the success of the BRI that will reduce Chinese strategic dilemma of dependence on the Malacca Strait as 80% percent of its oil imports flow from through South China Sea. Success of this part of BRI is very much necessary in the wake of new tensions between China and US and its allies in the region. Any naval blockade by its adversaries would hard hit the energy and trade flows to and from

China that is the backbone of its economy (Mohseni-Cheraghloou, 2021).

On the other hand, now many countries in the MENA have aligned their strategies for sustainable development with China's BRI, that help them to shift alternative energy resources to oil. It is the result of dense engagement; China has marked the largest investment in the region. In 2018, China announced 20\$ billion loan packages for the reconstitution in the region, and allocated 3\$ dollar for banking sector (Staff, 2018). Along it, she also projected various concessional and commercial loans to facilitate the central bank and funded mega infrastructural projects that utilize Chinese labour and accommodate her state-owned companies. There has also been a trade boom between the two sides, which has reached to \$245 billion, and out of 10 big e-commerce companies, 5 of them are from China. With the promotion of E-commerce, the total MENA's e-commerce volume would reach to 49\$ billion by the end of 2021 (Reporter, 2021).



Source: https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/

RECENT AREAS OF COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND THE MENA COUNTRIES

Economic and Trade Relations

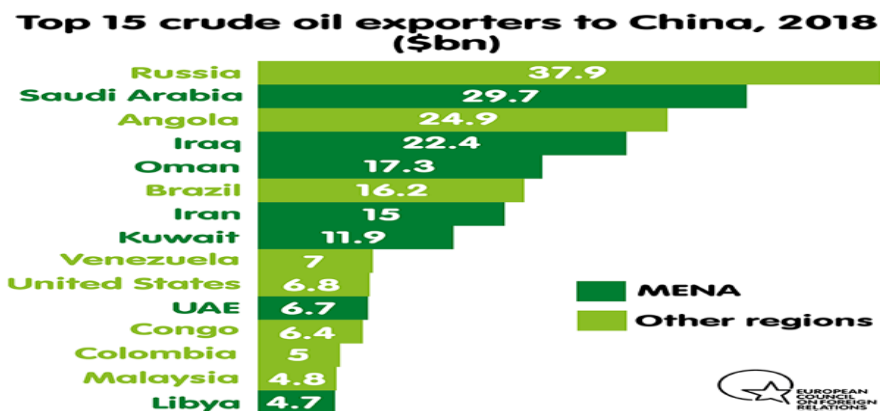
Economic ties are the key drivers for China's economic expansion and projection into new regions in the contemporary era. China's

economic relations have a wide cooperation diversity which ranges from cultural exchange to security cooperation, including investment and trade agreements, currency exchange, and infrastructural development. China is utilizing these collaborations to measure its influence in the region and beyond. Today, Chinese relations with other states are based on three aspects, i.e. the partnering states' dependence on the Chinese market, the strength of their (partnering states) relations with the US, and their strategic importance for China. While considering these primary classifications, Beijing decides which strategy she has to opt-in dealing with neighbouring states. The BRI is the perfect example of this model in which China offers economic incentives to other states (Marks, 2020).

Infrastructure development is the centre of BRI's gravitational field. The expansion through trade and economics has become the principal tool for China's foreign policy. Under XI's administration. Since 2013, China and MENA are cultivating new avenues for joint development under the BRI initiative. The Chinese involvement in the MENA region can be classified into four main layers i.e., comprehensive strategic partnerships, innovative-comprehensive partnerships, strategic partnerships with several medium-sized countries and relationships with the smaller states. Comprehensive strategic partnerships are with Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, Innovative-comprehensive partnerships with Israel and Turkey, strategic partnerships with several medium-sized countries refer to the bilateral relations with countries like Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. While the relations with Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, come under the fourth layer (Chaziza, 2020a).

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Israel, and Iran are the leading potential partner of China in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is the largest trading partner for China in West Asia, while China has become the largest trading partner of Saudi Arabia. China and Saudi Arabia are assisting each other for combined development. Chinese firms are working on building and developing the Saudi

infrastructure. In return, Saudi Arabia is engaged in establishing refineries and petrochemical production facilities in China. After China, UAE is the largest trading partner of China. More than 200000 Chinese workers settle in UAE, and the Dubai port is a logistic hub for Chinese goods. China's relations with Egypt have strengthened in the recent five years. Chinese firms are working to establish Egypt's new capital in the desert outside of Cairo- the existing one. Egyptian President Sisi visited China six times since assuming the charge in 2014, compared to only two trips to the US (Alterman, 2019). Due to the dense technological cooperation, Egypt owns a significant value for China. China is engaging in Egypt's infrastructure development and in building tunnels for light rail. Both countries have also signed the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement in December 2014 (Calabrese, 2020). Iran is the next strategic destination for China. She gives the trade route that the US Navy cannot disrupt. Recently, it claimed that China and Iran are about to enter into a 25 year strategic partnership in trade, culture, politics, and security (Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2020).



Political Relations

China uses a wide range of tools for its political engagement in the MENA region, in which conflict management and conflict mediation

are the prominent ones. China establishes balanced ties with regional opponents and makes them partners in BRI, which helps China boost her influence in the MENA region, which would endure peace and stability. The Chinese attempt to mediate in the regional conflicts testifies her wishes to bring harmony among the region's opposing states. In the case of Israel and Palestine, China possesses equal ties with each state. She has firm support for Palestine and has strong economic and technological relations with Israel. In 2017, Chinese President XI proposed his four-point solution to smoothen the two conflicting states' relations (Staff, 2017). Besides, Chinese companies are taking much interest in exploring trade potential in Israel. The Chinese entrepreneur Jack Ma also participated in Innovation Conference hosted by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 2018 and appreciated the Israel efforts to open up avenues for foreign investors. However, limitations also exist with these growing bilateral ties. China also condemned the US -an old ally of Israel, decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital (Lei Wang, 2017).

In 2016, China also made efforts to mediate between the Assad's government and the Syrian opposition, as any damaging regional development could harm her national objective and interests, particularly BRI, based in the region. Before it, Beijing also actively intervened in South Sudan in 2013 to protect the country's economic interests and ensure political stability. Since then. China has been continuously investing in South Sudan's oil field and promoting peace by sending it peacekeeping troops (Nyabiage, 2020). In developing relations with Iran, China faces numerous challenges and painful dilemmas in maturing its ties with Iran. She is willing to strengthen ties with Tehran without deteriorating the latter's relations with Washington. The existing reluctance in nuclear cooperation with Iran is the best example of China's regional peace commitments. China also slowed down its nuclear collaboration with Iran in 2019 and minimized the Chinese cooperation in the country due to fear of increasing US sanctions on Iran (Jeong-ho, 2019). However, Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and the leverage given to Iran

to establish linkages with foreign identities refer to the US's flexible approach towards Iran's foreign (Humeyra & Mohammed, 2020). The same scenario observed in China's relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia – the MENA region's two biggest rivals. Though China is the largest trading partner for Saudi Arabia, she does not prioritize or even considers her dense trade relations with Saudi Arabia to develop Iran's relations (Riadel, 2020).

Strategic Engagements

With the increasing trend of economic and political engagements, China has been making efforts to increase its regional strategic engagement in the Middle East. She has signed 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' agreements with states in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, Qatar, Egypt, and conducts annual ministerial-level dialogue each year since 2010 (Tawil, 2018) (Xinhua, 2017)(Xinhua, 2017). The Chinese role in the MENA is generally neutral, and she has proved herself 'the friend of all, the enemy of none' as she enjoys working relations with all the stakeholders in the region. China's military involvement in the MENA region became more visible in the last decade. It deployed 700 combat troops in South Sudan as a part of US-sanctioned peacekeeping missions and legislated a new law to oversee anti-terrorism operations in the regions (Smith, 2014). Such manoeuvres endorsed China's balanced approach towards the Middle East and her efforts to ensure peace and stability in the region. In 2017, China also established her first permanent in Djibouti to overseas multiple tasks, including military cooperation, joint exercises, evacuating and protecting Chinese nationals residing overseas and emergency rescue operations, and jointly maintaining the security of international strategic seaways (Xuejing, 2017). Despite maturing relations with the MENA region, China does not harm any US interests in the region. The growing Chinese influence is not the reaction of the US's rebalance approach towards the Middle East. US and China's interests overlap in the region as both are willing to access the Middle East's energy

resources. For that, China opts 'Way Dragon' strategy – achieve and protect the interests while opting neutral position in the regional conflicts, towards Middle East (Scobell & Nader, 2017).

CHALLENGES

Recent cycle of crises in the MENA region has posed various challenges that have a key impact on the interests of the regional and international players. Chinese interests in the regions have specifically been challenged due to the recent trends in geo-economic and geostrategic trends. As Chinese interest and influence expands in the region, challenges to its policy looms large. The conflict of interests between regional and international actors, issues of stability and security, trade and investment competition and global pandemic and its repercussions are the factors detrimental to China's ambitions and interests in the MENA region one or another way (Jr, 2020).

Understanding the regional dynamics is one of the important factors, any change in regional settings can cause destruction and even wars can occur, that may delay or risk silk road construction. Chinese BRI in the views of many analysts considers a technique of increasing China's sphere of influence (Chaziza, 2020b). Middle East is under influence of major powers like the US and Russia, the carrying out of BRI cannot be an easy task in these circumstances. The Middle East is a place where great powers exhibit their capabilities and engage in proxy warfare. Russia has emerged as a powerbroker in the Middle East managing a greater role, involving militarily in regional conflict mainly in the case of Syria, and playing its role to figure out Iran nuclear issue by involving UNSC. Taking the case of China, it has supported Moscow's stance, but China has to be more active in political issues of the Middle East as it aims for a long involvement in the region (Jin, 2017). To achieve its objectives China has to play a greater role in influencing regional dynamics.

The other issue is regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran which is a key matter in the region, as they involve in proxy wars in

Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq that has created an atmosphere of strategic competition for the establishment of relative sphere of influence in the region (Mirza et al., 2021). Iran and Saudi Arabia also play role in fuelling sectarian hostility across the Muslim World (Haiquan, 2017). On the other hand, the contention between Iran and the US, US restoration of sanctions on Iran is a hurdle for China to progress the BRI. Iran is a prominent country as it is located at the junction of Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), Maritime Silk Road (MSRI), and China-Central Asia-West Asia (CCAWA) economic corridor; a prospective strategic hub that will link the Middle East, Central and South Asia that is located at the crossroad of SREB and the MSR.

As Iran has a strategic edge and has plentiful oil and gas reserves, it is potentially expected that China perceives the inclusion of Iran into BRI so essential. China has a clear strategy towards the Middle East through the BRI is that to involve in activities that are related to economic progress and distance itself from interfering in the region's political associations. While China desires to maintain a balance among the regional states those having bitter relations (McGurk, 2019). Besides geopolitical struggles, China also has to address the economic and worsening humanitarian conditions. China also has to face the power dynamics of hostile states: Israel against the Arab states mainly Iran as it has proxies functioning in the region. Saudi Arabia is against Iran as they have large oil reserves and they expect more imports from them; however, China also has limits of its oil consumption (Alterman, 2013; Tiezzi Shannon, 2016). This situation poses a problem for China, and she struggles to maintain balance with them as China cannot choose one over the other.

China also has to take into consideration the threat that terrorist organizations and extremist groups pose to the Middle East. These groups can target the BRI infrastructure which can result in great loss of funds. The safety of Chinese workers is also a matter of concern, and they can be abducted or even killed by these organizations for

their interests that can be political or economic. China has taken steps to create a secure environment by the de-radicalization of the region that is supported by several states in the Middle East. (Qiblawi, 2019).

Sea power has remained an important element for great powers to increase their influence and so is the case with China in the Middle East. To tackle the issue of piracy, China has extended its operations to the Gulf of Aden- a vital passage for Persian Gulf oil. China expanded its anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. It also sent its guided-missile destroyer and frigate to the Gulf of Aden, off the Somalian coast in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean(*China Deploys New Missile Destroyer, Frigate in Its Anti-Piracy Fleet*, 2019). Even though these operations were followed by the call of the international community and with the approval of UNSC, and China has established a logistical support base in Djibouti in 2017 (Jin, 2020). These operations have international legitimacy but the growing presence of China is a subject of apprehension for the west.

As China is taking part in the industrialization of the Middle East, however, there is a risk of western influence. At first, Middle Eastern states tenderly receive the Chinese investment, however, as time passes the excitement is fading. The rationale following this change is that many analysts are of their view that these projects are more beneficial for China than the recipient states. The growing number of Chinese workers is another issue instead of the availability of jobs for locals. There are rising concerns about the environmental changes, debt issues, and raising suspicion about China's motivations (Jinping, 2019). Corruption is an additional nuisance as most Middle Eastern states are below 50 in the corruption perceptions index 2019 (*Corruption Perceptions Index*, 2019). In several Middle Eastern states, there is Political instability, economic issues, wars, internal conflicts, and corruption that make all these things worse.

CONCLUSION

As China's goal and role goes global, MENA region has become vital for its geo-economic and geostrategic interests. Engagement with MENA region under Xi Jinping has witnessed a new dynamism at major areas of cooperation. It has made the Middle Eastern states active in aligning and realigning their policies towards the regional and international players. As MENA region has plentiful possessions of oil and gas, China looks toward this region because of its growing need for energy and to sustain its rapid economic growth. While the motivation behind MENA states' engagements with China rests on the fact that they are looking for a new friend who has plenty of economic resources to gain investment and partly because of the reduced capacity and willingness of the US to serve the financial needs of these distressed states.

Historically, China's engagement with MENA region remained selective and limited to economic activity. Major reason of involvement in the region remained to ensure the protected and sustainable energy supplies. The happenings of Arab spring and its consequences made China play active role in the region. China for the first time directly engages in this region to save its nationals during the happening of the Libyan crisis in 2011. This was the first political and security engagement of China's engagement in this region that has ushered a new era of comprehensive interaction with the region at bilateral and multilateral level.

The Chinese massive financial status and growing influence since pulling together initiatives like BRI and AIIB and joint ventures with Russia made it possible for China to play the role of a key player that can make this region economically stable. China is expected to play greater in the region to maintain stability, fulfil the developmental needs of the region and play a responsible role in shouldering the burden of peace and development of the region. As challenges to Chinese policy and role in the region loom large it has to take various geo-economic and geopolitical measure to pacify tensions, manage

crises like address political issues among the MENA states, fulfil infrastructure and developmental needs of the regional partners and promote soft power in the region if it wants to satisfy its needs, pursue its interests and enhance its status at global level. In doing so China has a will, resource and capacity to comprehensively establish a new era of engagement with the MENA region.

REFERENCES

- Alterman, J. B. (2013). *China's Balancing Act in the Gulf*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/node/24378>
- Alterman, J. B. (2019). *Middle East Notes and Comment: China's Middle East Model*. Middle East Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/middle-east-notes-and-comment-chinas-middle-east-model>
- Calabrese, J. (2020). *Towering Ambitions: Egypt and China Building for the Future*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/towering-ambitions-egypt-and-china-building-future>
- Chaziza, M. (2020a). *China's partnership diplomacy and the successful implementation of the BRI*. Asia Dialogue. <https://theasiadialogue.com/2020/03/25/chinas-partnership-diplomacy-and-the-successful-implementation-of-the-bri/>
- Chaziza, M. (2020b). *Geopolitical and Geo-economics Challenges to China's Silk Road Strategy in the Middle East*. Middle East Institute. https://www.mei.edu/publications/geopolitical-and-geo-economic-challenges-chinas-silk-road-strategy-middle-east?fbclid=IwAR1Vm3LLNvWTE5hDAmNzK3PJlnaZh_aF-4YrHBa0KNZkTDxdzibsDELGt4g

- China deploys new missile destroyer, frigate in its anti-piracy fleet.* (2019). The Economic Times. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-deploys-new-missile-destroyer-frigate-in-its-anti-piracy-fleet/articleshow/68724333.cms?from=mdr>.
- Corruption Perceptions Index 2019.* (2019). Transparency International. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/index/nzl>
- Fassihi, F., & Myers, S. L. (2020). *Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership.* The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/world/asia/china-iran-trade-military-deal.html>
- Haiquan, L. (2017). The Security Challenges of the “One Belt, One Road” Initiative and China’s Choices. *Croatian International Relations Review*, XVIII(510), 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cirr-2017-0010>
- Houlden, G. /, & Zaamount, N. M. (2019). *China’s Middle East Balancing Approach.*
- Humeyra, P., & Mohammed, A. (2020). *U.S. renews sanctions waivers allowing Iran nonproliferation work.* Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-usa-idUSKBN21H33D>
- Jeong-ho, L. (2019). *China scales back Iran nuclear cooperation ‘due to fears of US sanctions.* South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2184512/china-scales-back-iran-nuclear-cooperation-due-fears-us>
- Jin, L. (2017). China’s Role in the Middle East: Current Debates and Future Trends. *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 05(01), 39–55.
- Jingping, X. (2014). *The Governance of China.* Foreign Languages Press.
- Jinping, X. (2014). *China’s Xi pledges to ‘fight corruption’ at Belt and Road summit.* Foreign Language Press.

- Jinping, X. (2019). *China's Xi pledges to 'fight corruption' at Belt and Road summit*. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2019/4/26/chinas-xi-pledges-to-fight-corruption-at-belt-and-road-summit>
- Jr, H. A. S. (2020). Middle East Geopolitics and China-India Strategic Interaction in the New Era. *Https://Doi.Org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1760541*, 14(2), 179–193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1760541>
- Lei Wang. (2017). *Why 65 countries refuse to condemn US over Jerusalem*. CGTN. https://news.cgtn.com/news/306b444e33637a6333566d54/share_p.html
- Liangxiang. Jin. (2020). *China and Middle East Security Issues: Challenges, Perceptions and Positions*. AI Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/china-and-middle-east-security-issues-challenges-perceptions-and-positions>
- Lons, C., Fulton, J., Sun, D., & Al-Tamimi, N. (2019). *China's great game in the Middle East*. European Council on Foreign Relations. https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/
- Lons, C., Fulton, J., Sun, D., & Al-Tamimi. (2019). *China's great game in the Middle East*. European Council on Foreign Relations. https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/
- Marks, J. (2020). *China's Pursuit of a "Strategic Fulcrum" in the Middle East*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-pursuit-strategic-fulcrum-middle-east>
- McGurk, B. (2019). *China's Risky Middle East Bet*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/chinas-risky-middle-east-bet/588166/>
- Ming, L. (2020). *China's BRI in the Middle East: Dynamics, New Developments and Challenges* | ISPI. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. <https://www.ispionline.it>

/en/publication/chinas-bri-middle-east-dynamics-new-developments-and-challenges-24947

- Mirza, M. N., Abbas, H., & Qaisrani, I. H. (2021). Structural Sources of Saudi–Iran Rivalry and Competition for the Sphere of Influence: *<https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211032642>*, 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211032642>
- Mohseni-Cheraghloou, A. (2021). *MENA at the center of the West: China's "opening up to the West" strategy*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/mena-center-west-chinas-opening-west-strategy>
- Nyabiage, J. (2020). *China welcomes 'encouraging developments' in South Sudan as rivals form unity government*. South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3052060/china-welcomes-encouraging-developments-south-sudan-rivals>
- Qiblawi, T. (2019). *Muslim nations are defending China as it cracks down on Muslims, shattering any myths of Islamic solidarity*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/17/asia/uyghurs-muslim-countries-china-intl/index.html>
- Reporter, S. (2021). *Mena gears up for unveiling of 100 most powerful icons in \$1trillion retail industry*. Khaleej Times. <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/business/mena-gears-up-for-unveiling-of-100-most-powerful-icons-in-1trillion-retail-industry>
- Riadel, B. (2020). *Saudi Arabia's relations with China: Functional, but not strategic*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/saudi-arabias-relations-with-china-functional-but-not-strategic/>
- Saleh, A., & Yazdanshenas, Z. (2020). *Iran and China Have Signed a Strategic Pact. That's Bad News for the West*. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/09/irans-pact-with-china-is-bad-news-for-the-west/>

- Scobell, A., & Nader, A. (2017). China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon. In *RAND Cooperation*. RAND Corporation. <https://doi.org/10.7249/rr1229>
- Smith, D. (2014). *China to send 700 combat troops to South Sudan*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/23/china-700-combat-troops-south-sudan-africa-battalion-un-peacekeeping>
- Staff, R. (2018). *China's Xi pledges \$20 billion in loans to revive Middle East*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-arabstates-idUSKBN1K0072>
- Staff, T. (2017). *China pushes four-point Israeli-Palestinian peace plan*. The Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/china-pushes-four-point-israeli-palestinian-peace-plan/>
- Sun, D., & Zoubir, Y. (2014). China-Arab States Strategic Partnership: Myth or Reality? *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, 8(3), 70–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19370679.2014.12023246>
- Tawil, N. El. (2018). *Details of Egyptian-Chinese agreements, prospective partnerships – Egypt Today*. Egypt Today. <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/59533/Details-of-Egyptian-Chinese-agreements-prospective-partnerships>
- Tiezzi Shannon. (2016). *China's Stake in the Saudi Arabia-Iran Clash*. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/chinas-stake-in-the-saudi-arabia-iran-clash/>
- Xi Jinping Calls for the Building of New Type of International Relations with Win-Win Cooperation at the Core in a Speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations*. (2013). Retrieved from https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpcf1_665694/t1024781.shtml

- Xinhua. (2017). *China, Saudi Arabia agree to boost all-round strategic partnership*. Xinhuanet. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/16/c_136134528.htm
- Xuejing, W. (2017). *China's first overseas military base opens in Djibouti*. CGTN. https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d6b7a4e3241544e/share_p.html
- Yao, K. (2007). Development of Sino-Arab Relations and the Evolution of China's Middle East Policy in the New Era. *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, 1(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19370679.2007.12023099>
- Cheng, J. Y., & Zhang, F. W., (2009). Chinese Foreign Relation Strategies Under Mao and Deng: A Systematic and Comparative Analysis. *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*