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## **From Economic to Geopolitical Policy: The Middle East on the Silk Road**

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#### ***Abstract***

The article aims to present and evaluate the activities and politics of the People's Republic of China in the Middle East, and to define its objectives through the Silk Project. It will provide an overview of the most important changes in the Chinese foreign and political policy, and the importance of the Middle East, particularly the Silk Road to China, and it will try to answer the following questions: How important is the Middle East for the Silk Road? Will the Chinese project bring stability to the region in light of the fierce competition between the great powers? The article adopted the hypothesis that China's involvement in the Middle East will deepen the conflict between the countries of the region among themselves, and thus become a fertile ground for international conflicts to the international conflict.

**Keywords:** Silk Road; China; Middle East; Geopolitics

## От экономики до геополитики: Ближний Восток на Шелковом Пути

### Аннотация

В статье проводится анализ и дается оценка действий и политики Китайской Народной Республики на Ближнем Востоке, а также целей, на достижение которых направлен «Шелковый Проект». Данное исследование показывает важнейшие изменения в международной политике КНР, важное значение Ближнего Востока и особенно Шелкового пути для Китая, а также попытается ответить на следующие вопросы: насколько важен Ближний Восток для Шелкового пути; может ли китайский проект благоприятствовать стабильности региона, особенно в условиях роста гонки сверхдержав? Статья основывается на гипотезе, что вовлечение Китая в дела Ближнего Востока только усилит конфликты между странами региона и таким образом создаст плодородную почву для международных конфликтов.

*Ключевые слова:* Шелковый путь, Китай, Ближний Восток, геополитика

### Introduction

With the beginning of the second millennium, the interest of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Middle East increased, coinciding with its rising economic growth, which necessitated it to satisfy its need of the energy available in this region. Since then, Beijing has endeavored to establish close partnership and cooperation relations with all countries in the region without disclosing the preference of one country over another. For a long time now, the wary dragon policy has still dominated China's foreign policy trajectory toward the region (Scobell, Nader, 2016, p. 5). Beijing is not concerned with the internal affairs of states or the nature of their political regimes, as long as those regimes achieve its economic interests. In contrast to the Western powers that put pressure on these regimes and criticize their behavior on issues related to democracy and freedoms. In this regard, some observers, including Abdel-Bari Atwan, consider that the West's interference in the affairs of Arab countries aims primarily to blackmail their political regimes, to subjugate them to its influence, and thus to achieve the interests of the West (Atwan, 2016).

In 2011, the Middle East, particularly in the Arab countries, witnessed the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions that led to the toppling of some of their political regimes, especially those that enjoyed close relations with Beijing. As a result, PRC felt that its economic interests in the region were under threat. Therefore, it began thinking about adjusting its policy towards the countries of the region, which was limited to some small investments to investing in large strategic projects through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI, launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, is nothing but a tool for China's foreign policy to protect its interests and secure its energy sources. During his speech to the BRI International Forum in Beijing in (May 14, 2017) (BRF, 2017), Xi described the BRI in terms of "peace and cooperation, mutual learning and mutual benefit", to persuade reluctant countries to participate in the initiative. However, these concepts do not indicate a new strategy for Beijing, through which it can achieve its goals. Rather, there is an important strategic goal, which is its quest to lead the global economy, or at least to be a strong competitor, and to put forward an alternative system to the economic Consensus system led by the United States since the end of World War II (BRF, 2017; Tomaszewska, Dahl, 2020, p. 70).

The Middle East falls within the interests of the Chinese initiative due to its geopolitical importance and abundant energy resources. Through the initiative, PRC seeks to achieve economic goals primarily through investments in strategic projects in several areas such as highways and ports, in addition to developing the energy sector – oil and gas. The other goal is geopolitical, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The first part of it starts from western China – Pakistan, and from there through the port of Gwadar to the Arabian Sea from to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. China attaches great importance to implementing this road, because it is considered an alternative to the roads in its South Sea and the Malacca Strait dilemma.

Its energy resources – oil – and its geographical location between three continents, gave the Middle East region a distinct strategic importance, thus it became a ground for international competition and conflict, dividing countries into allies – partners or enemies of certain countries. Sometimes this rivalry affects the nature of the relations among the countries of the region, and the relations of the countries of the region with the major powers.

## China's foreign policy

The Chinese call the period from 1839 to 1949 “Century of humiliation” to describe a period of intervention and subjugation of the Chinese Empire and the Republic of China by Western powers, Russia and Japan that led to a massive loss of their lands (Rachman, 2017, p. 17; Marszałek-Kawa, 2014). But the end of the 1946–1949<sup>1</sup> Civil War marked a major turning point in modern Chinese history when the Communist Party of China (CCP)<sup>2</sup> gained control of nearly the entire mainland and established the People's Republic of China (PRC) to replace the Republic of China (ROC)<sup>3</sup>. With the beginning of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, (PRC), led by Mao Zedong<sup>4</sup>, realized that its survival as an underdeveloped agricultural country without developed industry made it a weak and threatened country. In order to put PRC in the ranks of industrialized countries, Mao launched the policy of the Great Leap Forward in 1958 (Dexter, 2016, p. 68). Mao's economic policy backfired on the Chinese economy. Peasants' emigration of their lands and going to work in factories in cities led to the neglect of the agricultural sector in favor of industrial. Consequently, the largest famine in history took place, which was called the Great Chinese Famine, which killed around 30–45 million Chinese citizens (Dexter, 2016, p. 60). Ironically, some Westerners believe that PRC, in its struggle to eradicate famine, was forced to buy wheat from enemy countries that have capitalist economy.

Two years after Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping became chairman of the CPC Central Committee in 1978. Deng became the architect of Chinese reform by adopting an economic vision that contributed to the country's achievement of a major economic boom. In his prophecy, which he launched

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<sup>1</sup> The first phase spanned between 1927–1937.

<sup>2</sup> The former Chinese Socialist Party.

<sup>3</sup> The Independent Republic of China was established after the overthrow of the Chinese Empire. It ruled most of the lands of China, Mongolia, and contemporary Taiwan from 1912 until its end after the patriots lost the Chinese Civil War in favor of the Chinese Communist Party. The Nationalists then retreated to Taiwan while the Chinese Communist Party proclaimed the People's Republic of China on the Chinese mainland in 1949.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as Chairman Mao.

in 1978, he said that China needs half a century to complete the process of modernization and political and economic control. He realized the mistakes of his predecessor, calling for a comprehensive review of the internal policy in the economy, in addition to a review of the foreign policy and China's relationship with the countries of the world. Internally, Deng called for the adoption of a dual system that combines the central state governed by one party - the CCP - and the market economy system with a socialist cover (Cable, 2017, p. 1-4). Socialism was not removed from the literature of the Chinese Communist Party, but was mixed with the market system, or as it was expressed as "... socialism and the market economy are not in opposition (...) we should be concerned about the deviations of the right wing, but more than that, we must be more concerned about the deviations of the left wing" (Fischer, 2020).

Later, the hybrid policy saved the Chinese economy and greatly contributed to its development until it became the most prosperous in the world. In its foreign relations with the countries of the world, Deng called for the development of the foreign policy of PRC and openness to the countries of the world, while preserving some of the foundations of the beginnings of the Red Revolution based on improving the standard of living and opposing the forces of Western hegemony. Reforms in foreign policy later became known as the Deng Xiaoping Doctrine. This doctrine consists of seven principles, which are often reduced to the rule of hiding one's own abilities, the aim of which is to conceal the capabilities of the people of China in front of its opponents. Later this doctrine dominated China's foreign policy in the 1990s, specifically during the era of President Jiang Zemin (Brona, 2018, p. 230-231). Through this doctrine, the *Sleeping Dragon* was able to hide its economic and military capabilities at a critical time represented in the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the dominance of the United States over the world order.

At the beginning of the second millennium, China partially modified its foreign policy and showed part of its strength in international affairs. The invasion of Iraq by the United States and Britain in 2003 and the overthrow of its regime, without going back to UN Security Council resolutions, prompted China to show part of its strength, but with its keenness that its anti-Western policy does not have connotations of a superpower in order not to arouse

the suspicions of the United States, and consequently enter into a cold war with it, as happened to the Soviet Union.

In 2005, Chinese President Hu Jintao presented to the United Nations General Assembly the concept of “the harmonious world” as an alternative to the world of ally and enemy, or as President George W. Bush called it “you are either with us, or against us” after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (U.S Congress, 2002). A harmonious world according to Jintao’s view includes four principles concerning international issues: pluralism, building mutually beneficial relations and avoiding differences, respecting cultural differentiation, and acting on the basis of the United Nations Charter and respecting its decisions (Brona, 2018, p. 231). The purpose of the last principle was to restore the role of the United Nations and involve it in solving international issues, not to act in accordance with the principle of power and hegemony pursued by the United States. In terms of Chinese policy, Hu Jintao called for China’s peaceful rise and the use of soft power to solve regional and international disputes. The Jintao presidential term saw a rise in China’s global influence in Africa, Latin America, and other developing countries (Jie, 2017, p. 38).

In 2013 the policy of concealing intrinsic capabilities was abandoned after Xi Jinping was elected president of the PRC. Xi called for an effective and influential foreign policy for China, not only in its regional surroundings, but also in international affairs. Because he believed that the limited Chinese influence in international relations cannot maintain the continuation of its economic progress. Rather, it should become a true partner in the stability of the global system, which enables it unilaterally to impose new international standards. It is true that Beijing is still less important in this regard compared to the United States, which imposes itself as a global hegemon, but it is presenting new proposals and striving to implement them persistently while increasing its self-confidence as a pivotal country in the world (Kinzelbach, 2018, p. 301–303; Kupś, Szatkowski, Dahl, 2021; Marszałek-Kawa, Dmochowski, 2018).

One of the fruits of Xi’s policy is his announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative BRI, which aims to revive and develop the historic Silk Road, but this time it came in a more modern and massive way aimed at changing the world’s economic and cultural map, and it could even be considered

to some extent similar to a system of American globalization, but it is not a substitute for it in the near future, at the very least. China's strategy of promoting and developing the economy required the establishment of wider and comprehensive relations regionally and internationally. Therefore, the (BRI) strategy was included in the legislative decisions in the meetings of the third session of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party that was held in Beijing from November 9 to 12, 2013 (China.org.cn, 2013) which recognized the need to strengthen the construction of the economic belt so that a new situation of openness is formed at all levels. Due to the strategic importance of the initiative and Beijing's insistence on achieving it, the Chinese decision-maker divided the initiative according to the timeline set for it into three phases: the strategic mobilization between 2013–2016, the implementation phase between 2016–2019, and the evaluation phase between 2019–2049 (Abdullah, 2019, p. 13). While it was divided geographically into two corridors: the first one – economic rout of the Silk Road that was introduced in Astana. It consists of six economic corridors, including those that stretch from China through Central Asia to Western Asia. The second element is the Maritime Silk Road of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which was introduced in Jakarta (Brona, 2018, p. 232). The main sea route leads from China through the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal towards Europe. Sea routes occupy an important place in China's strategy, as they are the backbone of China's trade with other countries. But in general, the Belt and Road Initiative is considered to be of strategic importance to China at the internal and external levels, because it achieves several main goals, which can be summarized by three points:

1. Finding alternative methods for Malacca straits (Malacca Dilemma). It was formulated by President Hu Jintao in 2003, declaring the determination of "some major powers" to control the strait, and calling at the same time to adopt a new strategy to avoid this challenge. China relies heavily on its eastern coast and the Strait of Malacca near Singapore to pass goods to and from its vast lands, as more than 80% of Chinese oil passes through this strait, so building trade routes through Pakistan and Central Asia can avoid the threat to its energy supplies;
2. The initiative helps China invest its huge currency reserves and bring many of its idle companies into the workforce;

3. Gaining allies or areas of influence according to the perspective of presence in each region of the world. In addition to the Chinese competition with the United States of America, which explains China's desire to make many small countries feel grateful to them from the economic point of view, because it provides them with large investment loans that these countries need to develop their infrastructure (Abdullah, 2019, p. 17–19).

In 2015, the Chinese Communist Party passed laws enabling China to conduct military intervention outside its territorial borders. The passage of these laws is considered a precedent in the Chinese policy that relied mainly on soft power. Directly, and with the increase in its foreign investments, so did its need to secure its economic projects around the world. As the first practical application of these laws, China established a base in the port of Djibouti, under the pretext of protecting the Horn of Africa and combating piracy (Scobell, Nader, 2016, p. 18).

### **The Silk Road in the Middle East**

Being a secondary power during the Cold War (1945–1991), the presence of the People's Republic of China in the Middle East declined for a long time, and it did not have interests at stake in the region until the 1980s. The interest of PRC in the region was initially aimed at competing with the United States and the Soviet Union on the one hand, and its efforts to gain greater international recognition at the expense of its rival, the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan on the other hand. In the early 1990s, China's interest in and dependence on the Middle East increased rapidly. According to a local security officer at the Central Party School in Beijing, China's interests are constantly expanding in terms of geopolitical, economic, energy and security (Scobell, Nader, 2016, p. 4–6 ; Macała, 2020).

Until the beginning of the second millennium, China's foreign policy towards the countries of the Middle East was characterized by extreme caution and cooperation with all different political systems without interfering in their internal affairs. However, the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring revolutions in 2011, and the fall of some friendly Arab regimes, imposed on China a new reality that pushed it to change its policy towards the region. The



fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya with the help of NATO countries led to the loss of Chinese companies invested there and the departure of many Chinese workers due to the conditions of war (Scobell, Nader, 2016, p. 14–15). Consequently, China realized that its interests in the region, especially its energy needs, could not be protected without a physical presence in this part of the world. On the other hand, Beijing does not announce any specific strategy, due to the complexities of the political and security landscape in the region. Interfering in this internationally contested region calls for favoring one country over another. It thus limits its reputation as a friendly country to all. Therefore, PRC believes that soft power policy is preferred at least for the time being. Connecting countries in the region to the BRI, raising the level of trade exchanges and investments, and dealing with countries in the region according to the principle of partnership, is the best solution for China to preserve its interests. In contrast to the US hard power strategy that is based on favoring countries according to its strategic interests.

Geographically, the countries of the Middle East, especially the Arab ones, are of great importance to Beijing in general, and to the BRI in particular, for several factors:

1. Three sea lanes pass through them: Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab and the Suez Canal;
2. Characteristics of the land site as an extension between the continents of Asia and Africa;
3. The Arab countries overlook many seas, bays and sea lanes;
4. Abundant natural and energy resources;
5. There is no Arab country which is Landlocked (Al-Saqati, 2020).

On the security front, the Middle East today takes a much wider space in the Chinese national security calculations, because the Chinese decision-maker realizes that the security of the region, especially the Arab countries, not only affect its economic interests, but can also threaten its national security and territorial integrity. The emergence of ISIS in 2014 in oil-rich countries such as Iraq and Syria down to Libya and some African regions (Boko Haram in Nigeria), led to the spread of the phenomenon of terrorism represented by terrorist organizations that seek to occupy countries, threatening their stability and the dismantling of their national

borders<sup>5</sup>. The participation of more than 5,000 of the Chinese minority Uyghurs within the ISIS organization in Syria raised the alarm in Beijing (Taner, Bellacqua, 2016, p. 87–89). The return of these fighters with combat and organizational experiences, and under the pretext of getting rid of the communist persecution of Muslims that gives them legitimacy to struggle and resist, will lead to the return of the terrorist operations that struck China in (2014–2013), but this time, it will be terrorist operations aimed at separating the Muslim minority from the “repressive communist” state. Moreover, Xinjiang Province has great geographical importance as it connects China with Central Asia and borders important countries within the BRI (Woźniak-Bobińska, 2017, p. 54–55).

In his visit to the capitals of Riyadh, Cairo and Tehran 2016, and within the framework of the second phase – implementation of the BRI, President XI Jinping signed 52 agreements in the fields of energy, transportation and investment. At the same time, he urged those countries to adopt a policy of partnership, cooperation and leave side differences. His visit to these capitals has a political connotation that carries with it good intentions that can explain Beijing’s foreign policy in the region. The visit is supposed to be a reassuring message for the contradictory forces in the region, stating that China seeks to bridge points of view, unlike the United States, which is investing the conflict in its favor (Woźniak-Bobińska, 2017, p. 52).

The political contradictions prevailing over the relationship among the countries of the region are difficult to exclude from the BRI. Beijing’s efforts to reconcile these countries through a win-win policy may not suffice to spare the region additional new conflicts. The geopolitics of the countries of the region, which have intertwined relations and different political trends, make PRC preferring countries over others, thus complicating the relationship among them. Therefore, this issue is very sensitive to the Chinese decision-maker. For example, the sea route, the first part of which starts from the South China Sea towards the Persian Gulf, then its second part (under

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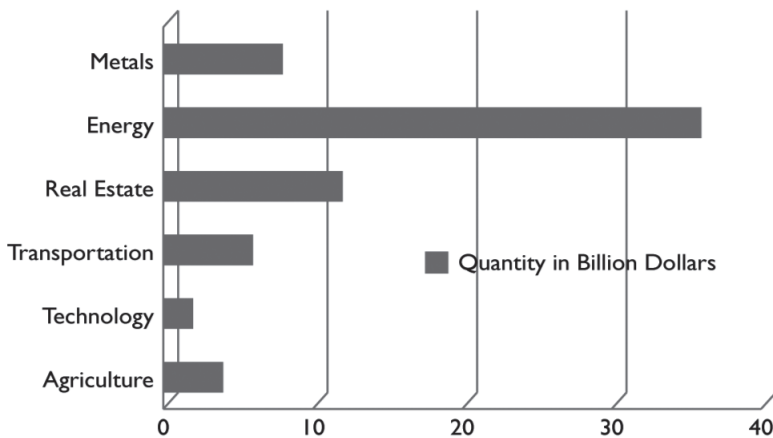
<sup>5</sup> Terrorist organizations, such as Al Qaeda, used to call for the downfall of political regimes, but their activities were limited to military resistance through bombings. In contrast to the organizations that emerged after the Arab Spring, such as ISIS, which are practicing terrorism in order to occupy the land and bring down states, as happened in Syria and Iraq in 2014.

construction) by land through Iraq, Syria or Turkey and from there to the Mediterranean, falls within an area of two severe conflicts: the Arab-Israeli national conflict, and the sectarian conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran over their influence in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

In 2013, under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China Overseas Ports, a subsidiary of China State Construction Engineering Corporation, began working to develop areas adjacent to the Pakistani port of Gwadar. The port was then leased to China for 43 years. China – Pakistan Economic Corridor, which has a length of 3,000 km and extends from Kashgar Prefecture in Xinjiang Province in western China to the port of Gwadar in southwestern Pakistan, links the economic Silk Road in the north and the maritime route of the 21st century in the south. China has allocated more than 62 billion dollars for this economic corridor of strategic importance and its great impact on linking South Asia, China and Central Asia, which together represent important engines of growth in the Asian continent (Nobis, 2017, p. 31–32).

This corridor is of great importance to China in both the Middle East and the Pacific region. In the Middle East, because it connects western China by land with Pakistan to the Arabian Sea through one country, which saves less time for transporting goods to and from China, in addition to reducing the security risks, because it passes within the borders of one country. Not to mention the importance of Gwadar Port, for its strategic location open to the Arabian Sea and close to the Strait of Hormuz (which Iran threatens to close in light of its cold war with the United States), through which a third of the global maritime oil trade crosses, the Strait of Hormuz. While its importance in the Pacific region lies in the fact that it is an alternative way that can extricate China from the dilemma of the sea straits controlled by countries friendly to the United States, if they were closed (presumably), it would lead to depriving China of its main energy resource and thus weakening it and delaying its economic development (Lin, 2017, p. 5–6).

Chinese investment in the Middle East has witnessed a remarkable rise, diversifying into the energy, real estate, roads and infrastructure sectors. But the energy sector comes first and this is logical, because its energy need is directly proportional to the growth and recovery of its economy (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** China Investments in the Middle East, 2005–2013.

Source: (Kāzemi, Chen, 2015).

Regarding the Arab countries, the volume of Chinese investments increased from 36.7 billion dollars in 2004 to 244.3 billion dollars in 2018, an increase of six times. Saudi Arabia and the UAE topped the Arab countries in their trade exchange with China by 46% of the total Arab countries for the year 2017. While oil exports to the first three Arab countries in 2018 were as follows: Saudi Arabia USD 29.7 billion, Iraq USD 22.4 billion, the Sultanate of Oman USD 17 billion. In the same year, China's imports from Arab countries amounted to 139.4 billion dollars, of which oil constitutes the largest share, while its exports were 104.9 billion dollars, the majority of which were electronic goods and clothing (Al-Ain, 2019). The marked variation in trade exchange and its quality between China and the Arab countries is caused firstly by the purchasing power of a particular country (import), and secondly by the state's wealth of oil and gas. In addition, the development factor in the ports plays a big rule in trade, as is the case in the United Arab Emirates. Although Saudi Arabia is the first exporter of oil to Beijing, it ranks second in the volume of trade exchanges after the UAE (Al-Saqati, 2020).

The increase in investment (especially in strategic projects such as oil refineries, ports and highways) and Chinese trade exchange with Arab

countries, and the variation in their rates, ultimately lead to competition among these countries. The nature of the relationship between the Arab countries located within the BRI is not without geographical disputes, the most prominent of which is the problem of demarcating the borders between Iraq and Kuwait and the two countries competing to win Chinese investment on the land road to be built from the top of the Arabian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea (Castelier, 2020). The ports and border disputes between Iraq and Kuwait have been going on since Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, but it intensified after Kuwait announced the construction of the Mubarak Al-Kabeer port in a narrow area at the top of the Persian Gulf, specifically opposite the large Iraqi port of Al-Faw. This announcement was considered by the Iraqis as an aggression against their maritime port, because it is aimed at thwarting the Faw port and thus weakening Iraq. What angered the Iraqis is that Kuwait has many completed ports on the open area of the Gulf, of which only 35% of its operational capacity is used (Abdul-Jabbar, 2019).

In addition, the Iraqis accuse Kuwait of buying silence and loyalty of the Iraqi representatives in order to delay the building the Iraqi Faw port. Therefore, Iraq is forced to agree to grant Kuwait a rail link across its lands. Thus, the need is eliminated from the Iraqi port of Faw (Abdul-Jabbar, 2019). Up to this point, both the Kuwaiti and Iraqi projects have not been completed. The Iraqi Faw failed for internal reasons related to security and administrative corruption, in addition to the interference of neighboring countries in the political decision in Baghdad. Kuwait announced the suspension of work in its port under the pretext that the project was not economically viable. But in fact, the suspension of work in the port of Mubarak came after the Iraqi parliament refused to grant Kuwait a rail link. This seems more logical, without the railway connection, the Kuwaiti port would be useless (Castelier, 2020).

Until the end of 2016, despite the complexities of the relationship between the countries of the Middle East, it maintained its balance. The arrival of President Donald Trump to the White House in early 2017 has complicated the division in the Middle East in general and the Arab countries in particular. After withdrawing from the 5+1 agreement<sup>6</sup> signed by his predecessor

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<sup>6</sup> The agreement signed by the member states of the Security Council in addition to Germany, which allowed Iran to continue its peaceful nuclear activities on the condition

Barack Obama, President Trump canceled the nuclear deal with Iran and reimposed sanctions on it<sup>7</sup>. In response, Iran announced the resumption of its nuclear program. This was considered a threat by the Arab Gulf states, particularly the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Consequently, the region was divided again between an ally and enemy to the United States. To confront the Iranian threat, and with the support of the Trump administration, the axis of normalization<sup>8</sup> was formed from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries-led by Saudi Arabia-, Egypt and Jordan, in addition to the State of Israel (Mulki, ERELÍ, 2020, p. 5–8). In contrast, the opposition axis (or the Shiite Crescent)<sup>9</sup> was formed, led by Iran and its allies in the region such as Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and some Iraqi Shiite factions. Just as the Arab countries were divided after the Second World War between a western and an eastern camp, the region is now being divided on the basis of religion. The axis of Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies represent the Sunnis. While Iran represents the Shiites. These matters undermined China's efforts to bring peace to the region, and it must now play a role within this difficult equation. Despite the importance of the above countries in the Belt and Road, China's interest in general lies in its relationship with four countries, for example, but not limited to, which are:

1. Iran: as China considers it a strategic ally, because of its geographical location and its energy resources, in addition to its hostility to the United States, which makes it a country outside the American influence in the region;

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that it is monitored and prevented from using the nuclear program for military purposes. In exchange, some economic sanctions on Iran were partially lifted.

<sup>7</sup> Sanctions were imposed on Tehran since 1979, but they intensified after Tehran announced its nuclear program in 2006.

<sup>8</sup> The axis of normalization is the axis of the Arab countries friendly to the United States, specifically those that have normalized or want to normalize their relationship with the State of Israel. This term was launched after the recognition and normalization of Bahrain, the UAE, and implicitly Saudi Arabia.

<sup>9</sup> The Shiite Crescent is a political and sectarian term used for areas inhabited by a majority Shiite. This term was used for the first time by the Jordanian monarch, King Abdullah II, in 2004, and it was used as a kind of warning against Arab Shiite relations with other Shiites, especially the Shiites of Iran.

2. Israel: the importance of Israel to China lies in its progress in the field of information and technology. Also, Beijing's cooperation with Tel Aviv in the field of information, especially in the field of security - the war on terror, can prevent terrorist operations. While China's need for technology in general is vital, but especially in the field of irrigation, because it is one of the countries that suffer from a shortage of fresh water and desertification. Hence, the very advanced Israeli technology in the field of irrigation enables it to develop its agricultural industry (Brona, 2018, p. 239–240);
3. Saudi Arabia: despite its importance as an important economic partner that meets its energy needs, China does not consider it an ally for several factors, the most important of which are: Riyadh's strategic relationship with the United States, its support for the Muslim Uyghur issue, which angered Beijing (Riedel, 2020). Not to mention its insistence on supporting the rebels in Syria against the Bashar regime, that is supported by Russia, Iran and China;
4. Egypt: China considers it an important economic partner, as it is the largest Arab country with a population of more than 100 million, and therefore it is considered a large market for its goods (Wood, 2018). In addition to its strategic importance, represented by the Suez Canal, which is seen as the shortest road between East and West. But China does not consider it an ally or an enemy.

## Conclusion

The world is witnessing a complex stage in the development of the global economy, in which China plays a major role, especially through the BRI. But this view is premature, as Beijing still needs the United States in its economic growth, because it is the largest trading partner of China in the world (Sharma, 2010, p. 104–105). Moreover, the United States provides a kind of stability and security in the world, and this is what benefits China, which is preoccupied in its endeavor to become the first economic country in the world. China's policy of balanced relations and the principle of friendship for all in the Middle East are not sufficient to guarantee permanent and reliable partners who safeguard its interests in the region for two reasons. The first:

that the political systems of these countries are unstable and may fall at any time. Consequently, its political orientations and foreign relations may change with the change of these regimes, so it is difficult to rely on them or consider them as allies or friends. For example, the Gaddafi regime in Libya has been a friend of Beijing for a long time. Although the Libyan economy was strong, this did not prevent the regime from falling.

The failure of the Arab Spring does not mean that the rest of the Arab regimes will be stable. Because these peoples can return to the protests and demands for democracy, or at least for just political systems. However, BRI is not interested in whether or not people obtain their rights, as it deals with governments. But the complex relationship of the states of the region does not allow combining opposites. Consequently, it is not expected that China's policy will succeed as a friend to everyone without taking sides. For example, Beijing considers Iran to not fall within the American influence in the region, and therefore Beijing considers it a strategic ally, while Saudi Arabia is considered as an economic partner nothing more, because it falls within the American influence in the region.

The Belt and Road Initiative may contribute to the development of the countries of the Middle East and create great job opportunities for the peoples of the region, but the initiative is mainly aimed at preserving the interests of China, the continuation of its economic rise and its position in the world.

The lack of a clear and specific strategy for Beijing in the region may open the way to several possible scenarios. The countries of the region suffer from innumerable manifold problems. Internally, the lack of democracy in these counties gives their regimes a weak and threatened political system. Regionally, few countries have border disputes, as is the case between Iraq and Kuwait. Internationally, the multipolarization of ally and enemy in the foreign relations with the major active powers in the region complicates the BRI future plans in the region.

As a result, the BRI will not bring stability to the countries of the region, especially the Arab ones. The Chinese project in the region is primarily economic, and therefore it is unable to provide political solutions that contribute to the stability of this part of the world. On the contrary, it could root disagreements in the region, and thus further divide it. The various crises that the region is experiencing are very complex, with elements of nationalism,



tribal and religious overlapping. Perhaps the most obvious divisions in the political and economic scene are the sectarian conflict represented by the rivalry between the Sunnis led by Saudi Arabia and the Shiites led by Iran, despite the fact that the conflict is over areas of influence and national interests.

In the end, the BRI is a strategic economic Chinese presence in the Middle East, not a military presence yet. The reason is that China does not need and desire at the present time a military intervention in the region. Although the reality of the presence of US military bases in countries rich in oil and gas, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, represents a weak point for Beijing, the United States of America provides security for the region, and this is beneficial to the Chinese side. But the United States at the same time controls the security keys in the region. Consequently, Beijing is unable to manage the Middle East file on its own in the near future without the American presence.

China's pursuit of becoming a superpower may contribute to delaying its economic growth. On the other hand, to maintain its economic rise in a competing world, it has to take that path. Under this complex equation, will China become the world's superpower? How would the world be without the United States of America? We leave the answer to these two central questions for the specialists.

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