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The Motivations Behind China-Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Relations: A Historical Perspective¹

*Çin-Ortadoğu ve Kuzey Afrika İlişkileri Ardındaki Motivasyonlar:
Tarihsel bir Perspektif*

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Abstract

China-MENA relations have developed in different periods and at different levels. Initially, the relations between these two parties started to develop within the framework of economic development. However, recently, these relations have not only developed in the axis of economic interests but also began to take shape in the axis of China's ambition to become a superpower and increasing its power competition with the USA. Although these relations gained momentum with the Opening-up and Reform policies, President Xi's leadership took these relations to a further stage. This study shows that China-MENA relations are not only based on the economic interests of the two parties, but also on China's pursuit of power-balancing strategies against US domination. Therefore, the analysis of these main factors has become even more important in predicting the future of relations between China and MENA. In this study, we aim to analyse the development of Chinese foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa and to evaluate the development process of China-MENA relations from a historical and practical perspective.

Keywords: China, Middle East, North Africa, BRI, Strategic Partnership.

Öz

Çin-MENA ilişkileri farklı dönemlerde ve farklı düzeylerde gelişmiştir. Başlangıçta bu iki taraf arasındaki ilişkiler ekonomik gelişmeler çerçevesinde gelişmeye başlamıştır. Ancak son dönemde bu ilişkiler sadece iki tarafın ekonomik çıkarları ekseninde gelişmekle kalmamış, Çin'in süper güç olma hırsı ve ABD ile güç rekabetini artırma ekseninde de şekillenmeye başlamıştır. Bu ilişkiler, Dışa Açılma ve Reform politikalarıyla ivme kazanmış olsa da Başkan Şi'nin liderliği bu ilişkileri daha ileri bir aşamaya

taşımıştır. Bu çalışma, Çin-MENA ilişkilerinin sadece iki tarafın ekonomik çıkarlarına değil, aynı zamanda Çin'in ABD egemenliğine karşı güç dengeleme stratejileri arayışına dayandığını göstermektedir. Bu nedenle, bu ana faktörlerin analizi, Çin ile MENA arasındaki ilişkilerin geleceğini tahmin etmede daha da önemli hale gelmektedir. Bu çalışmamızda Çin dış politikasının Orta Doğu ve Kuzey Afrika'ya yönelik gelişimini analiz etmeyi ve Çin-Orta Doğu ve Kuzey Afrika ilişkilerinin gelişim sürecini tarihsel ve pratik bir perspektiften değerlendirmeyi amaçlıyoruz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çin, Ortadoğu, Kuzey Afrika, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Stratejik Ortaklık.

Introduction

Over the past centuries, China has experienced and pursued different political ideas and distinctive political strategies. More than a thousand years ago, Mencius, the political scholar of ancient China, made an important definition between a tyrannical hegemon and a peace-loving "true king" Despite the changing world and political interactions, his wise words are still accepted by Chinese intellectuals, diplomats, and politicians. Many Chinese politicians are trying to adapt their political thinking in this direction to the foreign affairs of modern China. Mencius, "A true king sues virtue and humanity; an aggressive hegemon uses force under the pretext of humanity and compassion" (Bell, 2009). Not only Mencius but also Confucius have played important roles throughout Chinese history. Their peaceful approach to political relations has enabled modern China to pursue a more peaceful foreign policy since its founding in 1949.

Mencius believed that a hegemon or a despotic leader always tries to use hard power to attack other countries by claiming to establish benevolent justice. Looking at the entire political period of the PRC, it can be clearly seen that the contemporary Chinese political system was deeply influenced by Mencius' political and strategic ideas (Bell, 2009). Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Chinese Government has tried to be neutral toward other countries' domestic political and economic issues. In line with this political assumption, China followed a new political strategy in the name of non-intervention principles. Following China's peaceful foreign policy for a long period, international actors and institutions decided to set up political and economic relations with China.

Considering the development process of China-MENA relations, this study seeks to answer the question of what the main factors behind the rapid development of China-Middle East and China-North Africa relations in recent years are. China-MENA relations have developed in different periods and at different levels. When we examine the whole of China-MENA relations from a historical perspective, we can understand that China-MENA relations developed not only through economic interests but also through China's political interests. As a rising power, China has sought to set up enhanced relations and comprehensive partnerships with MENA countries in the context of China's soft balancing strategies to undermine US influence in MENA. This study examines China's relations with MENA by dividing them into different periods. Then it continues with President Xi's period and the BRI cooperation.

Pre-Reform China-MENA Relations

As a growing power, China's relations with MENA date back to ancient "Silk Road" interactions. However, with the establishment of the PRC, a new page was opened in China-MENA relations. The initial political policies of the PRC were strictly determined from a Maoist black-and-white perspective. With this policy, China has divided countries, governments, organizations, political parties, and leaders into two parties, with a clear distinction between those who are for or against China. Although the Chinese Government achieved remarkable diplomatic achievements during this period, this policy failed to achieve significant success in its relations with many MENA countries (Shichor, 2018). This political perspective of China continued for almost two decades. Then China could re-establish diplomatic relations with most of the Middle East and African countries and the rest of the world.

In its early years, the PRC was more concerned with its own internal development rather than developing advanced relations with other countries. During this period, Chairman Mao Zedong said, "*Where the enemy advances, we retreat. Where the enemy retreats, we pursue.*" (敌进我退, 敌退我追) (Sun, 2013). Therefore, China's political assumption at that time was relatively more inclined to its self-preservation and development rather than an aggressive or proactive strategy.

Under the influence of the Cold War and the bipolar system, Chinese foreign policy was extremely ideological. At that time, China's relations with other countries were largely determined by their relations with the two blocs (the USA or the USSR). The Chinese Government attempted to establish advanced relations with countries that had friendly relations

with the Soviet Union. The Countries that had positive relations with the USA could be considered as carrying potential risks for China (Rynhold, 1996).

As a semi-colonial country that suffered from different kinds of imperialist policies, China supported the Middle Eastern and North African countries to protect them against imperial power and colonial activities and help them control their regional integration. An obvious example of this case was China's supportive approach to the Palestinians against Israel in 1950 when China supported the Palestinians by refusing to set up diplomatic relations with Israel. As a result of China's supportive political gesture, in 1956 Egypt became the initial country in the Middle East and the Arab world to recognize the PRC and attempted to build diplomatic relations with China (Zhang, 1999). China's political principles were based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which meant maintaining good relations with all countries in the world. However, at that time, China had two reasons for refusing to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. First, the Muslim population of the Middle Eastern and North African countries was huge, and most of them were against the existence of Israel. Therefore, China did not want to ignore the reaction of Muslim countries to a relatively small and undesirable country in the region. Second, Israel was a close ally of the US and China was reluctant to engage with US mandate countries (Zhang, 1999). As a result, China took the sensible decision to refuse to establish political and economic relations with Israel as a positive signal to Islamic countries.

Before 1955, the MENA countries did not have remarkable importance to China. However, a short period later, China tried to find international political allies to strengthen the international political system against the Western capitalist states. (Looy, 2006). But the relations between China and the USSR in the early 1960s were also not smooth, and a few years later the Cultural Revolution broke out. In response, China began to seek allies from third-world countries or non-super or regional powers (Looy, 2006). As a result, in the early 1970s, most of the Middle Eastern and African countries, like many other countries, gradually began to form diplomatic relations with China.

In the first period of the PRC, China's Middle East policy was described as a period of slowness and inefficiency. There were two main reasons for this slow and unproductive period. The first reason was due to the unstable, uncertain, and violent turbulent situation of the Middle East after the Second World War. The second reason was China's need

for recovery, achieving self-sufficient goals, and its reluctance to be a part of other countries' foreign affairs. Since the establishment of the PRC, China has followed a political strategy that is based on peace, and development, as well as not being involved in conflicts with the Middle Eastern countries. China's non-interference policy means that each country is independent, each should only be governed by its own legal government, and no outside power or country should interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries. In fact, this policy first came into force with an alliance agreement signed between China and the USSR in 1950 (Zheng, 2016). Since most countries suffered irreparable losses from the Second World War and almost every country at that time needed recovery and development. China's peaceful and advancement-oriented strategy had been welcomed by most international actors.

This political assumption was formed by the new leaders of the PRC. Chairman Mao Zedong stated that China was ready to launch diplomatic relations with each country that was ready to follow the ideologies of the new Chinese Government. In line with this assumption, the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" were put forward by Prime Minister Zhou Enlai during an official meeting between the Government of China and India in 1953. It was also a part of the "Ten Principles" composed of the 1955 Bandung Conference. This principle was also strongly applied during the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square incident. In turn, this policy has become the official principle of China's foreign policy to design its political and economic relations with the world and the Middle East. This political strategy also included respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity of each party, equality, mutual benefit, peaceful coexistence, mutual non-aggression, and mutual non-interference in each other's domestic affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2020; Zheng, 2016). China's that time vision was a desirable political concept that could be welcomed by any international actor that needed to recover and develop its WWII-affected economy.

In the 1949-1955 period, there was almost no significant development in China-MENA relations. In 1955, China-MENA countries had the opportunity to meet officially in China for the first time (Shichor, 1979). After that first meeting, both parties received some positive signs, but these signs were not strong enough to establish more relationships between the parties. China saw MENA as a geography far from China. But China later realized that the Middle East (relatively later, North Africa) was not only a critical area for its natural resources but also it is important for multilateral political strategies. Later, China also recognized that

the Middle East is an important region for the stability of Central Asia, where the superpowers “contract and compete” (Harris, 1991). In the early 1980s, China received a potential threat to Chinese interests from the presence of the USA, other major powers, the Baghdad Pact, and the CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) in the Middle East. Accordingly, China followed a policy to weaken the existence of foreign powers in the Middle East (Shichor, 2006). As a result of its growing concerns, China decided to give more importance to the MENA countries and strengthen its presence in the region (Scobell and Nader 2016).

Table 1

Diplomatic Relations between the Middle Eastern States and China (1949-1978)

State	Date of diplomatic relations
Egypt	30 May 1956
Syria	1 August 1956
Yemen	24 September 1956
Iraq	25 August 1958
Sudan	4 January 1959
Algeria	20 December 1962
Tunisia	10 January 1964
Kuwait	22 March 1971
Turkey	4 August 1971
Iran	16 August 1971
Lebanon	9 November 1971
Cyprus	14 December 1971
Jordan	7 April 1977
Oman	25 May 1978
Libya	9 August 1978
Post-Reform (1978)	
United Arab Emirates	1 November 1984
Qatar	9 July 1988
Palestine	20 November 1988
Bahrain	18 April 1989
Saudi Arabia	21 July 1990
Israel	24 January 1992

Source: Data collected from, (Shichor, 2006), (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 2004,

China org cn), (刘中民, Liu Zhongming, 2015); (Chaziza, 2021); (Large, 2009).

As seen in Table 1, the China-USA rapprochement in the 1970s and China's admittance to the United Nations as a permanent member in 1971 enhanced the process of diplomatic interactions between China and most of the MENA countries (Shichor, 2006). During the 1978-1980 period, China maintained a defensive policy rather than the pursuit of superiority in its periphery, particularly in unstable Central Asia. By 1979, however, China had become more international, and China's policy of alliances shifted from seeking allies to seeking friends by emphasizing mutual interests much more seriously than before. This policy was welcomed by many countries, and as a result, they expressed their willingness to cooperate with China (Womack, 2012). This policy was attractive to most of the countries in the MENA, and Central Asia. Because no country could refuse to take mutual benefits from China, which is a huge emerging economic power.

With the advent of reform and opening-up policies, China aimed to find a balance in its developing political, economic, and commercial relations with MENA. China, on the other hand, was not willing to let its emerging presence in the Middle East cause any hostility for the USA. However, the USA wanted to see China's relations with the region develop in parallel with the political and economic goals of the USA, without relying solely on China's political and economic interests (Alterman and Garver, 2008). The US demand was neither reasonable nor acceptable to China. Moreover, some of the policies followed by the US in the region were completely opposite to China's political principles such as non-intervention and anti-imperialism/colonialism.

Both pre-reform and post-reform China supported a peaceful resolution against the conflicts in the region, this is because China wanted to provide the security of Chinese economic interests. Therefore, any military solution could both increase the US influence and disrupt China's energy and trade relations in the region. At that time, it was China's best choice to remain neutral towards Middle East conflicts. (Rynhold, 1996). Although conflicts indirectly supported by the US might challenge China's economic interests, thus, China maintained its principle of non-intervention to avoid conflicts in the Middle East. Even now, as a more powerful country, China continues a policy of not being a part of these conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya.

Post-Reform China-MENA Relations

With the start of the Deng Xiaoping era in 1978, the Chinese Government's old ideological approach was significantly replaced by a more practical approach based largely on energy, trade, and other economic developments. In turn, China opened its doors to international actors to support China's massive upgrading program, and China began to form multilateral relations with Middle Eastern and North African states and established humble economic ties in the context of arms sales and exporting Chinese goods (Lyll, 2019). With the spirit of reform, Chinese foreign relations became more dynamic, and accordingly, China established multilateral relations with almost the whole world. Consequently, Middle Eastern countries have increasingly become a strategic area for Chinese trade, energy, and investment policies.

With the arrival of opening-up and reform strategies, the relations between China and MENA developed rapidly. From the late 1970s to 1990, 90% of China's arms sales were to the Middle East, including Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and Libya, totaling approximately \$15 billion, and it made China enter among the top five guns providers in the region (Sichor, 1992). In 1980, China's military trade was higher than China's economic trade and foreign direct investment in the MENA region. Although China's arms sales were not as much as those of the USA, Russia, and France. However, increasingly China become a critical arm provider to the region (Yetiv and Lu, 2007). After a long period of reluctance to get involved in Middle Eastern affairs, China entered a period of increasing its presence in the Middle East to become a chief player in the region by climbing the ladder of future great power (Shichor, 1992). Since China is a huge market for oil and other energy products, most of the countries in the region were positive about China's presence in the region.

In parallel with the post-Cold War developments, China's Middle East policy was radically changed. During this period, China desired to both increase its global impact and intensify its economic ties with the MENA states by facilitating China's economic expansion process. In early 1992, China had established economic relations with almost every country in the region. With the declining tension in Arab-Israeli relations, the Middle East has become a cooperation priority for the Chinese Government. As a result, with China's increasing petrochemical demand in 1993, China's economic presence in the region increased rapidly. (Yetiv and Lu, 2007). Respectively, China developed political and economic relations with the

rest of the MENA states. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar became important strategic partners of China in the fields of oil, trade, and investment. As a result of the political and economic reforms under the Deng Xiaoping administration, China made remarkable progress in Middle Eastern and international arenas. Consequently, China was able to take its prominent place in the world economy with its stable economic rise for a long time. However, by enhancing and transforming its economic superiority China could also have some political and economic challenges. The first was the sensitivity of distrust that China, as a rising power, brought to its neighbours and other regions. The second was the containment challenges that the US pursued against China as an important emerging power (Okur, 2017). Therefore, China's strategic approach towards the Middle East and other regions was closely followed by both the USA and other international actors.

With the termination of the Cold War, a novel international system (unipolar international system) emerged. This new system brought both significant challenges and opportunities for China. As the United States became the sole dominant power and developed its regional security architecture in the region to serve its future political, economic, and militaristic policies. Although these uncertain policies of the USA brought an uncertain future for China's future strategies. However, the US security umbrella assisted China to become an important economic and political actor in the Middle East in the future. As a result, China pursued a strategy of avoiding political and militaristic policies that could challenge the interests of the USA in the region, as well as establishing stable economic relations with almost all states in the region (Fulton, 2019). Back then, China placed more emphasis on economic development than on political conflicts with its rivals. Accordingly, China's ideological slogans changed from Mao's slogan of "politics in command" to "economic development in command" (Rubin, 1998). However, if China's presence became too aggressive or excessively challenged the policies or interests of the United States, it was likely that the United States would create difficulties for China to spread its economic authority in the region and establish improved relations with the countries of the region. However, if China's presence was too aggressive or could extremely challenge the United States' existing policies or interests, probably, the United States could create difficulties for China to maintain its economic impact in the region and establish advanced relations with the regional countries.

Since 1990, the Middle East has witnessed many multilateral political, economic, and commercial cooperation and great power competition.

The motivation behind Beijing's pursuit of greater impact and its attempt to be a part of this competition has stemmed from China's changing and increasing political and economic influence. In this period, the Chinese economy, trade, and energy policies have gradually developed and taken shape in parallel with the regional and global economies. Therefore, China has needed to expand its political influence and leadership in MENA, Central, South, and East Asia.

Since 1990, the world political system has become more interactive. With the strong emphasis on globalization, states have had more complex relationships with each other. Parallel to these developments, China, as a rising global power, changed its political vision a little with the termination of the Cold War. In the context of internal and external transformation in global governance, China's political, economic, energy, and commercial interests in the Middle East increased rapidly and China needed to redesign its Middle East policies.

In early 1993, China got a net oil-importer position. At that time, China was struggling to expand its diplomatic and economic ties with the Middle East. Since China's monetization policies depend on foreign trade and energy, the Middle East became one of the most essential regions for China's global and economic policies. China is accustomed to preparing a favourable atmosphere for its regional economic policies and industrial development to achieve its projected economic targets. In turn, China has refocused on the Middle East in the context of new trade, energy, investment, and industrial strategies (Kenderdine and Lan, 2019). Since there is no trace of colonial domination in the history of China's relations with the Middle East and North Africa, China could relatively easily establish mutual trade and relatively weak military relations with the Middle East countries. After the September 11 attacks on the USA, China increased its existence and impact in the Middle East by maintaining its neutral political assumption against the turmoil and conflicts in the Middle East (Doster, 2016). However, when China's presence and interest relations in the Middle East after 2010 are evaluated, compared to its energy and economic relations, China's political and military presence in the Middle East and North Africa remained relatively weak.

In fact, China's oil interactions with the Middle East started in 1985. As China's need for oil was increasing fast, only one decade later, China's oil importation increased by more than 50 percent. Accordingly, China's trade, cross-investment, and multilateral relations began to grow in the region (Xu, 2000). Only one decade later, China turned out to be an

important figure in the energy and economy of the Middle East, even China gradually increased its impact and become the main trade partner of various countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

China's reforms and opening-up policies in 1978 and its participation to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in late 2001 are two important milestones in China's economic achievement and economic integration with the world economy (Abdulhalek and Korayem, 2007). These two main factors accelerated China's globalization process and highlighted China as an important power of the future in the international arena. With its membership in the WTO, China's international ambition made China pursue a soft power policy. After President Hu Jintao stated that China should increase its soft power activities in 2007, China attempted to implement soft power policies more efficiently (Shambaugh, 2015). This was the advent of China's soft power era. Since then, China's soft power activities have increased both regionally and globally.

China had successfully weathered the 2008 global economic crisis. After such an economic victory, many Chinese scholars strongly believed that China had already accomplished its regional power era and was accepted as a rising global power. However, during this successful period, some Chinese scholars believed that the policy of 'Keeping a Low Profile' (韬光养晦) was still necessary for China's economic growth. They believed that China is still a developing country, if China abandons this policy and becomes more proactive, China is likely to face a couple of challenges such as the hostility of the United States, the discontent of its neighbours, and the reluctance of some key countries' cooperation with China (Zheng, 2016).

After the 2008 economic crisis, the Chinese economy proved its stability and continued to grow as usual. Accordingly, the USA increasingly perceived China as a global rival, and China's economically weak partners began to worry about China's true intentions and future political and economic strategies. (Womack, 2012). Therefore, China did not want to have advanced relations with the regions where the US had relatively more political influence. For the oil-importing states of the Middle East, China's post-crisis stance did not cause great concern, on the contrary, in parallel with this growth, China needed more energy from the Middle East. However, trade deficits for non-oil-producing countries of the Middle East continued to increase in line with their dissatisfaction with bilateral relations with China.

Subsequently, China continued to increase its political and economic

presence in the region. The Chinese Foreign Minister stated that “China’s political role in the Middle East will only grow and there is no way back”. Moreover, in recent years, China has also started to focus on energy security, trade, and investments in the Middle East like a great power by using its economic power to balance and decrease the influence of the USA (Lyall, 2019). However, to achieve its long-term objectives, China did not compromise on its peaceful, mutual benefits and non-intervention principles that attracted other countries to rely on and cooperate with China. Because the attitudes of China in the competition process with the United States have significant effects on the relations between China and its neighbours; China and the Middle East; China and the rest of the world (Womack, 2012).

With China's fast-growing economy averaging 9% each year from 1990 to 2000, the Chinese Communist Party devised the "going out" (走出去) strategy, with which Beijing aimed to strengthen the structure of the Chinese Economy and lift millions of Chinese People from Poverty (Wang, 2016). Considering this strategy, after 2001, China’s presence in the Middle East was not only limited to oil purchasing and arms sales, Chinese investments, trade, and infrastructure have also played a crucial role in China-Middle East relations. China’s trade volume with the Middle Eastern states grew 87% in the period of 2005-2009 and reached \$100 billion. Since China has multilateral interest-based relations with the Middle East and China is not willing to let the United States act as freely as before in the Middle East. China’s growing presence in the Middle East brought a kind of disturbance to the USA. The USA, for instance, when brought sanctions on Iran, in 2010, China opposed it and did not permit the USA to be fully successful in the sanctions against Iran. Thus, the United States had to weaken its sanctions against Iran (Chen, 2011). Given that China and the USA have different interests in the Middle East, and Beijing has followed a more proactive foreign policy in recent years, China and the USA will likely face more political and economic contradictions in the future.

China-MENA Relations Under the Xi Administration

Recently, China has tried to increase its economic influence in MENA by establishing comprehensive economic partnerships through its soft power policies. In the context of the BRI’s long-term objectives, China has had far-reaching political and economic targets in MENA and other regions (Abdel-Ghafar and Jacobs, 2020). President Xi has been making efforts to develop China's political and economic capabilities since

2013. With the aim of being an intensive global power and its ambition for the realization of the "Chinese Dream", President Xi launched the BRI, Silk Road Fund, and AIIB, and strengthened the BRICS and SCO cooperation. Under President Xi's leadership, China has proactively attended G20 summits and held numerous new international conferences and events. In addition, China has had a remarkable role in the leadership and development of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, as well as initiating new and multilateral international cooperation in the international arena (Sun, 2019). In fact, President Xi has more focused on demonstrating China's existing advanced political, economic, and strategic capabilities as well as its increasing global influence.

With the launch of the BRI, China aimed to show the world its new world power capacity by paying more attention to the MENA. From now on, China's approach to MENA is more than reaping economic benefits and avoiding political stalemates. China's future policies towards MENA will be based on its increased political and economic presence, and China's economic cooperation will continue to be more unified in the future. However, these developments do not mean that China is looking for strong alternatives to compete directly with the US in the MENA. In fact, China avoids being part of direct conflicts with major powers in the Middle East such as the US, European Union, and Russia. Although China and Russia jointly vetoed several drafts of the UN Security Council's resolution to the Syrian War. However, China is still unwilling to be a part of the political conflicts in MENA or elsewhere, and China does not agree with the resumption of a full alliance with Russia in the Middle East (Sun, 2019). However, it is discussed by International Relations and political science scholars whether China's avoidance of being a part of controversial issues will continue in parallel with China's increasing influence and growing interests all over the world or not.

As a major and emerging superpower, China has expanded its ties with the Middle East. After the Arab Spring, China's Middle East policy has majorly developed by the tangible economic and energy interests of the region and the anxiety about the growth of terrorism and extremism. Under the leadership of President Xi, China's foreign policy has become more proactive and assertive. China's international influence both politically and economically has gained considerable dimensions. China's ambition for its army, economy, trade, energy, and raw materials will continue to be a subject of concern for the future of some regional and global actors. Accordingly, President Xi is not willing to "keep a low profile" "tao guang yang hui," as his predecessors pursued. Quite the

reverse, he wants to make a difference to demonstrate China's rising power and China's upgraded political level. Considering these concepts, China is likely to be more assertive in the international arena (Jin, 2016). Now China seeks to play a vital role in a multipolar global system by forming leadership in the process of global systemic change. As President Xi Jinping noted, China is moving in the light of being a global leader in combined national power and international influence (Xinhua, 2017; Ehteshami, 2018). In parallel with these policies, China will try to balance the forces that aim to harm its national and international interests.

President Xi has suggested new alternatives to the Middle East by emphasizing the significance of rebuilding the ancient "Silk Road" with expanded trade routes from China to Central Asia, the Middle East, North and South Africa, and Europe. Since, currently, together with the presence of the USA, Russia, and the EU, China is one of the major external actors in the region that has a unique position in remaining a friend to all Middle Eastern countries. China's grand strategy is not only focusing on looking East but also looking at Central Asia and the Middle East. This is also thought to be a counterattack of China against the United States which is strengthening its ties with Japan, Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia. By doing so, China hopes to decrease the dominance of the United States and balance its presence in the Middle East (Bao, 2013). China's this strategy is not only a kind of retaliation strategy against the United States such as "if you surround me, I shall surround you, too" strategy, but also China needs to be more active in these areas to realize its new economic initiatives and maintain its economic growth.

Beijing pursues diplomacy based on its growing power ambitions to overcome its own internal problems and redesign the current global order to make certain its global and economic upheaval The Middle East, which is the main energy source for China, has a strategic position between the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, and it is considered that China will move forward with the '1+2+3' comprehensive cooperation strategy which was declared in 2014 as a policy for China's cooperation with Middle Eastern countries (Kamel, 2018; Hindy, 2017). China sees BRI as a new strategy for peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit in the new century. By doing so, China aims to maintain the Silk Road cooperation spirit in such a complex international and regional position (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). As China's economic and military power has increased sharply in recent decades, China has become an important political actor, both globally

and regionally. To maintain its political and economic rise, China needs to be more active in global relations, especially in Indo-Pacific, East and Central Asia, and Middle East politics. To protect its political and economic interests, it seems essential for China to reduce the dominance of the USA in the Middle East, where China has developed important strategic policies and strategic partnerships.

Table 2

China's Establishing Partnership Relations with the Middle Eastern Countries

State	Level	Year Signed
Turkey	Strategic Partnership	2010
Algeria	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2014
Egypt	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2014
Qatar	Strategic Partnership	2014
Iraq	Strategic Partnership	2015
Jordan	Strategic Partnership	2015
Iran	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
Morocco	Strategic Partnership	2016
Saudi Arabia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
Oman	Strategic Partnership	2018
Kuwait	Strategic Partnership	2018
United Arab Emirates	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2018

Source: Atlantic Council, 2019.

As can be seen in Table 2, China has established strategic partnerships with many countries in the Middle East and North Africa. With the

launch of BRI, China has invested in marine and rail infrastructure both to create a regional network and to connect China to Europe (Qian, 2016; Chaziza, 2019). In response to the United States' growing presence in the Pacific, China has decided to expand its presence in the Middle East, which is a key area for China's BRI, energy, and investment policies. In 2016, a few days after President Xi's visit to the Middle East, China published its first "Arab Policy Document" (Hornschild, 2016; Beijing Review, 2016; Fulton, 2019). During his visit, President Xi promised \$55 billion in loans and additional investments to Middle Eastern countries (The National, 2016; Kamel, 2018). Later, China offered the "1+2+3" economic model to the Middle East countries. In such a model, "1" denotes energy cooperation as the main axis; "2" refers to cooperation in infrastructure development and facilitation of trade; "3" refers to high-tech cooperation in the fields such as satellites, space, and energy (Jin, 2017; Hindy, 2017).

Beijing's long-term diplomacy in the Middle East relies on gaining economic ties with oil, gas, and energy-producing states. However, recently China has also engaged with MENA countries that have little or no oil or gas, such as Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority, to expand its existence in MENA (Yao, 2012). Due to the increasing military presence of the USA in the Middle East, China is forced to give more importance to MENA, by doing so, China does not want to give full control of the Middle East to the USA (Neill, 2014). Due to the political disorder in MENA in the last 20 years, the USA has lost its reputation in the Middle East to a large extent. Therefore, it is probably the right time for China to develop strategic relations with the US's closest allies such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to expand its influence in the Middle East with a well-designed political, economic, and cultural strategy. (Chaziza, 2019). Although China's existence in the Middle East has not had a long history and China is quite cautious with its approach to the Middle East issues. However, China's role in the Middle East is getting more and more important, and its political and economic influence is increasingly going up. With the declining sign of the dominance of the USA in the region, China's role in the architecture of the region is progressively being discussed both by regional and Western scholars (Lons, 2019).

China-MENA relations have gained momentum in recent years. These relations mainly develop within the framework of their economic relations. However, China will likely deepen its relations with countries in these regions in the future (Chaziza, 2021). In this context, China's Middle East

strategies under the administration of President Xi are largely based on win-win cooperation, peaceful development, and mutual benefits. As he stated, China gives hope to the countries of the Middle East and the rest of the world to cooperate mutually beneficial and to share a bright future for all humanity. Before attending the Arab League conference in Cairo in 2017, President Xi stated China's new vision for the Middle East: "Instead of seeking a proxy in the Middle East, we support peace talks; we invite all parties to join the Belt and Road Initiative's circle of friends, rather than seeking any sphere of influence; Instead of trying to fill the "gap", we are establishing a cooperative network of partnerships for win-win results." (Chinese Newspaper, 2016). With this statement, the rise of China has gained prestige and momentum in MENA and other regions. As a result, in the context of win-win cooperation. the BRI has been welcomed by many regional and global actors.

Under the leadership of President Xi, China proclaimed the "Chinese Dream" with a new and multifaceted vision. In 2014, President Xi declared that "We must increase China's soft power, provide a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world" (Shambaugh, 2015). In recent years, the Chinese government has sought to develop China's soft power with the help of Confucian Institutes. China has opened nearly 500 Confucius Institutes in more than 100 countries. China has spent more money than the United States in the past few years to increase its soft power and conduct its foreign policy propaganda (Doster, 2016). Since the most important objectives behind the Confucius Institutes are "to make the world understand China, as well as make China understand the world," and introduce Chinese culture and language to the world (Han, 2011). Currently, the number of these institutes is rising all around the world, not surprisingly, these institutes are attracting and providing opportunities to many people around the world who are curious about understanding China, Chinese culture, and the Chinese language.

China has faced some economic and security issues in MENA. Due to the growing interdependence of the global economy, many companies need to deal with the local turmoil of unstable regions such as North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. In recent years, Chinese workers have been kidnapped, killed, or faced with evacuation in Yemen, Sudan, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Libya. Therefore, there are increasing domestic pressures for Beijing to take more measures to protect Chinese Citizens and expand China's interests overseas. In line with China's growing power and impact, some other international

actors also expect China to take the initiative and be more responsible for global security issues. Engaging in such matters would directly or indirectly challenge China's non-interference principle. However, lately, China's policy of non-inference has also been increasingly questioned by the Chinese People.

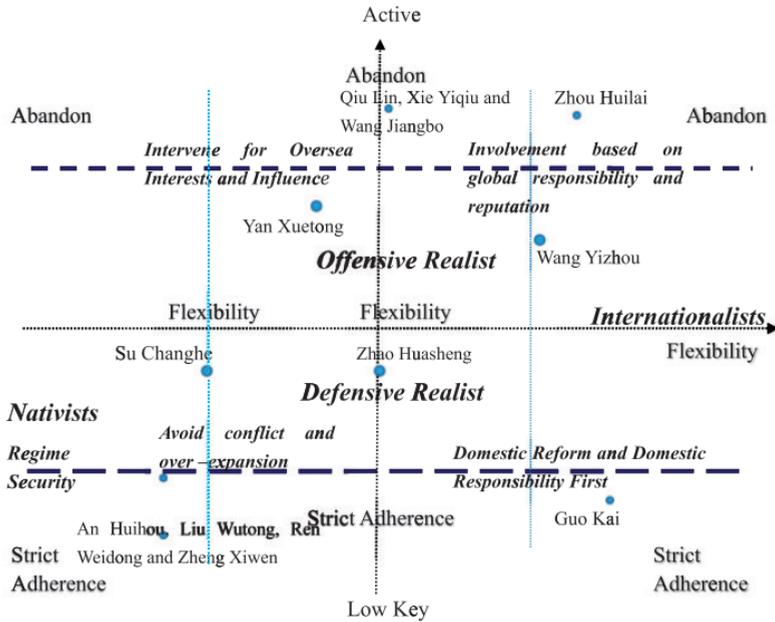
In Sudan, for example, China's oil investments account for 40% of the country's total oil investment, and China buys more than half of Sudan's total oil each year. Some scholars have even complained about China's reluctance to intervene in the defence of Chinese companies in certain unstable regions, such as the Middle East and Africa. They also think that China should soften its policy of not making arguments against human values, rather than emphasizing rhetorical statements about taking international responsibility. On the contrary, in response to these criticisms, the Chinese Foreign Ministry official stated: "If we listen to Western countries' flatteries to abandon the non-interference principle today, then, who will stand out to support our sovereignty and dignity in the future?" (Guancha Wang, 2011; Zheng, 2011; Chen, 2016). Thus, China has faced a hard dilemma, because it is quite hard for China to abandon its non-interference policy and become more involved in other countries' domestic issues, because for China, interfering with other countries' internal issues is considered a kind of irresponsibility and a flighty policy followed by the western countries.

Although many Chinese scholars and politicians strongly support China's non-intervention principle by arguing that if China abandons this policy Chinese sovereignty and Chinese interests will be affected seriously, and China's non-interference policy is still a significant tool for China to prevent external interference to China's internal affairs. However, some Chinese scholars think inversely by arguing that China should act more proactively in the international arena against the regional crisis of the Middle East, Central Asia, and South and North Africa by contacting different political forces, different communicating channels, or different regional organizations. No matter China is a rising power or a developing country, China should clarify its international role. Some Chinese foreign policy analysts are giving different answers to the question of what kind of an international role China should undertake. As a suggestion, Professor Wang Yizhou offers a 'creative involvement' strategy to the Chinese Government as a new concept, with a new positive attitude for China to take a more active role in international affairs. He also argues that if China fails to shoulder international responsibilities in the context of its non-inference policy, China will face losing its reputation and

soft power trustworthiness (Chen, 2016). Moreover, without a military presence or active role in some regions, it will also be risky for China to protect its overseas political and economic interests. Chinese scholar Wang Jisi has stated that, While the United States has deeply involved in the Asia Pacific, China should have a strategic plan for “Marching West.” (Sun, 2013; Bao, Eichacker and Rosenthal 2013; Hindy, 2017). With this concept, China aims to strengthen its relations with East and South Asia, at the same time establish strategic relations with West Asia which is thought of as a crucial strategy for China to protect its multilateral interests in MENA. China’s peaceful foreign policy and its non-intervention principle are appreciated. Notwithstanding, probably it will be hard for China to maintain this policy without increasing its presence in different and disputed regions as well.

Figure 1

Debates in China on China's Non-Interference Principle



Source: Chen, 2016.

As Figure 1 shows, China does not want to be involved in any conflicts in MENA and other regions under the leadership of President Xi. For example, during the crisis in the Middle East and the separatist movement in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, China decided to remain neutral. In 2014, when the Ukraine crisis broke out, China controlled itself not be a part of Russia's conflict with the Western world. This is because China has also suffered from its own internal separatist movements. (Chen, 2016). In fact, China's concern is basically that other powers interfere in China's domestic affairs. Therefore, the logic under the principle of non-intervention is that if China continues to refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, China will also protect itself from the interference of other foreign powers in China's domestic politics.

As expected, China has gradually intervened in Middle East affairs

since 2013, without compromising its principle of non-intervention. However, China's methodology for Middle Eastern affairs is still based on de-escalation and stabilizing the region, as was the old policy of Chairman Mao and Deng Xiaoping. For example, in 2014, China proposed a five-point solution to the Palestinian issue and signed comprehensive bilateral strategic partnership agreements with Egypt and Qatar. China has also provided support to Iraq in the fight against ISIS, which is seen as a threatening terrorist organization by the Chinese Government. In addition, China opened a Chinese Consulate General in the capital city of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (Doster, 2016). All these developments worried the USA. Indeed, the more China develops its political, economic, and strategic relations with the Middle East, the more the USA will be concerned.

On the other hand, some scholars worry that China will lose its international credibility because of its veto of Syria's intervention. They think that China should not interfere in anything related to Syria's future. China's veto of Syria caused China to lose its international image, and China gained nothing by doing so. Conversely, some scholars argue that China's blocking of the Security Council's resolution on Syria would have some advantages, such as reinforcing the Sino-Russian partnership, expanding China's authority in the region, and decreasing the risk of war between Iran and the USA. In doing so, international actors are more likely to be convinced that China not only cares about its own interests but also respects the principle of its non-interference policy (Chen, 2016; Yan, 2012). In this context, China's position in the Middle East is more critical than before, so any controversial decision by China could be abused by the US, causing China to lose credibility in the region.

It seems that the power of the USA is decreasing in MENA, and the power of China is increasing. China aims to follow a strategy that strengthens its economic networks in the context of its "win-win" cooperation politics. While the strategy of the USA is to reduce the economic dependence of other states on China, China targets to decrease the US security dominance by building strategic allies and expanding its military capabilities to bring middle states into its security orbit (Ikenberry, 2015). China has already started building military bases outside of China (in Africa, Djibouti) to undermine the US mandate and protect its allies. However, hard balancing is still not a favoured foreign policy for China, it seeks to establish peaceful and mutual economic interest policies to increase its influence and power in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. These policies mean that China will need to balance the US in the concept of

a soft balancing strategy to achieve its future political and economic goals. Otherwise, China cannot advance its economic, energy, and trade policies in the Middle East, which is a region strongly influenced by the interests-based dominant policies of the USA. As in the framework of its 'offend no one' diplomacy, China has pursued a distinctive political strategy by adopting an impartial tone against regional conflicts and kept itself away from emphatic policies of the United States that could indirectly damage the developing relations between China and Middle East countries since 1990 (Buckley, 2012). It seems that under President Xi's leadership, China will increasingly contest with the USA for global leadership. As China is the leading economy of Asia, it is possible that China will continue to expand its political and economic influence on the Middle East, North and South Africa, and Central Asia.

With the help of BRI, China aims to create the world's most comprehensive trade and energy platform within the framework of its strategic partnerships and economic cooperation. The Chinese Government designed the BRI with five principles: political coordination, facility connectivity, barrier-free trade, financial coordination, and people-to-people bond (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015). In this context, China aims to cooperate with MENA countries by assuring them China is not aiming to interfere in their internal affairs. It seems that with the development process of the BRI led by President Xi, China's emerging investment and strategic partnership relations will continue to rise, and China will be more engaged in MENA. However, this can also expose China to US backlash and jeopardize its non-intervention policies.

Conclusion

MENA is becoming more important for China. Looking at China's MENA policy, it can be figured out that China has focused on MENA politics since the first years of the People's Republic of China. The motivations behind the development of China-MENA relations not only stem from China's growing energy needs, investments, and economic developments but also stem from China's rising impact in the international arena. With the termination of the Cold War, China needed gradually increase its presence in the Middle East and Africa. One of the most significant reasons for this strategy was that China's economy, energy, investment, and trade relations could be adversely affected by the political calculations of the USA and other global powers.

Under the leadership of President Xi, China has become more influential both in MENA and the international arena. President Xi initiated the

BRI as a new political and economic engagement with the Middle East and several other regions. With China's increasing energy needs, new economic strategies, infrastructure, and commercial investments, China-Middle East relations are now much closer than before. According to the recent political, economic, and strategic interrelations, it is obvious that in the future, the relations between China and the Middle East will be even much closer than now. Since, for many regional actors, China's efforts are perceived as sharing the portion of a big cake with numerous related actors instead of using it only for its self-interests. China aims to follow this policy both to decrease the dominance of the USA in MENA and enhance its political, economic, and investment policies in the context of its 'win-win' and the BRI strategic policies.

Declaration

In all processes of the article, TESAM's research and publication ethics principles were followed.

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