

global political transitions

JAMES M. DORSEY

CHINA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Venturing into the Maelstrom



Global Political Transitions

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The Saudis get blamed for a lot, much of it critical and condemnatory. I certainly belong among the kingdom's critics. In this case, however, I'm blaming them for something I am grateful for. Saudi Arabia's existential battle with Iran for regional hegemony and dominance of the Muslim world persuaded me to look at its impact on Muslim nations in Asia that rank as the world's most populous ones as well as strategic communities like the Uyghurs in the troubled north-western Chinese province of Xinjiang. That in turn led me inevitably to the impact of the Saudi-Iranian struggle and China's controversial policy of suppressing expressions of Uyghur nationalism and culture on China's Belt and Road initiative and the Middle Kingdom's relationship with the greater Middle East that stretches into Pakistan and Central Asia.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

China's increasingly significant economic and security interests in the greater Middle East, a key global crossroads, impact not only its energy security but also its regional posture, relations with global and regional players, and efforts to pacify nationalist and Islamist Uyghurs in its north-western province of Xinjiang. The threats to those interests are considerably enhanced by its 65-nation, \$1 trillion Belt and Road initiative,¹ an ambitious transcontinental, geopolitical ploy to embed Eurasia in a China-centric world buffered by transportation, energy, and trade networks. By comparison, the United States' Marshall Plan for post-World War II Europe budgeted \$800 billion in reconstruction funds to Europe, calculated as a percentage of current gross domestic product (GDP).

Protecting its mushrooming interests is forcing China to review fundamental principles that have long underwritten its foreign and defence policy and realign its policies and relationships in the region. "The time for China's policy quietly to reap economic benefits with limited risk exposure to the Middle East markets and policies is past; Beijing can no longer steer clear of geopolitical risk," said China scholar Mordechai Chaziza.²

¹ Scott Cendrowski, Inside China's Global Spending Spree, *Fortune*, 12 December 2016, <http://fortune.com/china-belt-road-investment/>

² Mordechai Chaziza, The Arab Spring: Implications for Chinese Policy, Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs, 4 August 2013, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-arab-spring-implications-for-china-policy/>

The Belt and Road initiative, encompassing a geography populated by 4.4 billion people or 63% of the world's population with an aggregate GDP of \$2.1 trillion or 29% of the world's wealth, serves as an integrator of China's segmented regional approaches across Eurasia, including its evolving Greater Middle East policy. China's approach is rooted in the concept of *xijin*, a march west to balance China's maritime weakness by expanding its influence in the Greater Middle East that includes Central Asia as well as parts of South Asia.³ One consequence of this is that China has become a regional, if not a global, player, in competitive cooperation with the United States, the dominant external actor in the greater Middle East.

Another is that it is about far more than US-Chinese rivalry during the Cold War which historian Gregg A. Brazinsky concluded was primarily about status rather than ideology even if China's definition of status, the lack of an ambition to dominate, remains at the core of pronouncements of the People's Republic. Then like now, Chinese official thinking remains informed by the notion that China deserves a central or elevated position in international affairs. And then like now, China shies away from subverting governments, arguing instead that it can assist them in ways that the United States or the Soviet Union in the past cannot.⁴

Chinese officials do not tire in noting that non-interference means that Chinese aid and investment does not come with intrusive conditions attached like the demand to adhere to human rights, pursue economic liberalization, and adopt good governance. Yet in fact, China insists that its partners commit to its One China policy, limit relations with Taiwan, cooperate in countering Uyghur nationalists and jihadists, keep silent about Tibet, at times support China's position in the United Nations Security Council, and give Chinese companies priority in China-funded projects. Tajik economist Safovudin Jaborov argued that Chinese funding amounted to "predatory lending ... that seeks to promote (China's) own political and economic interests more than to work in the best interest of borrowers."⁵

³Yun Sun, *March West: China's Response to the U.S. Rebalancing*, Brookings, 31 January 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2013/01/31/march-west-chinas-response-to-the-u-s-rebalancing>

⁴Gregg A. Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry during the Cold War*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017, Kindle edition

⁵Safovudin Jaborov, *Chinese Loans in Central Asia: Development Assistance or "Predatory Lending"?* in Marlene Laruelle (Ed.), *China's Belt and Road Initiative and its Impact in Central*

Adherence to Chinese policies can nonetheless pay off handsomely in financial terms even if it limits economic growth and domestic job creation and potentially involves transfer of ownership of resources. A cable from the US embassy in Dushanbe quoted Jamshed Rahmonberdiev, the CEO of Somon Capital Investment Bank, as saying that “China’s investments in Tajikistan clearly serve a political purpose as much as, if not more than, an economic purpose. No one in either the Chinese or Tajik governments is speaking about paying back Chinese loans. ... Tajik leaders appear to believe they will deal with loan repayments on the basis of the ‘friendship between countries policy’ by supporting the Chinese politically, for instance on their treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang or on Taiwan.”⁶

Kyrgyz public policy scholar Kemel Toktomushev warned that Chinese aid policy and investment funding guidelines undermined national governments’ efforts to advance good governance and curb corruption by providing “a new source of rent for ... ruling elites ... Chinese modes of foreign investment do not often comply with the normative expectations of responsible development, instead exacerbating the problems of political accountability and economic governance,” Toktomushev said.⁷

The Belt and Road, rooted in the country’s post-1949 periphery and good neighbour policy approach, nevertheless “places China on par with the United States as a great power that is capable of providing leadership to the international system. ... (The Belt and Road) and its associated components, such as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank and Silk Road Fund, portray China as a provider rather than free-rider of international public goods,” according to China expert Michael Clark.⁸ The notion of parity has gained currency with Chinese President Xi Jinping’s promotion of a “new type of great power relationship,” a G2 world in which the United States and China would act as the dominant powers.

Asia, Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, Central Asia Program, 2018, p. 34–41, http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OBOR_Book_.pdf

⁶ US Embassy Dushanbe, Chinese interest in Tajikistan increases, Wikileaks, 7 August 2009, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09DUSHANBE954_a.html

⁷ Kemel Toktomushev, One Belt, One Road: A New Source of Rent for Ruling Elites in Central Asia? In Marlene Laruelle (Ed.), *China’s Belt and Road Initiative and its Impact in Central Asia*, Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, Central Asia Program, 2018, p. 77–86, http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OBOR_Book_.pdf

⁸ Michael Clark, China’s Dream of Economic Power May Come with Great Risks, *The National Interest*, 14 June 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/chinas-dream-economic-power-may-come-great-risks-21159?page=show>

The notion is reinforced with China taking stock of the Middle East and North Africa's volatility and tumultuous, often violent conflicts and political transitions. It feels the pressure to acknowledge that it no longer can maintain distance to the Middle East and North Africa's multiple disputes as it successfully did in recent decades. Despite official denials, China is realizing that, like other major powers, it ultimately will be sucked into the vortex of Middle Eastern and South Asian rivalries, conflicts, and politics. Its long-standing official adherence to the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of others that dates back to the era of Mao Zedong and traces its roots to a policy enshrined in the 1648 Peace of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe, its refusal to envision a foreign military presence, and its insistence that its primary focus is the development of mutually beneficial "win-win" economic and commercial relations increasingly fall short of what it needs to do to safeguard its vital interests. China's balancing act is moreover increasingly compromised by its effort to be a friend to all, an undertaking that becomes more and more difficult as the greater Middle East is enveloped by transitions that started in 2011 with the popular Arab revolts and are likely to play out over a period of up to half a century. To maintain its precarious tightrope walk to the degree possible, China continued to pay lip service to principles it increasingly has had to relegate to the garbage bin of history in response to developments on the ground.

China's balancing act is one reason why it has yet to articulate a grand strategy. Instead, China has over the years released a series of papers that address aspects of defence and other policies as well as approaches to various parts of the world but no overarching document that ties the parts together. The policies are nonetheless hotly debated among scholars and pundits. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Wang Jisi, the dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, insisted in 2011 that China needs to formulate a strategy that defines its core interests, the external threats to those interests, and how China intends to protect them.⁹ His article picked up on a revival of discussions that were being waged already for several years and built on debates dating back to the 1970s when Deng Xiaoping began to open China up and advocated that China maintain a low profile in international affairs in a bid to minimize opposition to the country's rise.¹⁰

⁹Wang Jisi, *China's Search for a Grand Strategy*, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2011-02-20/chinas-search-grand-strategy>

¹⁰Angela Stanzel, Nadège Rolland, Jabin Jacob, and Melanie Hart, *Grand Designs: Does China have a "Grand Strategy"?* European Council on Foreign Relations, 18 October 2017, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/grands_designs_does_china_have_a_grand_strategy

Some analysts, including Shi Yinhong, the head of the Center for American Studies at Renmin University, fear that China's reluctance to formulate an overall strategy increases rather than reduces its risks as it becomes more active and is increasingly drawn into crises and disputes. "The problem is ... if the focal points of Chinese diplomatic policies are too scattered, or if Beijing fails to calculate the possible risks in the Belt and Road initiative and the negative global response toward China's increasing military power, we might not be able to make use of the opportunities brought by the decline and disorganization in the West," Yinhong said. A critic of the Belt and Road and the creation of parallel multilateral institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Yinhong argued that before embarking on a massive, transformative geopolitical project, China should "first develop our own strength and capability."¹¹

That may be a luxury China can no longer afford. Geopolitical change across Eurasia, including the demise of the Soviet Union, the emergence of independent Muslim nations in Central Asia, the war in Afghanistan, and the influence of Saudi-inspired Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism in Pakistan and across the Muslim world, has significantly raised the stakes. That is nowhere truer than in the troubled north-western Chinese province of Xinjiang, home to the Uyghurs, a restive Turkic population. Massive geopolitical change in Muslim Eurasia has deprived Xinjiang of the protective buffer that long shielded it from the fallout of conflict in the greater Middle East. "Trends governing the situation in the Middle East and the region's pan-nationalisms and extremist religious ideological trends have a direct influence on China's security and stability," said Li Weijian, a Middle East and Africa scholar at the Shanghai Institutes of International Studies.¹²

The pressure to revisit long-standing foreign and defence policy principles is further driven by the fact that China's key interests in the greater Middle East and North Africa have expanded significantly beyond the narrow focus of energy and dependence on the region for half of its oil imports.¹³ Besides the need to protect its investments and nationals, China

¹¹ Shi Yinhong, Amid Western uncertainties, China mustn't spread too thin, Global Times, 26 October 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1013884.shtml>

¹² Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, China in the Middle East, The Wary Dragon, Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2016, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1229.html#page-content

¹³ United States Energy Information Agency (EIA), China, 14 May 2015, http://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/countries_long/China/china.pdf

has a strategic stake in the often inter-connected stability of countries across the Eurasian landmass as a result of its Belt and Road initiative and the threat of blowback in Xinjiang of unrest in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia.

That threat is enhanced by the fact that Chinese policies potentially risk jeopardizing the geopolitical and economic structures China is funding and developing across Eurasia by building them on historically proven unstable autocracies and imposing economic and commercial terms that have turned out to be disadvantageous and in some cases even disastrous, for many beneficiaries of Beijing's largesse. The lopsided equation in China's assertion that it intends to create a "community with a shared future for mankind"¹⁴ is evident in the fact that the lion's share of Belt and Road contracts is awarded to Chinese companies. Analysis showed that a whopping 89% of Chinese-funded transport infrastructure projects in 34 Asian and European countries had been given to Chinese entities.¹⁵ "China is finding that its deeply mercantilist approach to trade is breeding resentment and opposition. If you believe and behave as if trade is a zero-sum game in which you only win when someone else loses, you will soon see that the losers will find ways of respond. Mercantilism breeds a matching response," warned Financial Times columnist Nick Butler.¹⁶

Adding to this mix is a potentially radical change in the architecture of international relations driven by the rise of US President Donald J. Trump, his notion of America First as opposed to one of the United States as a beacon of enlightenment, and more inward-looking populism in the West. Speaking in advance of her first meeting with Trump as president in early 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May reaffirmed evolving Western attitudes with her pledge that the United States and Britain would never again invade sovereign foreign countries "in an attempt to make the world in their own image."¹⁷ By de-emphasizing America's role as a global leader, Trump, abetted by European populism, has allowed the Chinese

¹⁴Xinhua, Commentary: "A community with shared future for mankind" brings Chinese solutions to global governance, 15 November 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/15/c_136753896.htm

¹⁵James Kynge, Chinese contractors grab lion's share of Silk Road project, Financial Times, 25 January 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/76b1be0c-0113-11e8-9650-9c0ad2d7c5b5>

¹⁶Nick Butler, Trump's warnings about unfair trade with China ring true, Financial Times, 12 February 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/5ee514dc-0a54-11e8-8eb7-42f857ea9f09>

¹⁷David Wilkinson, Transcript of Theresa May's speech to US Republicans, CNN, 27 January 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/26/politics/theresa-may-us-speech-transcript/>

Communist Party in a twist of irony to project itself as a champion of free trade and globalization. As this book explores, Chinese policy may, however, prevent Beijing from translating short-term diplomatic and public relations gain into strategic advantage, particularly in the greater Middle East.

Xi Jinping has sought to evade being sucked into the greater Middle East's seemingly insoluble travails by positioning China as a mediator in conflict zones, including Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Palestine. Xi exploited Trump's promise to move the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem by reiterating his call for the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. He pinned his hopes, perhaps prematurely, on benefiting from the fact that China is free of colonial baggage in the region and that its respect of sovereignty and history of non-interference will allow it to drive the final nail into the coffin of Western interventionism.

Chinese analysts note that non-interference and their country's insistence that conflicts in the Middle East be resolved in direct negotiations between the parties without third-party interference has been a fixture of Chinese policy dating back a century. They point to the early days of the Arab-Israeli conflict, China's condemnation of the Anglo-French-Israeli attack in 1956 that sparked the Suez Canal war, as well as the 1958 US intervention in Lebanon and Iraqi threats in 1961 to thwart Kuwait's independence from Britain. "China's 'non-interference' policy has reflected its belief that Middle Eastern problems had been created by the great powers to justify their continued presence," said China scholar Yitzhak Shichor.¹⁸

It is a position deeply rooted in a history of foreign interference in China that fuels fear that it could happen again. Shichor argues that the Chinese empire survived for 2000 years not because of its military or political power but as a result of the values that underwrite its contemporary foreign and defence policy.¹⁹ Yet, China's current almost singular focus on economic growth and globalization has led it to disregard its political clout, a process Shichor terms "Japanization" or the pursuit of economic power at the expense of political influence. Similarly, China's principle of non-interference hinders its mounting need to play an international role commensurate with its economic power in its bid to protect Chinese inter-

¹⁸ Yitzhak Shichor, *Fundamentally Unacceptable yet Occasionally Unavoidable: China's Options on External Interference in the Middle East*, China Report No. 49:1, p. 25–41

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Shichor

ests and nationals abroad. Rather than garnering the respect it deserves, China is often viewed as a second-rank political fiddle by Middle Eastern governments because of its decision to let Russia take the lead in conflicts such as Syria where it largely acts as Moscow's sidekick.

It is a realization that has prompted some Chinese scholars to argue that China's expanding interests will force it to abandon its principle of non-interference and in a 180-degree turn build military alliances. Yan Xuetong, dean of the Institute of Contemporary International Relations at Tsinghua University and one of the most vocal advocates of forging military alliances, argues that insistence on non-alignment worked during the Cold War but is detrimental in an era in which China is a superpower.²⁰

China may indeed have little choice. Yet, inevitably it will mean that China will get sucked into the Middle East's multiple rivalries, disputes, and contradictions. Military alliances may strengthen China's ability to project itself as a superpower but at the same time will magnify limitations in achieving its policy objectives that have been evident for decades.

China's failure, for example, to effectively wield its influence to help resolve conflicts like the Iran-Iraq war when it was the only permanent UN Security Council member to maintain good relations with both parties while at the same time exploiting it to the People's Republic's economic advantage casts doubt on its claim to strive for win-win situations. A declassified US National Photographic Interpretation Center cable reported that China was supplying Iraq with arms shipped through the Saudi port of Tuwwal during the Iran-Iraq war.²¹ China was caught flat-footed three decades later with the leaking of documents that showed that it had offered to sell \$200 million worth of arms to Qaddafi.²²

Non-interference has also been at the root of China's feeble attempts to mediate in a host of other conflicts in the Greater Middle East. It prompted China to adopt what scholars Sun Degang and Yahia Zoubir dubbed quasi-mediation diplomacy, a limited, somewhat self-serving attempt to manage rather than resolve problems. "In this kind of media-

²⁰Yan Xuetong, China–U.S. Competition for Strategic Partners, China–US focus, 29 October 2016. <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/china-u-s-competition-for-strategic-partners>

²¹National Photographic Interpretation Center, China-Iraq Arms Delivery, 25 January 1982

²²Tania Branigan, Chinese Companies "Offered to Sell Weapons to Gaddafi Regime," The Guardian, 5 September 2011, <http://guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep05/chinese-arms-companies-weapons-gaddafi-regime>

tion China adopted the role of a ‘mediating’ state (that) plays in international activities to defend its commercial, political and diplomatic interests rather than core security and strategic interests. This type of mediator acts without seeking to dominate; to follow rather than to lead; to partake in the revision of the agenda rather than setting it; and, to encourage conflict de-escalation in lieu of determinedly engaging in conflict resolution,” Degang and Zoubir said. “China’s quasi-mediation diplomacy” in conflicts like Sudan, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Libya, and Israel-Palestine offers to assist in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and participation in multilateral negotiations such as the Iranian nuclear talks was driven by necessity rather than ideology given that the greater Middle East had become strategically and economically more crucial to China than the United States, they said.²³

Non-interference further informed China’s instinctive opposition to sanctions as a tool in the belief that it harms the population more than the government. Yet, in a bow to *realpolitik*, China voted in the Security Council in favour of sanctions in the wake of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and several times in the case of Iran. China also redefined non-interference when it effectively endorsed military action against Iraq by abstaining in the Council in a vote to authorize military force to drive Iraq out of Kuwait.

Chinese political tiptoeing around the greater Middle East was evident in its January 2016 Arab Policy Paper, the country’s first articulation of a policy towards most countries in the Middle East and North Africa. But, rather than spelling out specific policies, the paper reiterated the generalities of China’s core focus in its relations with the Arab world: economics, energy, counterterrorism, security, technical cooperation, and its Belt and Road initiative. With a total investment of \$29.5 billion compared to \$7 billion by the United States, China emerged in 2016 as the Arab’s world’s top foreign investor.²⁴ As a result, China ultimately will have to develop a strategic vision that outlines foreign and defence policies it needs to put in place to protect its expanding strategic, geopolitical, economic, and commercial interests in the Middle East and North Africa; its role and place in

²³Sun Degang and Yahia Zoubir, China’s Participation in Conflict Resolution in the Middle East and North Africa: A Case of Quasi-Mediation Diplomacy? *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27 October 2017, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670564.2018.1389019>

²⁴Global Times, China becomes largest investor in Arab region, 24 July 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0724/c90000-9245686.html>

the region as a rising superpower in the region; and its relationship and cooperation with the United States in managing, if not resolving, conflict.

China moreover cannot divorce its approach to the greater Middle East from competing efforts to create a new Eurasia-centred world. What amounts to the twenty-first century's Great Game locks China, the United States, Russia, India, Japan, and Europe into an epic battle. Middle Eastern rivals, Saudi Arabia and Iran, are key players too. As they vie for big power favour, they compete to secure the ability to shape the future architecture of Eurasia's energy landscape, enhance leverage by increasing energy and oil product market share, and position themselves as key nodes in infrastructure, transportation, and energy networks.

With China on the one hand, and India and Japan on the other, potentially backed by the United States as the heavyweights, the Great Game is unlikely to produce an undisputed winner. Nor do key players perceive it as a zero-sum game. The stakes in the game are for the United States and India about ensuring that China, despite its vast resources, economic leverage, and first-starter advantage in infrastructure linkage, does not emerge as the sole dominant power in Eurasia's future architecture. In a rare broadside against the Belt and Road, US Defence Secretary James N. Mattis told the Senate Armed Services Committee that "China is focussed on limiting our ability to project power ..., weakening our position in the Indo-Pacific region. ... In a globalized world there is many belts and many roads and no one nation should put itself in a position of dictating one belt, one road. That said the Belt and Road also goes through disputed territory and that in itself shows the vulnerability of trying to establish that sort of a dictate."²⁵ Mattis was referring to the Belt and Road by one of its earlier names.

For players, such as Europe, Russia, and Japan as well regional powers in the greater Middle East, the game is about ensuring that they remain influential stakeholders. US and Indian efforts to restrain China's rise are enhanced by growing anti-China resentment in key nodes of the Middle Kingdom's geopolitical ploy and increased questioning of China's business practices. Moreover, some of the alliances in the shaping of Eurasia's future are opportunistic rather than strategic. This is particularly true for Russian ties to China and Iran. The contours of potential conflicts of inter-

²⁵ US Department of Defense, Mattis, Dunford Testify Before Senate Armed Services Committee, 4 October 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vueVKL_GsKU

est are already evident and likely to impact the degree to which China will have a free reign.

For its part, China is betting on the fact that it is starting with a relatively clean slate. Even though the ancient Silk Road is older than Islam, Chinese have had in more modern times and until recently less direct exposure to the Middle East and North Africa. The Silk Road hosted travellers heading eastwards from across its expanse. Chinese were the one major exception. They seldom travelled westwards. As Muslim traders established enclaves in Chinese ports, Middle Eastern cities remained void of Chinatowns. Pilgrimages to Mecca by Chinese Muslims prior to the emergence of air travel were few and far between.

Similarly, Chinese Muslims only started to gravitate towards studies at Middle Eastern religious institution such as Cairo's Al-Azhar University in the twentieth century. Diplomatic relations with Arab nations in the 1950s and 1960s were high on anti-colonial and anti-imperialistic rhetoric and low on substance. The stakes for China have since changed dramatically. In seeking to further and protect its vast interests in the region in the twenty-first century, China believes that its lack of colonial past and by and large absence from the region means that it can forge relationships unburdened by history and legacy. "China is a blank canvas on which Middle Eastern countries project their aspirations for a different kind of great-power relationship," said Middle East scholar Jon B. Alterman.²⁶

That may be true on one level. On others, China risks losing its status as a high net worth, geopolitical virgin with strategic approaches and economic and commercial policies that threaten to pull the rug from under it. It is those risks and threats that this book seeks to explore.

In doing so, this book is intended to contribute to an understanding of what is emerging as a pivotal pillar of a new geo-economic order and an emerging new world order. China, the Gulf and the greater Middle East or West and Central Asia constitute increasingly inter-connected poles of that order, involving major emerging powers, production and consumption centres, and financial capitals. The network of relationships between China and the countries of the Gulf, the Levant, North Africa, Pakistan, and Central Asia is indicative of the changes underway. Linked by a sea-

²⁶ Jon B. Alterman, *The Other Side of the World, China, the United States, and the Struggle for Middle East Security*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2017, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170303_Alterman_OtherSideOfWorld_Web.pdf?me9UgmPULivjVw99dE.9sbVYwX1BdYHQ

borne commerce conveyor belt that runs from the Gulf to the Pacific, they are bound by growing trade and economic relations, mounting oil and gas demand, common traditional and non-traditional security concerns, and a greater assertiveness in international relations.

The growth in China-Gulf/Middle Eastern trade and investment is buffeted by a robust acceleration of high-level diplomatic engagement at a time when both regions are confronting significant changes reverberating across the globe. McKinsey Consulting predicted that total Middle East-Asia trade will range between \$350 billion and \$500 billion by the year 2020, with China-GCC trade accounting for the bulk of that figure.²⁷ The regional buzzword is CHIME: China, India, Middle East—a grouping of countries that are able to marshal substantial bargaining power in world financial markets and unprecedented clout in the global economy. This is largely based on the sheer volume of liquidity at the disposal of these two regions that increasingly complement each other.

The increasing economic and political linkages notwithstanding, China and the greater Middle East, have yet to develop a clearly defined security dimension of their relationship. Gulf states are vulnerable because of their energy wealth, small national populations, proximity to and involvement in protracted conflict zones, and underlying a repressed but potent clamour for social, economic, and political change that pervades the greater Middle East. Gulf reliance on a Western security umbrella is increasingly problematic given uncertainty about US policy despite the Trump administration's apparent realignment with a Saudi Arabia-led bloc of nations.

China and other Asian nations, on the other hand, have a mounting interest in ultimately taking an active stake in regional security arrangements and defensive shields given their increased dependence on the Gulf for energy resources and lack of alternative suppliers with the capacity to accommodate rising demand. The Gulf moreover looks to Asia as a credible non-partisan global actor that can play a constructive role in managing conflicts and restoring peace and tranquillity in the region even if it does not yet have the military muscle to replace the United States.

²⁷ Diana Farrel, Susan Lund, Eva Gerlemann, and Peter Seeburger, *The New Power Brokers: How Oil, Asia, Hedge Funds and Private Equity are Shaping Global Capital Markets*, McKinsey Global Institute, October 2007, http://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Global%20Themes/Global%20Capital%20Markets/How%20the%20new%20power%20brokers%20are%20shaping%20global%20capital%20markets/MGI_Power_brokers_shaping_global_markets_full_report.ashx

Although there has been an appreciable increase in China's regional military presence largely due to the establishment of the Middle Kingdom's first foreign base in Djibouti and its participation in anti-pirate operations in the Gulf of Aden, there is little projection of Asian military power in the Gulf itself. The absence of an Asian and particularly a clearly defined Chinese security relationship with the Gulf that goes beyond limited joint exercises, sales of some weapon systems, and a degree of joint production of hardware has reduced immediate fears of US-Chinese tension in the region. The United States nonetheless is certain to pay increasing attention to the China-Gulf relationship as the two regions look at various security aspects of their interdependency, which in turn could lead to friction between the region's monarchies and the United States and create political and commercial opportunities for China.

These opportunities are enhanced by shared concerns in the Indian Ocean as well as the threat of terrorism and piracy in the Strait of Malacca, the world's busiest and one of its most dangerous shipping lanes; the Strait of Hormuz, the only entry to the Gulf; and Bab-el-Mandeb, a key choke-point connecting Asia and the Gulf with Europe, and fuelled by the fact that energy security has joined physical security and territorial integrity at the top of the security agenda. Rather than simply looking to break the US security monopoly in the Gulf, China, like it does with India, is likely to seek cooperation based on managing its rivalry with the United States because of a common interest in safeguarding against energy supply disruptions.

Energy security concerns have already spawned a host of energy investment proposals and initiatives, involving cross-border pipelines, upstream-downstream bilateral investments related to oil and gas prospecting and refining, and the Asian Roundtable Dialogue of Producers and Consumers.

Insufficient cultivable lands, an arid climate, and scarce water, among other constraints, handicap agriculture and make the Gulf, among the world's most food deficient and water insecure regions, vulnerable to external market influences beyond its control and dependent on food import. As a result, food and water security are crucial challenges. This concern is heightened by the fact that food imports fuel inflation, soaring international prices and trade restrictions in major exporting nations in Asia. Consequently, Gulf nations and China are trying to secure physical access to food through farmland purchases, investments in agri-businesses, and locking in long-term supply agreements with exporters.

All this creates ample opportunity for China, Asia, and the Middle East to engage in food-related commerce that would diversify their trade and investments. There is, for example, space for Gulf investment in a wide range of agri-business activities in China. Gulf investors moreover may be able to leverage their importance as feedstock suppliers into more industrial projects in China as well as in countries with a significant potential to increase agricultural production such as Pakistan, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.

At the same time, China, Asia, the Gulf, and the greater Middle East also potentially compete with one another in establishing food security. Take wheat as an example. China is the world's biggest consumer of wheat, accounting for 17% of the world's total consumption. By and large, it produces most of what it consumes. When it has resorted to international markets, global wheat prices rose and were felt across the Middle East, the world's biggest importer of wheat. By the same token, China has made significant progress in introducing bio-technologies that increase yield and as a result could benefit political stability in the Middle East. China's production surplus is already worth half of the region's total wheat imports. This creates the basis for Chinese-Gulf cooperation in helping Africa improve food production. Maritime security moreover has a direct impact on food security in both the Gulf and Asia with Somali pirates at times targeting World Food Programme ships as well as fishing fleets and Gulf-bound food and raw agricultural materials being transported through the Strait of Hormuz.

Chinese dominance in any food security relationship with the Gulf is all but guaranteed by the fact that China, unlike the Gulf states, is pushing its state-owned agricultural companies to become global players on par with their Western counterparts. "China is also actively establishing overseas agri-business and investment associations to enhance coordination and cooperation among Chinese companies to improve risk management and conflict resolution. The government plays the role of creating a favourable investment environment, providing necessary support, creating opportunities and offering protection to China's agri-business companies," food security scholars Hongzhou Zhang and Guoqiang Cheng noted.²⁸

²⁸Hongzhou Zhang and Guoqiang Cheng, *China's Food Security Strategy Reform, An emerging global agricultural policy* in Fengshi Wu and Hongzhou Zhang (eds), *China's Global Quest for Resources, Energy, Food and Water*, London, Routledge, 2017, p. 35–36

For its part, the cyber domain is quintessentially transnational in nature and beyond the ability of any one state to control. In addition, the world is effectively divided between those who favour an emphasis on information security that allows governments to control content and those who focus on network security in a bid to ensure the uninterrupted functioning of the Internet at all times. A majority of Asian and Middle Eastern nations find common ground in their tendency to concentrate on information security as opposed to Western nations who give priority to network security even if the dividing line at times is blurred.

The long and short of this is that China's relations with the Middle East are increasingly complex and multi-layered and likely to expand and deepen at a rapid pace. What may seem logical and straightforward is in reality a process pockmarked by pitfalls and snake pits that inevitably will change the way China does business, if not the way it looks at one of the most volatile and often unpredictable parts of the world.



CHAPTER 2

Towards a New World Order

The twenty-first century's Great Game is about the creation of a new Eurasia-centred world. It locks China, the United States, Russia, India, Japan, and Europe into what is an epic battle that is likely to shape the international order, security architecture, and economy. It is a battle that is as much about geopolitical power as it is about concepts of governance, security, and sovereignty.

Major Western and Asian powers are not the only players. Bitter Middle Eastern rivals, Saudi Arabia and Iran, battling for oversized influence and/or regional hegemony, as well as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar are key players too. As they vie for big power favour, they compete to secure the ability to shape the future architecture of Eurasia's energy landscape, enhance leverage by increasing energy and oil product market share, position themselves as the key nodes in infrastructure networks, and influence the region's cultural and religious outlook.

With China, the United States, and India as the heavyweights, the Great Game is unlikely to produce an undisputed winner. Nor do key players perceive it as a zero-sum game. For the United States, India, Japan, and Russia, the stakes are about ensuring that China, despite its vast resources, economic leverage, chequebook diplomacy, and first-starter advantage in infrastructure linkage, does not emerge as the sole dominant power in Eurasia's future architecture. For them, it is about ensuring that they remain influential stakeholders. Their efforts to restrain China's rise are enhanced by nations in the greater Middle East becoming potential

spoilers, growing anti-China resentment in key nodes of the Middle Kingdom's 65-nation, \$1 trillion Belt and Road initiative,¹ and increased questioning of China's commercial terms and business practices that risk recipient countries being trapped in debt. The terms involve Chinese loans and investment funds that more often than not never leave the country's financial system. The loans granted to governments are invested in the Chinese company that was awarded a contract and implements a project with its own equipment, materials, and workers. Even so, some analysts predict that many projects will be loss-making, "Chinese officials privately admit they expect to lose 80 percent of their investment in Pakistan, 50 percent in Myanmar, and 30 percent in Central Asia," said Hong Kong-based financial analyst Tom Miller.²

The battle for the future of Eurasia takes place on shifting sands. Alliances are often opportunistic rather than strategic. The balance of power between Russia and China has changed dramatically since China's economic opening. If the Soviet Union was the dominant power before the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, roles have since dramatically reversed with Russia becoming the junior partner. Russia and China, nevertheless, share similar approaches to a host of regional and international conflicts as well as an interest in curtailing US influence. Yet, their bilateral relationship continues to be shaped by three no's that dominated ties between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic: no alliance given that neither has ever forged an alliance in which it was not the dominant force, no splits, and no conflict on their mutual border, one of the world's longest. Theirs "is an axis of necessity" rather than an axis of convenience, particularly for Russia, given the shift in the balance of power, said Russia scholar Andrew Kushin.³

At the same time, the contours of potential conflicts of interest are already evident and likely to impact the degree to which China will have a free reign. Russia's ties to Iran are driven by short-term rather than long-term interests as well as a common interest to build an alliance that challenges Western dominance of the international system—a diversion

¹Ibid. Cendrowski

²James Kynge, How the Silk Road plans will be financed, Financial Times, 9 May 2016, <https://www.f.com/content/e83ced94-0bd8-11e6-9456-444ab5211a2f>

³Andrew Kushin, Remarks at China in Conflict Zones: Cooperation or Competition? Conference, United States Institute of Peace and Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies, 22 March 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bb95JhnJQBQ>

from one of the Islamic republic's founding slogans: "No to the East. No to the West, Islamic Republic," a reference to both the Soviet Union and the United States.

Tehran finds Russia to at a minimum share its intrinsic opposition to what they both perceive to be Western diktat. It is why the Iranian government—an Islamist regime that claims to be carrying out Allah's wishes on Earth and preparing the ground for the coming of the Mahdi (the Messiah)—counts among its most treasured foreign partners an atheist China and a Russia led by Putin, a self-declared champion of Christianity. It is not a common set of values that brings them together, but rather the desire to preserve their own power and to limit their sense of isolation in the international arena. If there is a succinct way in which to describe the goal of such alliances, it is what has been aptly called the doctrine of 'democracy containment,'

said Iran scholar Alex Vatanka.⁴

China has backed the notion of breaking rather than replacing Western dominance through the creation of regional institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and support for Iran and Russia in Syria. Yet, China differs with Iran in its approach towards Israel, with whom it has close relations, as well as the United States. Similarly, Russia is unlikely to surrender its backyard in Central Asia without a fight and may still try to reverse its position as a junior partner even if Russia and China perceive an initial common interest in exploiting declining Western influence and a US withdrawal from global leadership with President Donald J. Trump in office.

In China's view, its relationship with Russia, according to international relations scholars Evan S. Medeiros and Michael S. Chase, has "over the past two decades ... evolved from a marriage of convenience into one of enduring strategic value for both countries, one that China describes as a 'comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination.' ... China's incentives to sustain this relationship will remain robust for the foreseeable future, while the costs for China will remain low," the two scholars concluded.⁵

⁴Alex Vatanka, Iran's Russian Conundrum, The Jamestown Foundation, 5 October 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/irans-russian-conundrum/?mc_cid=8a9acf2ca0&mc_cid=f8da4b6ebe

⁵Evan S. Medeiros and Michael S. Chase, Chinese Perspectives on the Sino-Russian Relationship in Michael S. Chase, Evan S. Medeiros, J. Stapleton Roy, Eugene B. Rumer, Robert Sutter, and Richard Weitz, Russia-China Relations, Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines, Washington DC: The National Bureau of Research, July 2017, <http://www.nbr.org/publications/issue.aspx?id=349>

The game's outcome is nonetheless unpredictable. Economic power, population size, assertiveness, and military might be key factors but may not be enough for China to become the unrivalled dominant power in Eurasia. It will, however, no doubt be a key player. The Belt and Road virtually guarantees that with a budget projected to be 12 times what the United States spent on its history-changing Marshall Plan that helped Western Europe rise from the rubble after World War Two. China marshals its financial and economic muscle to seduce countries seeking to diversify away from dependency on commodities; desperate to develop their transportation, energy, and technology infrastructure; and/or groping for ways to revive their stagnant economies. Nonetheless, the question is how multi-polar Eurasia will turn out to be.

That may depend in part on more than just economic, financial, political, and military muscle. So far, Western powers have shown a poor record in matching words with deeds in their recognition that the world is moving from unipolar to multi-polar by acknowledging the legitimacy of China and other rising powers as well as their past and current contributions. Brazilian scholar Oliver Stuenkel contends that perceptions of aggressive Chinese goals are rooted in Western-centric theories of international relations and beliefs that see Western-led institutions such as the G-7, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as benign and peace-loving, whereas non-Western entities such as the G-77, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the AIIB, or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are either ineffective, illegitimate, or nonsensical.⁶

“Few analysts care to ask about the global political contributions provided by these organizations, and most generally view them with suspicion. Although rarely stated explicitly, this points to a latent sense of Western entitlement and a notion that non-Western leadership initiatives lack legitimacy,” Stuenkel wrote.⁷ These include, for example, the fact that China has become the world's largest contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations, the \$100 million funding of an African emergency response force under the auspices of the African Union, and the establishment of a \$1 billion China-UN peace and development fund.

⁶Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers are Remaking Global Order*, Cambridge: Polity, 2016, Kindle edition

⁷Ibid. Stuenkel

Institutions created by non-Western countries amount to a parallel order that complements the Western-dominated world order, but one day could challenge it. “These structures do not emerge because China and others have fundamentally new ideas or because they seek to change global rules and norms; rather, they create them to better project their power, just as Western powers have done before them. They also arose because of the limited social mobility of today’s order and because of existing institutions’ incapacity to adequately integrate rising powers,” Stuenkel said. As a result, he argues further that China’s military build-up underwrites its economic ambitions and does not signal a desire to dominate militarily despite its territory grabs in the South China Sea. Ultimately, Chinese policymakers realize that they need political stability and respect for international law to defend their far-flung and vulnerable economic interests.⁸

Predicting how the Great Game will end is complicated by volatility, instability, and uncertainty that has sparked violence and widespread discontent across a swath of land that stretches from the Mediterranean into the deep recesses of Asia. Predominantly Middle Eastern, South, and Southeast Asian violence and discontent complicates China’s grandiose plans for infrastructure and economic zones designed to tie Eurasia to the Middle Kingdom, threatens Russian aspirations to position itself as a global rather than a regional power, and scares off risk-averse investors.

The game resembles Risk, a popular board game. Multiple players engage in a complex dance as they strive for advantage and seek to compensate for weaknesses. Players form opportunistic alliances that could change at any moment. Potential black swans threaten to disrupt. The stakes, however, could not be higher.

The Great Game is played not only in Eurasia but across the world map.⁹ Like Risk, it is a game that not only aims to achieve dominance of infrastructure and energy but also to reshape political systems at a time that liberal democracy is on the defensive and populism is growing in appeal.

Players like China and Russia benefit from the rise of populism, authoritarianism, and illiberal democracy. Russia, tacitly backed by China, has sought to harness the new winds by attempting to undermine trust in Western democratic structures, manipulate elections, and sew domestic discord in the West.

⁸ Ibid. Stuenkel

⁹ James M. Dorsey, *Towards a New World Order in Eurasia? The Role of Russia and China*, RSIS Commentaries, 22 December 2016, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co16310-towards-a-new-world-order-in-eurasia-the-role-of-russia-and-china/>

That is not to say that China was simply a passive onlooker. China has invested heavily in buying influence among Western politicians, think tanks, including Washington DC's influential Brookings Institution and prestigious academic institutions such as the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.¹⁰ The impact of Chinese funding is not dissimilar to that of massive Gulf support for Middle Eastern studies in Western nations. Researchers often self-censor in a bid to ensure their access and safeguard their jobs. Publishers agree to erase critical articles from journals to maintain access to the lucrative Chinese market.¹¹

“We have a lot of discussion of Russian interference in our elections, but the Chinese efforts to influence our public policy and our basic freedoms are much more widespread than most people realize. This is an all-out effort to not simply promote themselves in a better light but to target Americans within the United States,” said Republican Senator and one-time presidential candidate, Marco Rubio, co-chairman of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC).¹²

A study by the publicly funded, Washington-based National Endowment for Democracy concluded that “over the past decade, China and Russia have spent billions of dollars to shape public opinion and perceptions around the world, employing a diverse toolkit that includes thousands of people-to-people exchanges, wide-ranging cultural activities, educational programs, and the development of media enterprises and information initiatives with global reach. ... While there are differences in the shape and tone of the Chinese and Russian approaches, both stem from an ideological model that privileges state power over individual liberty and is fundamentally hostile to free expression, open debate, and independent thought. At the same time, both Beijing and Moscow clearly take advantage of the openness of democratic systems.”¹³

¹⁰ Josh Rogin, China's foreign influence operations are causing alarm in Washington, The Washington Post, 10 December 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/chinas-foreign-influencers-are-causing-alarm-in-washington/2017/12/10/98227264-dc58-11e7-b859-fb0995360725_story.html?utm_term=.815359d3d810

¹¹ Maev Kennedy and Tom Phillips, Cambridge University Press backs down over China censorship, The Guardian, 21 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/aug/21/cambridge-university-press-to-back-down-over-china-censorship>

¹² Ibid. Rogin

¹³ Juan Pablo Cardenal, Jacek Kucharczyk, Grigorij Mesežnikov, and Gabriela Pleschová, Sharp Power, Rising Authoritarian Influence, National Endowment for Democracy, December 2017, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-Full-Report.pdf>

Populism and the Trump administration's economic nationalism have, in a twist of irony, allowed China, led by a Communist Party, to project itself as a champion of free trade and globalization.¹⁴ The irony was evident in two historic events that occurred on the same day in June 2016: the West demonstrated its dramatic turn towards looking inwards with Brits voting in a referendum to leave the European Union, while China cemented its march westwards with an inaugural annual meeting of the newly established AIIB. Shakespeare "could hardly have set up greater dramatic tension," said scholars Matthew P. Goodman and Jonathan E. Hillman, quoting the bard's words in *Henry V*: "This story shall the good man teach his son."¹⁵

Chinese state media have exploited the rise of American nationalism under Trump to project China as the guide in the creation of a new world order. A video released to mark the holding of a forum in Beijing in May 2017 attended by scores of world leaders featured a mournful cartoon character asking in a song: "Why is there conflict and war? Why is there prejudice and famine? What's wrong with the world? What can we do?" The character that sings in the video suggested that China had the solution to the world's environmental problems, glaring differences in standards of living, and conflicts.¹⁶

The video highlighted fundamental differences in China and the West's evaluation of the turmoil wracking the Middle East as well as concepts of global governance. Chinese Middle East scholar Degang Sun classified the region's conflicts as either inter-state or as political and sectarian.¹⁷ The notion of civil unrest in response to repression, discrimination, and arbitrary rule in addition to failure to deliver on public goods and services did not factor in his analysis. "The styles of Chinese and Western security governance in the Middle East vary with the Chinese side placing most emphasis on improving the well-being of Middle Eastern peoples and

¹⁴World Economic Forum, President Xi's speech to Davos in full, 17 January 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/full-text-of-xi-jinping-keynote-at-the-world-economic-forum>

¹⁵Matthew P. Goodman and Jonathan E. Hillman, Is China Winning the Scramble for Eurasia? *The National Interest*, 21 August 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-new-cold-war-was-never-inevitable-21994?page=show>

¹⁶New China TV, What's wrong with the world? What can we do? 12 May 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkkGb14zIVY>

¹⁷Degang Sun, China and the Middle security governance in the new era, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 10:3, p. 354–371

placing this as the top priority on the agenda, followed by a ‘bottom-up’ roadmap, and the seeking of incremental, consultative, inclusive and selective governance in Middle East conflict resolution,” Sun asserted. Sun’s approach stroked with Xi’s goal of returning China to “its natural, rightful and historical position as the greatest power in Asia.”¹⁸ Sun juxtaposed the West’s notion of “democratic governance” with China’s concept of “people’s livelihood governance.”¹⁹ The difference indeed reflects China’s decoupling of the rights and civil society aspect of governance from its social and economic components or what Sun terms the West’s bottom-up approach versus China’s top-down, a reference to China’s focus on government at the expense of civil society. “China is suspicious of ... non-governmental/civil society organizations in participation in security governance,” Sun noted.²⁰

Sun’s delineation of China’s concept of governance is rooted in Chinese perceptions of the world around it. Surveys of public opinion in 2011 and 2013 showed that many Chinese see China’s neighbourhood as unfriendly towards it. “Given that China has long viewed the Asian region as its most important zone of foreign engagement, this finding suggests that China does so out of necessity—to mitigate threats rather than to work with friends. ... Rather than going out into an area marked by cooperation and trust, China ... engages with a region that its population regards as unfriendly. This does not mean that mutual benefits cannot be accrued, but that the benefits will need to be perceived by the Chinese population as weighted in China’s favour. To do otherwise is to risk societal backlash,” said scholar Nicholas Thomas (Fig. 2.1).²¹

Equally central to differences in Chinese and Western concepts of governance is China’s hueing of its definitions to its adherence to outdated principles underlying its foreign and defence policies that emphasize

¹⁸Tom Miller, *China’s Asian Dream: Empire Building along the New Silk Road*, London: Zed Books, 2017, Kindle edition

¹⁹Ibid. Sun

²⁰Ibid. Sun

²¹Nicholas Thomas, *The rise of China through the eyes of China*, East Asia Forum, 12 September 2017, http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/09/12/the-rise-of-china-through-the-eyes-of-china/?utm_source=subscribe&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=postnotify&utm_id=86483&utm_title=The+rise+of+China+through+the+eyes+of+China/ Qing Pan and Nicholas Thomas, *Chinese Nationalism and Trust in East Asia*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 9 June 2017, <http://www.tandfonline.com.ezlibproxy1.ntu.edu.sg/doi/full/10.1080/00472336.2017.1322627>

Do you agree the following statements?	Distribution (%)							N	Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7			
1. Generally speaking, China is a better country than most other countries.	4.2	10.8	21.4	17.8	22.7	14.8	8.2	3091	4.21	1.59
2. The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like Chinese.	13.2	23.3	34.5	15.0	7.3	4.1	2.7	3089	3.03	1.41
3. I would rather be a citizen of China than of any other country in the world.	5.3	13.3	17.3	20.4	11.7	17.6	14.4	3089	4.3	1.79
4. It is impossible for people who do not share Chinese customs and traditions to fully understand China.	1.9	4.8	8.8	10.0	25.3	27.5	21.7	3085	5.21	1.51
5. People should support their country even if the country is in the wrong.	6.5	15.8	29.9	17.0	16.2	9.8	4.9	3072	3.69	1.55
6. How important do you think it is "to have been born in China" for being truly Chinese?	9.3	22.8	33.1	11.3	12.8	7.4	3.3	3082	3.31	1.52
7. China should follow its own interests, even if this leads to conflicts with other nations.	3.5	7.5	15.4	13.3	24.6	20.9	14.8	3081	4.70	1.64

Fig. 2.1 Chinese nationalism. (The choice of each question is 1–7. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = moderately disagree, 4 = neutral, 5 = moderately agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree. N is the number of observations, SD is the standard deviation of each item; Table 4: Nationalism, in Qing Pan & Nicholas Thomas (2017): Chinese Nationalism and Trust in East Asia, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1322627>)

Features	Western powers	China
Governance ideas	Priority on democratic governance	Priority on livelihood governance
Approach	Bottom to top	Top to bottom
Agenda setting	Radical	Progressive
Way to solve problems	Mandatory	Consultative
Level of involvement	Full participation	Selective participation
Partner selection	Elite governance	Civilian governance
Mechanism	Close	Open
Pursuit of interests	Security interest and political ideology	Economic interests and morality

Fig. 2.2 Styles of Chinese and Western governance in the Middle East (Degang Sun)

non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states and a naïve belief in economics as the magic solution for conflict. Those principles, often redefined in practice but not in theory, undergird Sun’s projection of the Belt and Road initiative as a Chinese contribution to global governance (Fig. 2.2).

China’s approach, including the flexing of its economic muscle, by definition subjects smaller countries to the whims of bigger ones and is void of any notion of human, social, and political rights or rule of law as prerequisites for sustainable stability and security. Chinese scholars take pride in China’s adherence to authoritarianism. Sun notes, for example, that the six oil-rich Gulf states that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) “welcome China to play a positive role to balance the pressure from the United States and Europe on pushing the monarchies for democratic reform.”²² In fact, Sun defines preventing “Western powers from dominating the Middle East with a view to promoting the democratization of international relations” as one of the goals of Chinese involvement in regional

²² Ibid. Sun

security governance and as a bid to establish “a great-power relationship for the establishment of a strategic partnership between China, on the one side, and Russia, the United States and Europe, on the other.”²³

Although autocrats welcome China’s de facto endorsement, Beijing at the same time has to secure its Belt and Road. The Belt and Road winds its way through a Muslim world pockmarked by conflict, including a potentially growing Rohingya insurgency in Myanmar; the war in Afghanistan; militant, sectarian, and ethnic violence in Pakistan; possible US-Saudi efforts to destabilize Iran; the conflict between Sudan and South Sudan; the wars in Syria and Yemen; the rupture between Qatar and three of its fellow GCC members; and jihadism that also threatens its north-western province of Xinjiang. In the case of Central Asia, Indian strategist Bibhu Prasad Routrayand Mantraya noted that poverty and repression accounted for the high number of Central Asians who have joined IS and its affiliates in the region.²⁴

China defines global governance, according to Sun, as capacity building and solving international conflicts. Global powers, he argues, “provide public goods in the forms of security, economy and social order to weak countries, and the countries under governance are usually the source of ‘problems,’ i.e. the threat or challenge to the international community,” Sun argued.²⁵ Sun bolsters his argument by quoting Chinese scholar Cai Tuo as describing China’s concept of governance as “a new kind of rules, mechanisms, methods and activities to manage public affairs.”²⁶

China’s concept is rooted as much in its notion of its place in the world as it is in the perception of having been shunned by the international community from the days of the 1949 revolution until 1971 when US President Richard Nixon reached out to China. As a result, China viewed Western-dominated global governance as a mantle for interference in the affairs of other countries and dominance of the developing world. Tuo’s juxtaposition of Western concepts anchored in the territory-based notion of a government’s monopoly on violence as opposed to China’s advocacy

²³ Ibid. Sun

²⁴ Bibhu Prasad Routrayand Mantraya, *Islamic State in Central Asia—Analysis*, Eurasia Review, 14 July 2017, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/14072017-islamic-state-in-central-asia-analysis/>

²⁵ Ibid. Sun

²⁶ Cai Tuo, *China’s Perspective and Practice of Global Governance*, Chinese Social Sciences 1, p. 94–106

of global governance based on the equality of power authorities repeats the fiction of adherence to the principle of non-interference.²⁷

That may prove to be the Achilles heel of China's concept of governance. "Chinese leaders and officials ... do not seem to understand that their own attitudes can evoke distrust. If a new *modus vivendi* requires the US to acknowledge that different political systems can have their own legitimacy, it requires China to resist the temptations of triumphalist nationalism. With communism discredited as an ideology, the CCP (the Chinese Communist Party) is increasingly relying on nationalism to legitimise its rule. China never lost its sense of superiority even when powerless before the West and Japan. Now that China has re-emerged as a major power, this sense of superiority has become the underlying cause of the difficulties in China's relations with many countries," warned prominent Singapore diplomat and intellectual Bilahari Kausikan.²⁸

The cost-benefit analysis of Chinese investment and economic engagement, particularly with weak states across the Eurasian landmass, has proven to be detrimental despite the massive funding of badly needed infrastructure.

The direct and indirect costs of economic cooperation for ... weak states include, but are not limited to, disruption or distortion of their economic development, economically driven environmental degradation, social and/or political instability, localised violence, and schisms within state/society relations. ... The inability or unwillingness of a weak state's government to regulate harmful Chinese-originating economic activity (whether state-sponsored or private) can ... undermine its legitimacy and/or further weaken the country's domestic institutions,

said Asia scholar Jeffrey Reeves. Reeves warned that the downside of China's economics-focussed strategy makes it vulnerable to "threats stemming from nationalism, separatism, terrorism, transnational organized crime, and drug trafficking."²⁹

The Chinese approach, moreover, has so far failed to offer solutions to multiple conflicts, including South Sudan, Israel and Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Libya or Syria. Beyond the immediate Middle East,

²⁷ Cai Tuo, *Global Governance: A Chinese Perspective and Practice*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, p. 57

²⁸ Bilahari Kausikan, *War is Unlikely but Distrust Runs Deep*, Institute of Policy Studies, 27 February 2016, <https://www.ipscommons.sg/war-is-unlikely-but-distrust-runs-deep/>

²⁹ Jeffrey Reeves, *Chinese Foreign Relations with Weak Peripheral States: Asymmetrical Economic Power and Insecurity*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, p. 2-3

China's approach involved selective support for militants in Pakistan, the first Muslim country to recognize the People's Republic, and legitimization of the Myanmar government's brutal crackdown on its Rohingya Muslim minority.³⁰ China's contribution to ending Sri Lanka's civil war amounted to giving the government the military hardware and political backing for a brutal campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that claimed to defend the interests of the country's Tamil minority. Sri Lanka was severely criticized for the high civilian death toll in the war.³¹ Undermining confidence in democratic structures, moreover, legitimizes Russian and Chinese efforts to rebalance global geopolitical power arrangements, no more so than in alliance with autocrats in the greater Middle East. They are aided by the fact that relations between the United States and many of its allies are testy. US President Trump's apparent affinity to illiberal and authoritarian leaders like Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Saudi King Salman did not stop them from enhancing relations with Moscow and Beijing.

Erdogan, who has repeatedly accused the West of supporting a failed coup attempt in July 2016 as well as a mysterious international financial cabal that allegedly seeks to undermine the Turkish economy, has applied for Turkish membership in the SCO that groups Central and South Asian states with China and Russia.³² Bent on enhancing his personal power, Erdogan is not about to fully rupture relations with the West anchored in Turkish membership in NATO and the European Council. But he is happy to play both ends against the middle by publicly aligning himself with Russian-backed Eurasianists. Iran, whose relations with the United States have worsened since the rise of Trump, is already aligned with Russia and China.

The notion of a Eurasian-dominated world order was initially propagated in Turkey by Dogu Perincek, a left-wing secularist who spent six years in prison for allegedly being part of a military-led cabal that sought to stage a coup prior to the failed attempt in 2016. Perincek has since

³⁰ James M. Dorsey, Rohingya plight feeds Muslim assertiveness, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, 14 September 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.co.uk/2017/09/rohingya-plight-feeds-muslim.html>

³¹ Jeff M. Smith, China and Sri Lanka: Between a Dream and a Nightmare, *The Diplomat*, 18 November 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/11/china-and-sri-lanka-between-a-dream-and-a-nightmare/>

³² *The American Interest*, China Eyes Turkey For Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 22 November 2016, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/11/21/china-eyes-turkey-for-shanghai-cooperation-organization/>

become a player in Turkey's hedging of its bets. Together with the deputy leader of his Homeland Party, Ismail Hakki Pekin, a former head of Turkish military intelligence with extensive contacts in Moscow that include Russian President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy advisor, Alexander Dugin, he mediated the reconciliation between Russia and Turkey following the Turkish air force's downing of a Russian fighter in 2015. The two men were supported by Turkish businessmen close to Erdogan and ultra-nationalist Eurasianist elements in the military.³³

Eurasianism in Turkey was buoyed by increasingly strained relations between the Erdogan government and the West. Erdogan has taken issue with Western criticism of his introduction of a presidential system that granted him almost unlimited power. He has also blasted the West for refusing to crack down on the Hizmet movement led by Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish imam who lives in exile in Pennsylvania, whom Erdogan holds responsible for the 2016 unsuccessful coup.³⁴ Differences over Syria have intensified pro-Eurasianist thinking that has gained currency among bureaucrats and security forces as well as in think tanks and academia. The influence of Eurasianist generals was boosted when they replaced officers who were accused of having participated in the failed coup.³⁵

Eurasianism as a concept borrows elements of Kemalism, the ideology on which Mustafa Kemal Atatürk carved modern Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire, Turkish nationalism, socialism, and radical secularism. It traces its roots to *Kadro*, an influential leftist magazine published in Turkey between 1932 and 1934,³⁶ and *Yon*, a left-wing magazine launched in the wake of a military coup in 1960³⁷ that became popular following yet another military takeover in 1980. Eurasianism is opposed to liberal capitalism and globalization, believes that Western powers want to carve up Turkey, and sees Turkey's future in alignment with Russia, Central Asia, and China.

³³ Mustafa Akyol, What the "Russian lobby" in Ankara wants, *Al-Monitor*, 15 December 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/turkey-russia-what-russian-lobby-wants.html>

³⁴ Michelle Martin, German spy agency chief says does not believe Gulen behind Turkey coup attempt, *Reuters*, 19 March 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-germany-idUSKBN16P0LQ>

³⁵ Mustafa Gurbuz, Beyond the Trump-Erdogan Meeting: The Rise of Eurasianists and Turkey's Syria Policy, Arab Center Washington DC, 23 May 2017, http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/beyond-the-trump-erdogan-meeting-the-rise-of-eurasianists-and-turkeys-syria-policy/

³⁶ *Kadro*, <http://kadrodergisi.com/>

³⁷ Jacob Landau, *Radical Politics in Modern Turkey*, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing, 1997, p. 50

Perincek's vision is shared by hardliners in Iran, including the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who advocate an Iranian pivot to the east on the grounds that China, Russia, and other members of the SCO were more reliable partners than the United States and Europe. The Guards believe that Iran stands to significantly benefit as a key node in the Belt and Road and will not be confronted by China on its human rights record. Some Iranian hardliners also suggested that China's principle of non-interference would mean that Beijing would not resist Iran's support of regional proxies like Lebanon's Hezbollah militia, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen in the way the United States did. Their vision was strengthened by Chinese plans to invest \$30 billion in Iranian oil and gas fields, and \$40 billion in Iran's mining industry as well as the willingness of Chinese banks to extend loans at a time that Trump was seeking to reimpose sanctions.³⁸ China's Belt and Road moreover strokes with Iran's own strategic vision formulated in 2005 in a 25-year plan that remains valid.³⁹ The plan envisions Iran as a transportation and energy hub for Central Asia, the Middle East, India, Russia, and Europe with the Islamic republic's deep-sea port of Chabahar and railways links at its core.⁴⁰

Turkey's embrace of the Eurasianist idea takes on added significance with Russia and the European Union slapping sanctions on each other because of the dispute over Russian intervention in Ukraine.⁴¹ The EU sanctions halted \$15.8 billion in European agricultural supports to Russia.⁴² Russian countermeasures prevent shipment of those products via Russia to China.

³⁸ Ladane Nasser, *Iran's Leaders Are Bolstered by Billions in Loans From the East*, Bloomberg, 20 September 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-09-20/iran-loaned-billions-as-asian-powers-reject-trump-world-view>

³⁹ Seyyed Ali Khamenei, *Document of the Perspective of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the horizon of 1404 AH* (چشم‌انداز جمهوری اسلامی ایران در افق سال 1404 هجری شمسی سند), Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, March 2005, <http://asl44.mefa.gov.ir/Portal/home/?generaltext/82757/82764/> سند چشم‌انداز - 20 - ساله کشور

⁴⁰ Jahangir Amuzegar, *Iran's 20-Year Economic Perspective: Promises and Pitfalls*, Middle East Policy Council, Vol. XVI:3, <http://www.mepc.org/journal/irans-20-year-economic-perspective-promises-and-pitfalls>

⁴¹ Daniel Gros and Federica Mustilli, *The Effects of Sanctions and Counter-Sanctions on EU-Russian Trade Flows*, Center for European Policy Studies, 5 July 2016, <https://www.ceps.eu/publications/effects-sanctions-and-counter-sanctions-eu-russian-trade-flows>

⁴² BBC News, *Russia hits West with food import ban in sanctions row*, 7 August 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28687172>

To solve their problem, China and Europe have focussed on an alternative route that would bypass the Russian landmass, which stretches from the Bering Sea to the Baltics.⁴³ Turkey as well as Caucasian and Central Asian nations, eager to seize the opportunity, fast-tracked port projects in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, Poti in Georgia, Aktau in Kazakhstan, and Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan as well as a rail line linking Baku and the Georgian capital of Tbilisi with Kars in eastern Turkey that ensured that traffic from China to Europe could circumvent Russia.⁴⁴ An initial lack of focus because of a crackdown on dissent and a divisive referendum that enhanced President Erdogan's powers stopped Turkey from following through. The delays in completing the Turkish bit of the 826-kilometre-long Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) line that offers China the shortest route to Europe and potentially competes with Russia's Trans-Siberian railroad allowed Ukraine to emerge alongside the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad as a key transit node between Asia and Europe.⁴⁵ The line was finally inaugurated in November 2017 with the arrival of a train from Kazakhstan carrying wheat in arrival in Turkey's Mediterranean port of Mersin.⁴⁶

Turkey and the Caspian Sea ports expect the railroad to position them in the competition for railroad dominance in Central Asia and enable them to play both sides against the middle: service China's Belt and Road initiative as well as the competing North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) that is backed by India, Japan, and Iran. Russia worries that successful Uzbek-Kyrgyz discussions about the construction of a China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, which would stretch from Xinjiang to the Fergana Valley, could allow China to easily send troops to the region. To do so, the Central Asians would have to switch from Russia's broad-gauge

⁴³Alexander Gabuev, *Did Western Sanctions Affect Sino-Russian Economic Ties?*, Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 26 April 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/04/26/did-western-sanctions-affect-sino-russian-economic-ties-pub-63461>

⁴⁴Wade Shephard, *Reconnecting Asia: The Story Behind The Emerging Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Rail Line*, Forbes, 15 December 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2016/12/15/reconnecting-asia-the-story-behind-the-emerging-baku-tbilisi-kars-rail-line/print/>

⁴⁵Zaur Shiriyeu, *Will the North-South Transport Corridor Overshadow the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway?* Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol. 14: 53, 24 April 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/will-north-south-transport-corridor-overshadow-baku-tbilisi-kars-railway/>

⁴⁶Kazinform, *The first train from Kazakhstan arrived in BTK in Turkish Mersin (Первый поезд из Казахстана прибыл по БТК в турецкий Мерсин)*, 5 November 2017, http://www.inform.kz/ru/pervyy-poezd-iz-kazahstana-pribyl-po-btk-v-tureckiy-mersin_a3082190?utm_referrer=https%253A%252F%252Fzen.yandex.com&mc_cid=df7edbcfa3&mc_eid=f8da4b6ebe

rail to the narrower one used by both China and much of Europe. Russia is equally suspicious of Chinese-Iranian plans to link their countries through a railroad that would traverse Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.⁴⁷

The rail component of the Belt and Road takes on a far greater geostrategic than economic importance when evaluated against the backdrop of trade flows because trains, while more expensive, cut maritime transport times by more than 50%.⁴⁸ Ships, on the other hand, outcompete trains not only on cost but because they can carry 100 times more cargo than trains. Trains ferry on average 200 20-foot containers, while ships accommodate up to 20,000. Trains pulled by 1,881 locomotives carried goods to and from Europe worth \$17 billion by mid-2016. China hopes to triple the volume with the introduction of an additional 3,119 engines by 2020.⁴⁹ Even so, trains pale in economic significance given that more than 90% of China's \$4 trillion trade travelled by sea in 2016.⁵⁰

In the Great Game, Russia and China appear so far, despite the sanctions on Russia, to be scoring the most points in the Great Game. They have benefited from the rise of populism in an era of defiance and dissent in which significant segments of the public in the West and beyond no longer have confidence in traditional politics or leaders. To cement their gains, Russia and China will have to go beyond focussing on geopolitics, public diplomacy, and cyberwarfare. They will have to address concerns of disaffected social groups who feel marginalized by globalization and shunted aside by elites. Already, much like traditional politicians in the West, China is encountering resistance. Its massive investments frequently generate opposition by population groups that feel threatened or left out.

China is nevertheless better positioned than Russia to meet Eurasia's infrastructural needs despite Russia's deep historical and cultural roots in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Already, Chinese state-owned energy

⁴⁷ Alexander Shustov, Iran and China want to redraw the geopolitical map of Central Asia (Иран и Китай хотят перекроить геополитическую карту Центральной Азии), Eurasia Expert, 23 January 2017, http://eurasia.expert/iran-i-kitay-khotyat-perekroit-geopoliticheskuyu-kartu-tsentralnoy-azii/?mc_cid=df7edbcfa3&mc_cid=f8da4b6ebe

⁴⁸ Kira Egorova, Why China launched a freight train to London via Kazakhstan and Russia. Russia Beyond, 13 January 2017, https://www.rbth.com/business/2017/01/13/why-china-launched-a-freight-train-to-london-via-kazakhstan-and-russia_680196

⁴⁹ Chu Daye, Blueprint for continental cargo train to open markets in Eurasia, Global Times, 18 October 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1012168.shtml>

⁵⁰ China Regional Service, HIS Global Insight, December 2016

companies have broken Russia's monopoly in the region.⁵¹ Russia's long-term hopes are in part pinned on long-standing Central Asian caution towards Asia dating back to the time of the czars. Legend has it that Central Asian khans favoured an embrace by the Russian bear rather than the Chinese dragon whom they feared would drown them with its migration westwards.⁵² It was a legend that Czarist Russia propagated by warning of a yellow peril and asserting that Chinese territorial expansion was imminent.⁵³ "This imaginary population imbalance has taken root in the region and foreshadows the incoming Chinese economic migration," said China scholar Alessandro Arduino.⁵⁴

Yet, Russia's strategic assets are also liabilities. Even without European sanctions and counter sanctions, rail transport through Russia is easier said than done. Using Russian rail with its unique gauge increases cost and makes linkages south of the Russian border more attractive. Russia is nonetheless working to connect Moscow and Beijing by high-speed rail that would cut travel time to a mere two days.⁵⁵ Russia has also expressed interest in linking its Trans-Siberian Railway to the Chinese-controlled Pakistani port of Gwadar.⁵⁶

To further hedge its bets and bolster its leverage, Russia has forged strategic ties to China and partnered with it in areas such as aerospace, science, and finance.⁵⁷ Russia has also sought hook-ups to Chinese networks where possible and struck energy, commodity, and construction deals beyond Eurasia with Middle Eastern and North African nations such

⁵¹ Alessandro Arduino, *China's Energy Interests in Central Asia, Symbiotic distrust and striking a balance between cooperation and confrontation* in Fengshi Wu and Hongzhou Zhang (eds.), *China's Global Quest for Resources, Energy, food and water*, London: Routledge, 2017, p. 121

⁵² Susanna Soojung Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian Imagination, 1685–1922: To the Ends of the Orient*, London: Routledge, 2013, p. 78

⁵³ David Scott, *China and the International System, 1840–1949, Power, Presence, and Perceptions in a Century of Humiliation*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012, p. 144

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* Arduino, p. 125

⁵⁵ Wade Shephard, *2 Days From China To Europe By Rail? Russia Going For High-Speed Cargo Trains*, *Forbes*, 14 January 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/01/14/2-days-from-china-to-europe-by-rail-russia-going-for-high-speed-cargo-trains/print/>

⁵⁶ Gwadar News, *Russia formally requests access to Gwadar Port*, 25 November 2016, <https://gwadarnews.com/2016/11/25/russia-formally-requests-access-to-gwadar-port/>

⁵⁷ RT, *Russia-China trade up almost 10% in May*, 8 June 2016, <https://www.rt.com/business/345827-russia-china-trade-turnover/>

as Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, Egypt, and Libya. Russia was considering bidding for offshore drilling rights in Lebanon.⁵⁸ In Libya, Russia has politically and militarily supported General Khalifa Haftar, who is fighting a United Nations-backed government that Western states see as the vehicle to restore stability.⁵⁹ Forces loyal to Haftar captured in 2017 key oil-rich areas of eastern Libya and associated ports.⁶⁰ Russian intervention appears to acknowledge de facto partition of Libya.

Yet, Russian-Chinese relations based on a perceived communality of interest should not be taken for granted.

Anxiety over China's conventional military superiority probably motivated, at least partly, Russia's 2009 announcement of a new military doctrine explicitly reserving the right to first use of nuclear weapons—a stance that resembles America's Cold War force posture, aimed at deterring superior conventional Soviet forces in Europe. These imbalances suggest that Russia would resist a tight military alliance with China, even as the two countries pursue mutually beneficial tactical diplomatic coordination. China's willingness to cooperate with Russia also has its limits. After all, China's development strategy depends on its continued integration into the world economy—and, specifically, reliable access to American markets and technology. The Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy depends on strong economic growth, and it will not risk this strategy for some 'authoritarian alliance' with Russia,

argued international relations scholar Joseph S. Nye.⁶¹

Like with China, the longevity of Russia's alliance with Iran is far from certain. Iranian-Russian competition is already visible in Syria,⁶² the Caucasus, and Central Asia and could create opportunity for China. How Iran deploys its strategic advantage in determining Eurasia's energy infrastructure is likely to feed into a potential divergence of Chinese and Russian interests. Strains

⁵⁸ Henry Foy and David Sheppard, Rosneft takes key step in push into Middle East, *Financial Times*, 3 April 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/5417e004-13a4-11e7-80f4-13e067d5072c>

⁵⁹ Maria Tsvetkova, Exclusive—Russian private security firm says it had armed men in east Libya, *Reuters*, 10 March 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-libya-contractors-exclusive-idUKKBN16H2EI>

⁶⁰ BBC News, Libya's Khalifa Haftar retakes oil ports from Islamist militia, 14 March 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39266509>

⁶¹ Joseph S. Nye, A New Sino-Russian Alliance? Project Syndicate, 12 January 2015, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-china-alliance-by-joseph-s-nye-2015-01>

⁶² Ibrahim Hamidi, Syrian Regime's Delay in Sealing Economic Agreements Cause Row with Tehran (من بطء تنفيذ اتفاقات استر اتجنية مع دمشق طهران «غاضبة»), *Al Hayat*, 8 March 2017, <http://www.alhayat.com/m/story/20602223>

in relations with Iran could complicate another Russian hedging strategy: projecting Russia as the go-to mediator in the Middle East. Russia believes it has a strategic advantage, particularly with Iran, given that it, unlike the United States, had good relations with all the region's players.⁶³ China, in much the same boat, could step in to replace Russia as the main alternative to the US go-to power.

Recognizing opportunities, Gulf states have sought to ensure that Russia like China has a greater stake in their survival by digging into their deep pockets to invest at a time when Moscow's embattled economy struggled with lower oil prices. Qatar's investment arm, the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), bought, in a joint venture with Swiss oil trader Glencore, a 19.5% stake in Russia's state-owned oil group Rosneft. The stake was worth an estimated \$11 billion.⁶⁴

Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE additionally put tens of billions of dollars into Russia's sovereign wealth fund, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF).⁶⁵ The UAE has, moreover, purchased Russian military equipment and services, including anti-armour missiles, training, and support for \$1.9 billion. It also agreed to develop together with Russia a fifth generation, joint light fighter aircraft, while a consortium of Middle East investors acquired a 12% stake in defence manufacturer, Russian Helicopters.⁶⁶

Diverging Chinese and Russian interests remain for now muted. The rise of populism, economic nationalism, and a reduced Western focus on human rights is likely to keep their interests aligned at least for the immediate future. Those interests, however, are potentially threatened by emerging Chinese-Russian rivalry in Central Asia, greater Chinese engagement in security beyond its borders, and mounting anti-Chinese sentiment across Eurasia, including parts of the greater Middle East.

⁶³ Mark N. Katz and Hussein Ibish, Can Moscow Be an Effective Mideast Mediator? Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 24 March 2017, <http://www.agsiw.org/can-moscow-effective-mideast-mediator/>

⁶⁴ Katya Golubkova, Dmitry Zhdannikov, and Stephen Jewkes, How Russia sold its oil jewel: without saying who bought it, Reuters, 25 January 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-rosneft-privatisation-insight-idUSKBN1582OH>

⁶⁵ Theodore Karasik, Why is Qatar Investing so much in Russia? Middle East Institute, 8 March 2017, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/why-qatar-investing-so-much-russia>

⁶⁶ Leone Lakhani, Russia-Gulf Arab States: A Relationship of Convenience, The Cipher Brief, 7 March 2017, https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/exclusive/middle-east/russia-gulf-arab-states-relationship-convenience-1091?utm_content=bufferc3874&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

China benefits from concern in Central Asia about Russian ambitions in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Xi's assurance in advance of a visit to Astana in June 2017 that China and Kazakhstan "respect each other's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and choice of development path" was widely seen as a projection of the People's Republic as a more reliable partner than Russia.⁶⁷ Kazakh concerns were also reflected in a decision to shift the nation from a Cyrillic to a Latin alphabet.⁶⁸

Chinese concerns about unrest in Xinjiang and fears that violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan could spill into the resource-rich and militarily strategic province that is China's gateway to Central Asia have already prompted China to move beyond its traditional reluctance to engage militarily beyond its borders. The engagement was partly intended to prevent the return of Uyghur foreign fighters and increased weapon smuggling into Xinjiang in the wake of the Islamic State's military setbacks in Syria and Iraq.⁶⁹ Some Chinese government agencies, including the ministry of public security and authorities in Xinjiang, feared, however, that the Belt and Road's integration of Xinjiang with its Muslim hinterlands in Central and South Asia as well as closer ties to Saudi Arabia could fuel rather than undermine Uyghur religiosity and nationalism.⁷⁰

China, by now, had, however, too much at stake in the Belt and Road for it to back away. Protection of Chinese investment and personnel rather than retrenchment became the name of the game. The need to protect is both material and psychological in the aftermath of Uyghur nationalist riots in 2009 in the Xinjiang capital of Urumqi in which almost 200 people, mostly Han Chinese, were killed. "The Urumqi riots were a political earthquake that jolted China's confidence and image, inflicting particular damage on Beijing's deepening ties with the Islamic world. Since then, the

⁶⁷ Xi Jinping, Full Text of Chinese president's signed article in Kazakh newspaper, Xinhuanet, 17 June 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/07/c_136347206.htm

⁶⁸ Deutsche Welle, Kazakhstan spells out plans for alphabet swap, 12 April 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/kazakhstan-spells-out-plans-for-alphabet-swap/a-38407769>

⁶⁹ Christian Shepherd, China, Kyrgyzstan Border Forces Hold Exercises to Stop Arms Smuggling, Reuters, 27 June 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-06-27/china-kyrgyzstan-border-forces-hold-exercises-to-stop-arms-smuggling>

⁷⁰ Mohammed Al-Sudairi, Changing State-Religion Dynamics in Xi Jinping's China: And its Consequences for Sino-Saudi Relations, King Faisal Center For Research and Islamic Studies, January 2017, <http://kfcris.com/pdf/32a413c468c1b66c84d974e0b34c1efa58d77ebe4d1a1.pdf>

bloodshed from Xinjiang's ethnic and religious strife has escalated to the point that China's rulers constantly feel forced to prove that they can protect their own citizens—especially the Han Chinese—at home and around the world,” said China scholar Robert R. Bianchi.⁷¹

To counter increased threats and secure its interests in the greater Middle East, China has expanded the scope of its military and private security operations in the region. In a response that raised the spectre of a vicious circle, the Islamic State released in early 2017 a 30-minute video in which it denounced “evil Chinese communist infidel lackeys” and promised to “shed blood like rivers” in attacks on Chinese targets. Filmed in Iraq by IS's Al-Furat province, the video featured Uyghur fighters and their heavily armed children who appeared to hail from Xinjiang. Offering a stylized view of Uyghur life in the caliphate that contrasted starkly with China's construction of a surveillance state of the future in Xinjiang, the video showed scenes of their battles and prayers as well as the execution of alleged informants. The group's threat against China was issued by a fighter as he prepared to put to death a suspected informant.⁷²

Australian scholar Michael Clarke suggested that the video was more than just a response to Chinese assertiveness. Clarke argued that the group was seeking to become the dominant jihadist player in Xinjiang and among Uyghurs at a time that it was on the defensive in Syria and Iraq. A militant in the video denounced the al-Qaeda-affiliated Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), the hitherto foremost Uyghur group, as apostates and called on its members to defect to IS. TIP has roots in Afghanistan and has had a presence in Syria since 2012.⁷³

In a rare cross-border operation, China sent personnel and military vehicles in 2016 to patrol the Wakhan Corridor, Afghanistan's eastern tongue that touches, albeit barely, China's borders. The patrols suggested that China was moving beyond providing Afghanistan military aid to the tune of \$70 million and training of security forces to conducting counterterrorism

⁷¹ Robert R. Bianchi, *The Perception of the 2009 Urumqi Conflict across the Islamic World* in Niv Horesh (ed), *Toward Well-Oiled Relations? China's Presence in the Middle East Following the Arab Spring*, Houndsmill, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 48–68

⁷² Site Intelligence Group, *IS Video Highlights Uighur Fighters and Children, training Camps in Western Iraq*, 27 February 2017, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/is-video-highlights-Uighur-fighters-and-children-training-camps-in-western-iraq.html>

⁷³ Michael Clarke, *After ISIS Threat, China May Have to Get off Sidelines in Middle East*, *Foreign Policy*, 3 March 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/03/after-isis-threat-china-may-have-to-get-off-sidelines-in-middle-east/?utm_content=buffer36dbf&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

operations.⁷⁴ China has since started talks with Afghanistan to build the People's Republic's first foreign land rather than naval military base.⁷⁵

The patrols fit an emerging pattern of China using law enforcement and its mushrooming private security industry for counterterrorism and anti-crime operations beyond its borders. Chinese and Pakistani special forces held a joint military exercise in November 2016 in a bid to strengthen cooperation in countering political violence.⁷⁶ Similarly, the Afghan patrols resembled joint police operations with Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand along the Mekong river⁷⁷ and border controls in Central Asia in cooperation with Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Tajik forces. Chinese private security companies were also expanding operations in and around Gwadar.⁷⁸

Chinese engagement on the Afghan side of the border as well as closer military cooperation with Tajikistan appeared to be driven by concern in Beijing that Uyghur militants had moved from Pakistan into Badakhshan, a region in northern Afghanistan that borders on China and the Central Asian state. The engagement also constituted a response to President Barak Obama's drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan and uncertainty over what policy Trump would pursue.

Jonny, a blogging traveller, reported encountering Afghan, Chinese, and Tajik soldiers at a military checkpoint in Little Pamir in October 2016. "We had a fun adventure hanging with Afghan commanders, Chinese military and Tajik soldiers," Jonny wrote.⁷⁹ The encounter served as a first

⁷⁴ Giles Gibson, Exclusive: Chinese security forces caught patrolling deep inside eastern Afghanistan, WION, 3 November 2016, <http://www.wionews.com/south-asia/exclusive-chinese-security-forces-caught-patrolling-deep-inside-eastern-afghanistan-8008/>; Franz J. Marty, The curious case of Chinese troops on Afghan soil, The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 3 February 2017, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13424-the-curious-case-of-chinese-troops-on-afghan-soil.html>

⁷⁵ Allison Jackson and Gohar Abbas, China in talks over military base in remote Afghanistan: officials, Agence France Presse, 2 February 2018, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/china-talks-over-military-remote-afghanistan-officials-030210395.html>

⁷⁶ People's Daily, China, Pakistan hold joint anti-terrorism drills, 7 November 2016, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/1107/c90000-9138367.html>

⁷⁷ Andrew R.C. Marshall, Led by China, Mekong nations take on Golden Triangle narco-empire, Reuters, 17 March 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-southeastasia-drugs-mekong-idUKKCN0WH2ZW>

⁷⁸ Email interview with Chinese private security scholar Alessandro Arduino, 8 March 2017

⁷⁹ Jonny, The Complete Adventure Guide To The Afghanistan Wakhan Valley And Pamir, Backpacking Man, 24 October 2016, <http://backpackingman.com/afghanistan-wakhan-hiking-little-pamir/>

indication that a Chinese proposal for a four-nation security bloc that would include Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan was taking shape.⁸⁰ The grouping would compete with the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Tajikistan, like Kyrgyzstan home to a Russian military base, is already a CSTO member. The presence of Chinese forces in Afghanistan suggested changes in the definitions of China's foreign and defence policy principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of others. The Chinese units reportedly crossed twice a month from Tajikistan into Afghanistan.⁸¹

China created the legal basis for cross-border operations with the adoption in 2015 of an anti-terrorism law that allows the government to deploy troops beyond the country's frontiers.⁸² The Chinese defence ministry nonetheless indicated that the patrols in Afghanistan were being carried out by private security companies with close ties to the Chinese military rather than by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) itself.⁸³

While China may want to secure its border with Afghanistan, strife elsewhere in the country may well serve its purpose. Iran's forging of increasingly close ties with the Taliban and its financial and military support for the insurgents in a bid to bleed US forces to death by a thousand cuts constitutes an effort to ensure that the Belt and Road will ultimately run across Afghanistan's western border into Iran. In support of Iran's ambition, India was building a road through southwestern Afghanistan to the Iranian border that would allow traders to bypass Pakistan, which has long restricted the transit of Afghan goods. "We said that Afghanistan would not be landlocked anymore and we would be at Afghanistan's disposal," said Iran's ambassador to Afghanistan, Mohammed Reza Bahrami, noting that Iran was co-funding construction of the road.⁸⁴

China's new assertiveness signalled a potential first step towards a restructuring of tacit understandings whereby Russia acted as Central

⁸⁰Ting Shi, China Moves Closer to Afghan Security Role, Bloomberg, 12 April 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-11/growing-terrorism-risk-leads-china-to-boost-role-in-afghanistan>

⁸¹Ibid. Gibson

⁸²Ibid. BBC News, China passes controversial new anti-terror laws

⁸³Ministry of National Defense, Defense Ministry's regular press conference on Feb. 23, 24 February 2017, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2017-02/24/content_4773551.htm

⁸⁴Carlotta Gall, Iran Gains Ground in Afghanistan as U.S. Presence Wanes, The New York Times, 5 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/05/world/asia/iran-afghanistan-taliban.html>

Asia's security guarantor while China focussed on regional economic development. Paving the road to greater assertiveness that would put China in competition with Russia was Beijing's first arms sales to Central Asian nations, including its HQ-9 air defence system to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. China also supplied Pterodactyl drones to Uzbekistan.⁸⁵ In an out-of-left field move, Uzbekistan, long one of the world's most repressive regime, in 2017, took first steps towards political and economic liberalization in a bid to improve relations with the United States and play Washington against Beijing and Moscow. At the same time, Uzbekistan moved to improve strained relations with its neighbours, opening borders that had been closed for more than a decade and urging closer regional cooperation and trade.⁸⁶ Thousands attended in September 2017 the reopening of a major crossing on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border where only a year earlier troops of the two countries had faced off.⁸⁷

Chinese plans to increase its marine corps fivefold from 20,000 to 100,000 men would allow it to station more of its own military personnel in Gwadar as well as in Djibouti, home to China's first overseas military facility at the crossroads of key trade routes linking Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. The Djibouti base is large enough to house a few thousand troops, berth six ships, and pre-position supplies. Beyond its strategic location, Djibouti, Africa's third smallest country that has turned hosting foreign military bases into a business, served China's purpose of playing down the importance of its naval expansion. "It's less controversial for China to be in Djibouti simply because there are many other countries with a presence there," said Zhang Baohui, a Lingnan University professor of Chinese foreign policy, referring to French, the United States, Saudi, and Japanese bases in the country.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Sputnik International, China Supplies Air Defense Systems, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle to Uzbekistan, 2 February 2015, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201502021017650004/>

⁸⁶ Yaroslav Trofimov, In Uzbekistan, Signs of a Thaw After Decades of Repression, The Wall Street Journal, 14 September 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-uzbekistan-signs-of-a-thaw-after-decades-of-repression-1505381404>

⁸⁷ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Thousands Attend Reopening Of Major Checkpoint Along Kyrgyz-Uzbek Border, 6 September 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-major-border-checkpoint-reopened/28720427.html>

⁸⁸ Sarah Zheng, China's Djibouti military base: "logistics facility," or platform for geopolitical ambitions overseas? South China Morning Post, 1 October 2017, http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2113300/chinas-djibouti-military-base-logistics-facility-or?utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=referral

“Besides its original missions of a possible war with Taiwan, maritime defence in the East and South China seas, it’s also foreseeable that the PLA Navy’s mission will expand overseas, including ... offshore supply depots like in Djibouti and Gwadar port in Pakistan,” added Liu Xiaojiang, a former navy political commissar.⁸⁹ The US Defence Department concurred. “China most likely will seek to establish additional military bases in countries with which it has a longstanding friendly relationship and similar strategic interests, such as Pakistan,” the Pentagon said.⁹⁰

Liu Lin, a lieutenant and strategist at the PLA Academy of Military Science, positioned Chinese investment in ports across Eurasia from Piraeus in Greece to Malaysia’s Malacca as part of an effort to ensure that the Chinese navy has the ability to operate independently in international waters.⁹¹ The Chinese push benefits from the fact that the country’s state-owned ports and shipping companies are beholden to only one shareholder: the government. “Private operators have a one-year time line for their investments. Chinese operators can afford to look at the long-term and cut deals with autocrats at whom our shareholders as well as Western public opinion would balk,” said a Western shipping executive.⁹² Belgian port economist Theo Notteboom estimated that state-owned Chinese companies had invested more than \$4 billion since 2010 in stakes in 21 of the world’s top 50 container ports.⁹³ A Financial

⁸⁹ Minnie Chan, As overseas ambitions expand, China plans 400 per cent increase to marine corps numbers, sources say, South China Morning Post, 13 March 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2078245/overseas-ambitions-expand-china-plans-400pc-increase>

⁹⁰ Office of the Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to Congress, Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2017, 15 May 2017, https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017_China_Military_Power_Report.PDF

⁹¹ Christopher Lens, China’s Maritime Silk Road and Energy Geopolitics in the Indian Ocean: Motivations and Implications for the Region, in Erica Downs, Mikal E. Herberg, Michael Kugelman, Christopher Len, and Kaho Yu, Asia’s Energy Security and China’s Belt and Road Initiative, National Bureau of Asian Research, November 2017, p. 47 http://nbr.org/publications/specialreport/pdf/free/010218/SR68_Aσίας_Energy_Security_November2017.pdf

⁹² Interview with the author, 10 November 2017

⁹³ Costas Paris, Chinese Shipping Giants Seek Control of ‘Maritime Silk Road’, The Wall Street Journal, 7 April 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinese-shipping-giants-seek-control-of-maritime-silk-road-1491557405>

Times investigation concluded that China had invested by 2015 in two thirds of the world's 60 foremost container ports.⁹⁴

Putin, in response, to the Chinese push used a visit to Central Asia in early 2017 to signal Russia's intention to stand its ground against what it saw as encroachment on its military position in the region.⁹⁵ Putin focussed on security rather than on the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union that Tajikistan has wanted to join. CSTO and Russian bases in Central Asia are central to Moscow's efforts to counter Islamic militancy in Afghanistan as well as drug trafficking. In Dushanbe, Putin announced that Russian troops would again be patrolling Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan.⁹⁶

The joker in the Great Game is Donald J. Trump's United States. Trump has yet to spell out an overall policy towards Eurasia even though he has articulated attitudes towards individual players. One of those players, Iran, was on his hit list, much to Saudi Arabia's delight.

A tougher US policy towards Iran, a nation of strategic importance to several of the Great Game's players, has consequences and could undercut the Islamic republic's strategic advantage in shaping the future architecture of Eurasia's energy landscape. Unfettered by international sanctions, Iran is pivotal to the success of China's transcontinental, infrastructure-focussed Belt and Road initiative in ways that Saudi Arabia is not.

In a study published in 2015, energy scholar Micha'el Tanchum suggested that it would be gas supplies from Iran and Turkmenistan, two Caspian Sea states, rather than Saudi oil that would determine which way the future Eurasian energy architecture tilts: China, the world's third largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) importer, or Europe. Iran's pivotal position is reinforced by the fact that Asian exporters of liquefied natural gas such as Indonesia and Malaysia have reduced exports to satisfy increasing domestic demand.

"Iran, within five years, will likely have 24.6 billion cubic metres of natural gas available for annual piped gas exports beyond its current supply commitments. Not enough to supply all major markets, Tehran will face a crucial geopolitical choice for the destination of its piped exports. Iran will

⁹⁴ James Kyngge, Chris Campbell, Amy Kazmin, and Farhan Bokhari, How China Rules the Waves, Financial Times, 12 January 2017, <https://ig.ft.com/sites/china-ports>

⁹⁵ Rostilav Ishcenko, Putin's Central Asia Tour? What's at Stake, Fort Russ, 1 March 2017, <http://www.fort-russ.com/2017/03/putins-central-asia-tour-whats-at-stake.html>

⁹⁶ Sputnik, Russia to Help Boost Tajik-Afghan Border Protection Using Russian Base—Putin, 27 February 2017, https://sputniknews.com/russia/201702271051082505-russia-tajikistan-afghanistan-putin/?mc_cid=0f7c66561d&mc_cid=f8da4b6ebe

be able to export piped gas to two of the following three markets: European Union (EU)/ Turkey via the Southern Gas Corridor centring on the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), India via an Iran-Oman-India pipeline, or China via either Turkmenistan or Pakistan. The degree to which the system of energy relationships in Eurasia will be more oriented toward the European Union or China will depend on the extent to which each secures Caspian piped gas exports through pipeline infrastructure directed to its respective markets,” Tanchum argued.

The lifting of international sanctions in 2015 as part of an agreement on restrictions on Iran’s nuclear programme significantly enhanced the Islamic republic’s ability to Eurasia’s energy architecture given that it boasts the world’s second largest natural gas reserves and its fourth largest oil reserves.⁹⁷ That door could however close following Trump’s decision in 2018 to withdraw the United States from the agreement and reimpose sanctions. Irrespective of Iran’s prospects, Saudi Arabia has been slow to counter the Islamic republic by developing its own natural gas reserves, estimated to be the fourth largest in the world.⁹⁸ In the absence of being able to leverage its natural gas potential, Saudi Arabia’s ability to remain a player beyond being an oil supplier and market for commercial and military goods may lie in giving in to Chinese pressure to price its fossil fuel in Chinese yuan as well as US dollars—a move that would challenge the petrodollar system, a bedrock of US influence in the greater Middle East. In doing so, it could halt China’s tendency to prefer suppliers like Russia that are not members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). It would help China increase global demand for yuan-denominated assets and eventually put the Chinese currency on par with that of the United States and keep Saudi Arabia as a major player in the game.⁹⁹

In a similar vein, a report by an Abu Dhabi- and Washington-based think tank, emerge85, concluded that Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries were not core to the Belt and Road initiative, had developed less deep economic relations with China, and could find enhancement of those ties

⁹⁷Micha’el Tanchum, *A Post-Sanctions Iran and the Eurasian Energy Architecture, Challenges and Opportunities for the Euro-Atlantic Community*, Atlantic Council, September 2015, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Iran_Energy_Architecture_web_0925.pdf

⁹⁸Ayhan Demirbas, Hemaïd Alsulami, and Abdul-Sattar Nizami, *The natural gas potential of Saudi Arabia*, *Energy Sources: Energy Sources, Part A: Recovery, Utilization, and Environmental Effects*, Vol. 38:18, p. 2635–2642

⁹⁹Mishaal Al Gergawi, *China Is Eyeballing a Major Strategic Investment in Saudi Arabia’s Oil*, *Foreign Policy*, 26 October 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/26/china-is-eyeballing-a-major-strategic-investment-in-saudi-arabias-oil/>

LNG Imports and Market Share by Country (in MTPA)

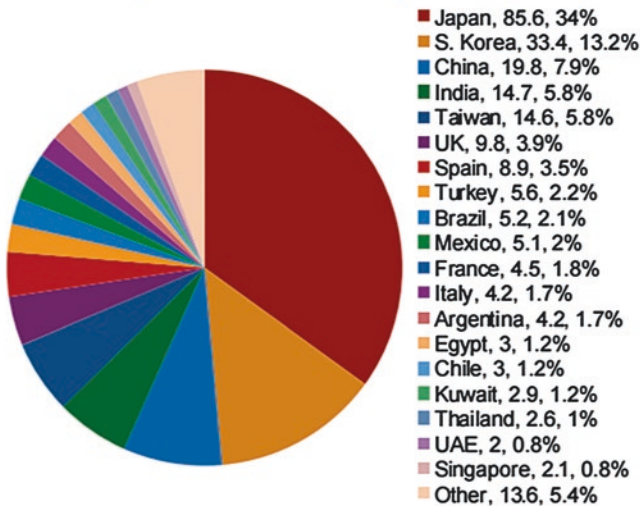


Fig. 2.3 LNG imports and market share by country (in MPTA). (IGU 2017 World LNG Report)

complicated by China's greater interest in Iran. "Options for (the GCC) benefitting from the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) without allowing it to worsen regional relations and stability require careful assessment. ... The China-GCC relationship has been broad but rather shallow, confined to trade in oil, gas, and bulk materials one way, and mass-market manufactured goods the other way," the report said. It noted that "China's investments in Iraq, Egypt, Pakistan, and especially Iran represent a much larger financial commitment and level of oil and gas production." Faced with the prospect of reduced demand for fossil fuels, if not the end of oil, Saudi Arabia and Gulf states have made renewable energy as well as energy-intensive products such as petrochemicals, iron and steel, aluminium, fertilizers, and cement a key part of their economic diversification plans that create new opportunities for a deepening of the region's ties to China (Fig. 2.3).¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Emerge85, China's Road to the Gulf, 11 October 2017, <http://emerge85.io/report/the-road-to-the-gulf/>

Nonetheless, in the absence of Saudi Arabia being able to play its natural gas card, Tanchum's analysis meant that China would by hook or by crook have to ensure that it is Iran and Turkmenistan's main gas importer. That would position the Belt and Road as Eurasia's key energy infrastructure and solidify Chinese influence in Central Asia and the greater Middle East.

Turkmen hopes that it would be China's primary gas supplier were however dashed when the China National Petroleum Corporation and Uzbekistan's Uzbekneftegaz indefinitely postponed construction of a pipeline on Uzbek territory dubbed Line D. Line D was intended to increase the share of Turkmen gas exported to China, the Central Asian state's only buyer. Three other pipelines identified as Lines A, B, and C accommodate not only Turkmen but also Kazak exports to China. The decision put Turkmenistan and its state-owned gas company, Turkmengaz, in financial difficulty as it struggled to service billions of dollars in Chinese loans extended to develop the country's gas fields and build the pipelines to China.¹⁰¹

Europe and China have already begun to put the blocks in place for a shared role in Eurasia. Tens of rail links traverse the Eurasian landmass from China to the Atlantic. Both China and Europe are developing new cities and trade hubs in remote locations that often were nodes on the ancient Silk Road. These include Lanzhou in western China, Horgos/Khorgos in the Saryesik-Atyrau Desert on the Chinese-Kazakh border, and Terespol on the Polish-Belarus frontier.

The frenzy is attracting not only Chinese, Russian, and European but also Japanese and Indian investment in the knowledge that emerging hubs and networks will be available to all. The open question is whether any one power will dominate them and, if so, who. Recipient countries meanwhile benefit from the competition that not only at times allows them to play one power against the other but also lower cost as regional powers engage in wars over contract terms. To counter its disadvantage compared to China in terms of speed of market entry and cost competitiveness, Japan is seeking to leverage its technological superiority and experience.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Bruce Pannier, The End Of The (Gas Pipe-) Line For Turkmenistan, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 16 March 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-gas-pipe-line-china-berdymukhammedov-iran-russia/28353522.html>

¹⁰² The Japan Times, Japan, China competing for construction projects in Asia, 28 January 2015, http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/01/28/national/japan-china-competing-for-construction-projects-in-asia#.WO3DR_mGPcs

In doing so Japan is teaming up with India that is concerned about what it sees as Chinese encroachment in India's traditional sphere of influence and possible Chinese emboldening of Pakistan in its rivalry with India. To counter China, Japan and India have launched their own Belt and Road initiative, dubbed the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), at a meeting of the African Development Bank (AfDB)¹⁰³ in Ahmedabad in May 2017, just days after President XI showcased China's effort at a high-level forum in Beijing attended by scores of heads of state.¹⁰⁴ The Asia-Africa Corridor aims to integrate the economies of South, Southeast, and East Asia; Oceania; and Africa into an Indo-Pacific region connected through rediscovered ancient sea routes, new sea corridors, and upcoming cities and economic hubs that are likely to become engines of economic growth.

The corridor fits neatly into a web of separate US-backed Indian and Japanese projects and policies that were designed to ensure that the two Asian powers remain players in the Great Game. Speaking in Chennai in July 2011, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for the development of the United States' version of a "New Silk Road."¹⁰⁵ Clinton envisioned power, transportation, and market networks that would link Afghanistan to Central and South Asia in bid to involve regional states in the stabilization of the war-torn country. Clinton's appropriation of the term Silk Road challenged China's claim to it as its intellectual property on the basis that historically it was the final stop of past silk routes.

Clinton's call stroked with India's desire to counter China's massive investment in Pakistan by looking at Central and South Asia. India backed the development of Chabahar, a deep seaport in Iran a stone's throw from Pakistan's Gwadar, as a focal point of a NSTC that would stretch 7200 kilometres from the Indian West Coast across Iran and the Caucasus into

¹⁰³ African Development Bank, Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, Partnership for Sustainable and Innovative Development, 22–26 May 2017, <http://www.eria.org/Asia-Africa-Growth-Corridor-Document.pdf>

¹⁰⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Xi Jinping Attends Opening Ceremony of Sixth Ministerial Conference of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and Delivers Important Speech Stressing to Promote Silk Road Spirit and Deepen China-Arab Cooperation, 5 June 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1163554.shtml

¹⁰⁵ Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks on India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century, US Department of State, 20 July 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168840.htm>

Russia and link the Gulf and the Indian Ocean with the Caspian Sea. Chabahar would also allow Afghanistan to break Pakistan's regional maritime monopoly. Seen off by Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj and her Afghan counterpart Salahuddin Rabbani in a joint video conference, India in October 2017 dispatched its first consignment of wheat to Afghanistan via Chabahar.¹⁰⁶ Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the shipment on Twitter as a “new chapter in regional cooperation & connectivity.”¹⁰⁷ The port was officially inaugurated weeks later at a ceremony attended by representatives of 17 countries.¹⁰⁸ Iranian officials asserted that Chabahar would undercut Gwadar in the price of shipping a 20-foot container from India to Afghanistan by up to \$1000.

Originally conceived at the beginning of the twenty-first century,¹⁰⁹ the North-South Corridor would create in cooperation with Iran and Russia a combined sea and land route from the Indian ports of Jawaharlal Nehru and Kandla via Chabahar to the Azerbaijani capital of Baku as well as Moscow. Leaders of Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan in November 2017 finalized funding of a railway linking St. Petersburg with the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas.¹¹⁰ A 925-kilometre-long railway linking Iran with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan that was inaugurated in 2014 would take the corridor into Central Asia,¹¹¹ while the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) will link the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka with Istanbul.¹¹² In addition, in competition with the Chinese-controlled Sri Lankan port of Hambantota,

¹⁰⁶ Anjana Pasricha, *India's New Afghan Trade Route Via Iran, Bypasses Pakistan*, Voice of America, 30 October 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-opens-new-afghan-trade-route-via-iran/4091915.html>

¹⁰⁷ https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/924599231524073472?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfv

¹⁰⁸ Saeed Jalili, *Iran: Chabahar Port promise and nuclear deal threat*, Al Jazeera English, 4 December 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/iran-chabahar-port-promise-nuclear-deal-threat-171203195238768.html>

¹⁰⁹ Regine A. Spector, *The North-South Transport Corridor*, Brookings, 3 July 2002, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-north-south-transport-corridor/>

¹¹⁰ Paul Goble, *North-South Transport Corridor: Russia Wins, Armenia Loses*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol. 14, Issue 145

¹¹¹ Marat Guurt, *Landlocked Central Asia gets shorter railway link to Persian Gulf*, Reuters, 3 December 2014, <https://in.reuters.com/article/turkmenistan-railway-idINKCN0JH1Q820141203>

¹¹² United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Trans-Asian Railway Network Map*, 1 November 2016, <http://www.unescap.org/resources/trans-asian-railway-network-map>

India is developing Trincomalee in the northeast of the island.¹¹³ For its part, Japan has pledged to invest \$200 billion in Asian and African infrastructure.¹¹⁴

China has an advantage with many of the building blocks in place that it needs to turn its ambitions into reality: close and long-standing relations with Iran, significant investment in Turkmen gas production and pipeline infrastructure, and the construction of Pakistan's section of the Iran-Pakistan pipeline, which has been slowed down by US and Indian opposition. Hooking the pipeline to the Belt and Road would allow China to receive Iranian gas not only by sea on its eastern seaboard but also in its landlocked, troubled north-western province Xinjiang. Iran, in positioning itself as a key land and maritime node of the Belt and Road initiative, hopes to exploit its competitive edge over Saudi Arabia that beyond energy has at best maritime assets to offer. Iran is also betting on Chabahar proving in the short and middle term to be more competitive than Gwadar that, without a secure road link to Afghanistan, will find it difficult to service Central Asia. Not to mention the fact that the road from Gwadar to Xinjiang traverses forbidding geography, including disputed territory in Gilgit-Baltistan, hardly conducive to massive commercial flows.

Saudi Arabia, in an effort to compensate for its handicap and ensure the secure export of its oil, gas, and other goods to China, has sought to align itself with Chinese investment in the Belt and Road by announcing that it would participate in developing Gwadar and other projects.¹¹⁵ The kingdom has gone out of its way to woo the Maldives, a strategically located 820-km-long chain of 1200 Indian Ocean coral islands. Saudi interest coincided with increased Chinese investment in the Maldives that opposition politicians believe could eventually host China's next military base as well as a Saudi military outpost. China and Saudi Arabia are independently

¹¹³Sachin Parashar, Sri Lanka to offer India port development to balance out China, *The Economic Times*, 19 April 2017, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/sri-lanka-to-offer-india-port-development-to-balance-out-china/article-show/58253212.cms>

¹¹⁴The Japan Times, Japan to up infrastructure aid to developing nations to \$200 billion, 21 May 2016, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/05/21/national/japan-infrastructure-aid-developing-nations-200-billion/#.WEB9j-YrI2w>

¹¹⁵Asim Yasin, Tahir Khalil, and Tanveer Hashmi, Saudi Arabia to join CPEC soon: envoy, *The News*, 22 September 2017, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/231755-Saudi-Arabia-to-join-CPEC-soon-envoy>

constructing their first foreign military bases in Djibouti. The two countries “want to have a base in the Maldives that would safeguard the trade routes, their oil routes, to their new markets. To have strategic installations, infrastructure,” said ousted former Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed.¹¹⁶

Saudi Arabia was negotiating a \$10 billion development, if not the wholesale acquisition of Faafu, a collection of 19 low-lying islands 120 kilometres south of the Maldives capital of Male. The project would involve construction of seaports, airports, high-end housing and resorts, and the creation of special economic zones policy. Saudi Arabia could be granted a freehold, if 70% of the project is executed on reclaimed land.¹¹⁷ The investment would be three times the GDP of the Maldives, a nation of 400,000, including 100,000 foreign workers that straddles some of the world’s key shipping routes.

Saudi interest in Faafu was sparked by a 2014 visit by then Crown Prince Salman prior to his ascent to the throne and his son Mohammed, now crown prince and defence minister. Mohammed returned a year later to host a week of parties. He and his entourage took over two resorts. Guests flew in night after night on private jets to attend the parties, which featured famous entertainers including the rapper Pitbull and the South Korean singer Psy. The Saudis signed at about that time a memorandum of understanding that involved the sale of Faafu to the kingdom.¹¹⁸

Saudi Arabia and China moreover shouldered complementary projects in the Maldives. Chinese Premier Xi Jinping in 2014 agreed to fund construction of a \$210 million Friendship Bridge that would connect Male to the Maldives airport.¹¹⁹ The troubled Saudi Binladen Group won a contract to build a new terminal for the Ibrahim Nasir International Airport

¹¹⁶ Karl Mathiesen and Megan Darby, Saudis make Maldives land grab to secure oil routes to China, ClimateHome, 5 March 2017, <http://www.climatechangenews.com/2017/03/05/saudis-make-maldives-land-grab-secure-oil-routes-china/>

¹¹⁷ Ahmed Naish, No cause for concern over “US\$10bn Faafu atoll project,” insists Yameen, Maldives Independent, 1 March 2017, <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/no-cause-for-concern-over-us10bn-faafu-atoll-project-insists-yameen-129120>

¹¹⁸ Hassan Moosa and Geeta Ananad, Inhabitants of Maldives Atoll Fear a Flood of Saudi Money, The New York Times, 26 March 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/26/world/asia/maldives-atoll-saudi-money.html?_r=0&mtrref=undefined&gwh=E949ED9FC62A14D5A4BB0EE64817E4DC&gwt=pay

¹¹⁹ Ahmed Naish, “China-Maldives Friendship Bridge” project launched, Maldives Independent, 31 December 2015, <http://maldivesindependent.com/business/china-maldives-friendship-bridge-project-launched-121081>

that was initially awarded to an Indian company.¹²⁰ Saudi Arabia has also pledged tens of millions of dollars in loans and grants for infrastructure and housing on an artificial island near Male.

For its part, China agreed to build a new airport runway as well as a port in Laamu, an atoll south of Faafu. The port would be one more stone in China's string of pearls. The Maldives, moreover, in 2016 leased Feydhoo Finolhu, an uninhabited island close to Mahe previously used by the government for school trips and youth activities, to a Chinese company for 50 years at a cost of \$4 million.¹²¹

Saudi and Chinese interest in the Maldives came as the two countries upgraded their military cooperation. "China is willing to push military relations with Saudi Arabia to a new level," Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan told Mohammed, his visiting Saudi counterpart, in August 2016.¹²² Special counterterrorism forces from the two countries held their first ever joint exercise between the Chinese military and an Arab armed force two months later.

With the United States refusing to share its most advanced drone technology, China and Saudi Arabia agreed that China would open its first overseas defence production facility in the kingdom. State-owned China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) will manufacture its CH-4 Caihong, or Rainbow drone, as well as associated equipment in Saudi Arabia.¹²³ The CH-4 is comparable to the US armed MQ-9 Reaper drone. The deal threatened to spark an arms race in the Middle East with Iran and other states seeking to match the kingdom's newly acquired capability.

To lay the ground for Saudi investment in the Maldives, Saudi Arabia provided the island republic in 2013 \$300 million on soft terms and has massively funded religious institutions and education. The kingdom offers

¹²⁰ Maldives Independent, Saudi Binladin Group awarded Maldives airport terminal project, 22 May 2016, <http://maldivesindependent.com/business/saudi-binladin-group-awarded-maldives-airport-terminal-project-124336>

¹²¹ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, Chinese company bags Maldivian island on 50-year lease, The Economic Times, 30 December 2016, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/chinese-companies-bags-maldivian-island-on-50-year-lease/article-show/56245729.cms>

¹²² Xinhua, China willing to advance military relations with Saudi Arabia: Defense Minister, 31 August 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-08/31/c_135648206.htm

¹²³ Middle East Eye, China's Saudi drone factory compensates for US ban, 29 March 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/china-build-factory-saudi-arabia-fill-drone-shortage-1200657135>

scholarships for Maldives students to pursue religious studies at the kingdom's ultra-conservative universities in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and has donated \$100,000 to the Islamic University of the Maldives.

During a visit in 2015, Saudi Islamic Affairs Minister Saleh bin Abdulaziz promised to help the Maldives improve the collection of zakat, alms for the poor that constitutes one of Islam's five pillars, publish Islamic texts in English, speed up mosque construction, and train imams.¹²⁴ The kingdom has also funded the construction of the six-storey, multi-facility King Salman Mosque, the island republic's largest.¹²⁵

The kingdom has not shied away from stifling criticism of its efforts by bribing journalists. In one incident, journalists were handed cash-filled envelopes during an event at the Saudi embassy in Mahe.¹²⁶ Other journalists report that they were harassed when reporting critically on Saudi interests in the Maldives or on the rise of ultra-conservatism. Many journalists see the disappearance in 2014 of Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, a prominent journalist, who wrote about secularism and ultra-conservatism, as a warning.

Yameen Rashid, a 29-year-old popular blogger and prominent critic of creeping authoritarianism and Saudi-influenced Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism in the Maldives, was brutally stabbed and killed as he walked home from work three years later. His killers, believed to be Islamic militants, have yet to be apprehended. It's unlikely that Saudi Arabia was in any way linked to Rashid's death. Critics charge, however, that his killing fits neatly with Saudi efforts to silence opponents in non-violent ways.¹²⁷

Saudi Arabia's investment paid off in early 2016 when the Maldives broke off diplomatic relations with Iran, charging that Iranian policy

¹²⁴Hassan Mohamed, Maldives parliament to form joint committees with Saudi Arabia's Shura Council, Maldives Independent, 5 January 2016, <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-parliament-to-form-joint-committees-with-saudi-arabias-shura-council-121170>

¹²⁵Yeni Safak, Turkish company to build Maldives' largest mosque, 30 March 2017, <http://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/turkish-company-to-build-maldives-largest-mosque-2635989>

¹²⁶Avas Online, Saudi's cash 'gift' to Maldives jourmos sparks concern, February 2017, <https://avas.mv/en/29796>

¹²⁷Michael Safi, Maldives blogger stabbed to death in capital, The Guardian, 23 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/23/maldives-blogger-yameen-rasheed-stabbed-to-death-in-capital>

threatened security and stability in the Indian Ocean.¹²⁸ It has also left its mark on society. Saudi-funded ultra-conservatism has contributed to the Maldives, a popular high-end tourist destination that prided itself on adhering to a blend of Sufism and other religions, becoming increasingly less tolerant and less accepting of liberal lifestyles. Forms of entertainment like mixed dancing and Western beach garb have become acceptable only within the walls of expensive resorts.

Reflecting the shift towards ultra-conservatism, a court in 2015 for the first time sentenced a woman to death by stoning for having committed adultery.¹²⁹ The Saudis “have had a good run of propagating their worldview to the people of the Maldives and they’ve done that for the last three decades. They’ve now, I think, come to view that they have enough sympathy for them to get a foothold,” Nasheed said.

Indian intelligence sources worry that the Maldives could become a base of a very different kind just off the sub-continental mainland.¹³⁰ They and independent analysts¹³¹ assert that hundreds of Maldivians have joined the ranks of IS in Syria—a significant number given the country’s tiny population.¹³² Some 200 people carrying Islamic State flags marched in 2014 through Mahe demanding implementation of Sharia law instead of democracy.¹³³ It was a demonstration that did not go unnoticed in Beijing where policymakers continuously grapple with the need to formulate a more comprehensive strategy towards the region that takes account of its expanding interests as well as the impact of escalating conflict that threatens pillars of China’s Belt and Road initiative, and efforts to prevent a spill over in Xinjiang.

¹²⁸ Shihar Aneez, Maldives severs diplomatic ties with Iran citing security threats, 18 May 2016, Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-maldives-iran-idUSKCN0Y91Z0>

¹²⁹ Hassan Mohamed, Maldives court sentences woman to death by stoning Maldives Independent, 18 October 2015, <http://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/maldives-court-sentences-woman-to-death-by-stoning-118541>

¹³⁰ Interview with author, 12 February 2017

¹³¹ The Soufan Group, Foreign Fighters, An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq, December 2015, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate4.pdf

¹³² Shantanu Mukharji, Saudi Arabia eyes Maldives atoll to build SEZ: Why India is concerned about this development, Firstpost, 6 March 2017, <http://www.firstpost.com/world/saudi-arabia-eyes-maldives-atoll-to-build-sez-why-india-is-concerned-about-this-development-3317224.html>

¹³³ Minivan News, Protesters march with IS flag calling for enforcement of Islamic Shariah, 6 September 2014, <http://minivannewsarchive.com/politics/protesters-march-with-is-flag-calling-for-enforcement-of-islamic-shariah-89957>



The United States and China: Seeking Complementary Approaches

The formulation of China's emerging Middle East and North Africa strategy is shaped as much by US predicaments in the region as it is by the twenty-first century's Great Game, the high-stakes battle for the future of Eurasia. Power, influence, geopolitics, and economics rather than ideology drive US-Chinese rivalry as well as the Great Game. Complicating formulation of an overall policy is the fact that the United States and China are adjusting to one another in a world in which China is on the rise and the United States under President Donald J. Trump is in an accelerated process of transition and shifts in balances of power.

"US-China relations will certainly be a, if not the, central pillar of any new post-Cold War international order," noted Bilahari Kausikan, a prominent Singaporean diplomat and intellectual. The immediate problem, Kausikan argued, was that "US-China relations are infused with deep strategic distrust" that underlies their current "groping towards a new *modus vivendi* with each other."

Kausikan's assertion that "neither the US or China is looking for trouble or spoiling for a fight" is key to the formulation of a Chinese policy towards the Middle East and North Africa. "The essential priorities of both are internal not external. Of course, neither is going to roll over and let the other tickle its tummy. That is not how great powers behave. Both will not relent in the pursuit of their own interests, which

sometimes will be incompatible. There will be frictions and tensions,” Kausikan predicted.¹

“How the United States and China handle their mutual interests in the Middle East and in the Asian space leading to it will not only be an important indicator of how they relate to each other globally, but it will also strongly affect their broader ties. The geopolitics of this area will have a profound effect on the future of geopolitics more broadly,” added Middle East scholar Jon B. Alterman.²

That is certainly true for the Middle East and North Africa given that China bases its positions on a set of foreign and defence policy principles that at least nominally contrast starkly with those of the United States and are intended to ensure that China does not repeat what it views as US mistakes. While there appears to be broad consensus in China on this approach, China’s policy community is in fact divided on a host of questions related to the complicated process of marrying their country’s policy principles with a comprehensive approach towards the Middle East and North Africa that takes the region’s complexities and difficulties into account.

These questions involve issues like the posture China should adopt towards the region, its major powers and numerous conflicts, and the protection of Chinese interests. They range from the sustainability of the region’s autocracies to the rise of Islam as a political force, the emergence of violent and ultra-conservative strands of the faith, and the continued viability of the existing borders of Middle Eastern and North African nation states. Underlying the debate is the question whether China can afford to continuously respond to events as they occur rather than develop a coherent, overarching policy.

At the crux of the debate is ironically the same dilemma that long stymied US policy in the Middle East and North Africa: the clash between lofty principles and a harsh reality that produces perceptions of a policy that is riddled with contradictions and fails to live up to the values it enunciates. Increasingly, China is finding it difficult to paper over some of those dilemmas by harping on the principles of non-alignment and non-intervention, disavowing alliances, rejecting the notion of foreign military bases, and viewing economic incentives as a key driver of foreign policy success.

¹ Bilahari Kausikan, *US-China Relations: Groping towards a New Modus Vivendi*, Institute of Policy Studies, S.R. Nathan Lecture, 25 February 2016

² *Ibid.* Alterman

The Chinese debate goes to the core of China's vision of its role in world affairs. It is forcing China to revisit its view of itself as what China scholar David Shambaugh described as "a partial power that is "hesitant, risk adverse and narrowly self-interested" and that "often makes it known what it is against, but rarely what it is for."³ Chinese officials and analysts who argue against moving away from adherence to their country's established foreign policy and defence guidelines worry that a watering down of China's principles will take it into more risky, uncharted territory or down a road that has gotten the United States at times tangled into knots.

Wu Jianmin, a member of the Chinese Foreign Ministry's foreign policy advisory group, a senior research fellow with the State Council of China, and former ambassador to the United Nations and various European countries, argued as late as 2015 that abandoning long-standing principles would put China on a slippery slope. "If China aligned with others there would be a new cold war. It would create enemies. China today does not need enemies, we need partners," Wu said.⁴

Remaining aloof may however be easier said than done as China's economic stake in the region increases and conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa escalate and spill out of the region and closer to home. While China and the United States share a desire for stability in the greater Middle East and unfettered access to energy, Beijing is realizing that despite criticism of US policy its traditional policy principles are inadequate in dealing with mounting challenges. Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the United States, acknowledged the greater Middle East's increasing centrality, when he told an investor's conference that "Chinese foreign policy will inevitably follow its investment."⁵

The significant expansion beyond energy of key Chinese interests in the region makes standing aside ever more difficult. Besides the need to protect its investments and nationals, China has a strategic stake in the stability of countries across the Eurasian landmass because of its Belt and Road initiative, an ambitious geopolitical bid for supremacy, and the threat of blowback of unrest in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and

³ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, Kindle, edition

⁴ Wu Jianmin, *One Belt and One Road, Asia's Stability and Prosperity*, RSIS Distinguished Public Lecture, 12 March 2015

⁵ Cui Tiankai, *US-China CEO Bilateral Investment Dialogue*, Goldman Sachs, 12 February 2015, <http://www.goldmansachs.com/our-thinking/pages/us-china-bilateral-investment-dialogue/>

China's crude oil imports by source, 2014

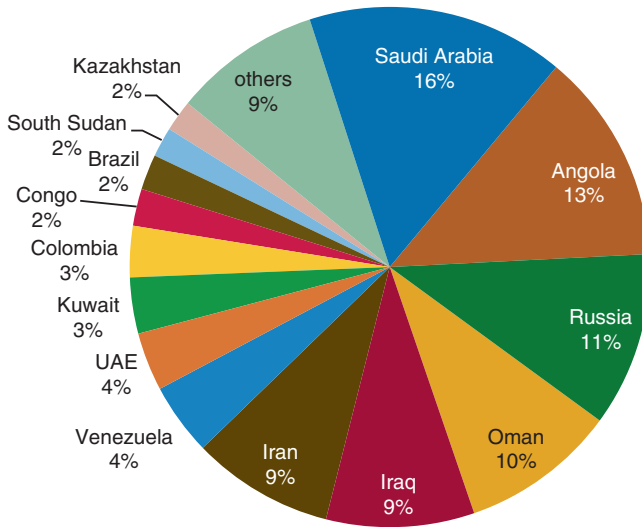


Fig. 3.1 China's crude oil imports by source. (U.S. Energy Information Administration (2015))

South Asia in its key north-western province of Xinjiang, home to restive Uyghurs of Turkic origin (Fig. 3.1).

In just one slice of the vast Eurasian interests of Chinese companies, China's ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Li Chengwen, noted in 2013 that 140 Chinese companies were involved in contracts worth \$18 billion in Saudi Arabia's construction, telecommunications, infrastructure, and petrochemical sectors (Table 3.1).⁶

All told, Chinese firms signed an estimated \$30 billion worth of construction and infrastructure projects with GCC states between 2005 and 2014, accounting for 8% of their total portfolio. Projects include a \$1.8 billion railway that the China Railway Construction Corporation built to transport pilgrims performing the hajj, a pipeline linking the UAE's Habshan oil field to its Indian Ocean port in Fujairah, allowing the Gulf state to bypass the Hormuz Straits in getting its oil to the market.

⁶ Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat, Saudi-Chinese trade increases by 14 percent, 20 November 2013, <http://english.aawsat.com/2013/11/article55323012/saudi-chinese-trade-increases-by-14-percent>

Table 3.1 Chinese investments of more than \$10 billion in the Middle East

<i>Year of first investment</i>	<i>Investor</i>	<i>Investment in million \$</i>	<i>Partner/target</i>	<i>Sector</i>	<i>Subsector</i>	<i>Country</i>
2006	CITC and Chinalco	940		Metals	Aluminium	Egypt
2007	China Ocean Shipping	150		Transport	Shipping	Egypt
2007	Chinalco	1200	Bin Laden, MMC	Metals	Aluminium	Saudi Arabia
2007	Sinopec	2010	National Iranian Oil Company	Energy	Oil	Iran
2008	Sinochem	470	SOCO	Energy	Oil	Yemen
2008	CNPC	3020		Energy	Oil	Iraq
2009	CNPC	1760	National Iranian Oil Company	Energy	Oil	Iran
2009	Tianjin Development	280		Real estate	Property	Egypt
2009	CNOOC	100	Qatar Petroleum	Energy	Gas	Qatar
2009	CNPC	2250	National Iranian Oil Company	Energy	Oil	Iran
2009	CNPC	240	State Oil Marketing Organization and South Oil Company	Energy	Oil	Iraq
2010	Sinochem	1440	Makhteshim-Agan	Agriculture	Agriculture	Israel
2011	Sinopec	3300	SABC	Energy	Oil	Saudi Arabia
2012	Jushi Group	230		Technology	Medical	Egypt
2013	FostumiPharma	240	Alma Lasers	Technology	Medical	Israel

Source: China the “Next U.S.” in the Middle East? MEI NUS (Stig Stenslie and Wang Luyao, China the “Next U.S.” in the Middle East? Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, 2014, https://mei.nus.edu.sg/index.php/web/publications_TMPL/Volume-7-1-China-the-Next-U.S.-in-the-Middle-East)

The Belt and Road initiative coupled with multiple conflicts in the Middle East and the rise of jihadism has also sparked debate about whether China should shed its disavowal of alliances in favour of ganging up with Russia. The argument in favour of an alliance with Russia that would be designed to counter perceived US efforts at containment of China took on added significance with the rise of US President Trump. International relations scholar Xie Chao, while seeing some virtue in an alliance with Russia, cautioned that it risked dragging China into military conflict that it would not want and was as yet unprepared for.⁷ Nonetheless, Xie noted that there was ever closer cooperation between China and Russia, highlighted, for example, by almost simultaneous moves to counter Japanese territorial claims in the East China Sea as well as in international crises like North Korea and Iran.

The alliance debate could challenge in the middle or longer term a long-standing belief in the Chinese policy community that cooperation with the United States is an imperative. Short term, however, the question about cooperation with Washington remains: on whose terms? The answer is a subtle sidekick to the larger battle between the United States and China over who will write the rules for the international system and the global economy in the twenty-first-century global economy that is being fought out in the South China Sea and with the creation of Chinese-led institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that groups Central and South Asian states.

Middle Eastern and North African states have provided initial answers to the question in terms of their expectations. While realizing that they are likely to remain dependent on the United States' regional defence umbrella, Gulf states have begun to look towards Asia, and China specifically, as a power that can at least partially compensate for doubts about US reliability. The late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia already highlighted those expectations by making China the first country he visited after his coronation in 2005. In doing so, Abdullah, like other Middle Eastern leaders, further saw relations with China at the time as a way to pressure Barak Obama's United States to re-engage in the Middle East and North Africa and become more supportive of their often-divisive policies. Abdullah also sought to balance the kingdom's economic and cultural relations. As a result, Saudi Aramco, the world's

⁷ Xie Chao, To form an alliance with China? (与中国结盟吗?), China Diplomacy, January 2017, p. 44–69, <http://www.1xuezhc.exuezhc.com/Qk/art/615600?dbcode=1&flag=2>

largest oil company, invested in a refinery in Qingdao province and in a second one in Fujian in a joint venture with Sinopec, a Chinese petroleum giant, and ExxonMobil. Saudi Arabia also began sending students on scholarships to Chinese universities. Wealthy Saudis with close government ties added once-obscure Chinese cities, particularly for furniture, to their global shopping destinations.⁸ King Abdullah's approach, if anything, was intensified with the deepening of the kingdom's relations with China under his successor, King Salman. The King and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, made clear that despite forging ever closer ties to China, the United States remained the bedrock of their defence and security policy as well as their quest for regional hegemony at the expense of Iran.

Acknowledging that there was a mismatch between expectations in the greater Middle East and China's projection of the Belt and Road initiative as a primarily economic project, Chinese analysts Li Weijan and Zhao Jin argued that to solve problems confronting China, the People's Republic needed "to talk about the 'One Belt One Road' in ways that fit the reality in the Middle East." Without saying it explicitly, Li and Zhao advocated a rewrite of the foreign, defence, and economic policies that underwrite the Belt and Road by linking development to the guaranteeing of security and projecting China as a model of governance.

There must be coordination between the BRI narrative and China's broader great power diplomacy. It must become a key part of China's narrative in international affairs and keep on revolving around the ideas of 'peaceful development' and 'win-win cooperation.' It is necessary that China put forward solutions that are constructive and communicate the feeling of leadership. China's experience and history in domestic governance can be very useful to the region, and many countries there are indeed interested in it. The relationship between development and stability must be clear. ... The BRI must become the engine of China's great power diplomacy in the Middle East. ... While building consensus, we must avoid the BRI becoming a synonym for unilateralism,

Li and Zhao said.⁹

⁸The Economist, Looking east, 9 December 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/17680668>

⁹Li Weijan and Zhao Jin, China must talk about the "One Belt One Road" in ways that fit the reality of the Middle East, ChinaMed, 15 September 2017, <https://www.chinamed.it/observer/index.html#!/posts/China-must-talk-about-the-One-Belt-One-Road-in-ways-that-fit-the-reality-of-the-Middle-East/189>

Shifts in the global energy market with the expansion of shale oil that made the United States less dependent on Middle Eastern and North African imports and positioned it to replace Saudi Arabia as the world's largest exporter meant that regional players needed to balance relations with the United States and China. The shifting energy market outlines were reflected in patterns of US and Chinese investments. Highlighting the shifts, two Chinese companies together became in 2017 the single largest shareholders in Abu Dhabi's most important oil concession. They replaced Western companies like Exxon Mobil Corp. and Royal Dutch Shell Plc as major players in the emirate, OPEC's fourth-largest producer.¹⁰

Saudi Arabia moreover was mulling the possibility of selling a 5% stake in its national oil company, Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Aramco), in a private sale to China rather than listing it in New York, London, and/or Hong Kong as originally planned.¹¹ Either way, China indicated that it intended to secure a stake. China, in preparation of a possible initial public offering (IPO), was creating a consortium, including state-owned oil giants and banks and its sovereign wealth fund, that would act as a cornerstone investor in the case of an IPO. Aramco's board, moreover, met in May 2017 for the second time ever in Shanghai amid doubts that the company would get the \$2 trillion valuation Prince Mohammed predicted when he first announced the sale of a stake in the company as a part of Vision 2030, his plan for economic reform and social liberalization of the kingdom.¹² A private sale would also evade discussion of how big the kingdom's oil reserves really are. Saudi Arabia has raised the figure to 260 billion barrels from 170 billion in the 1980s despite having produced some 100 billion barrels over the last three decades.¹³ China's interest was driven by rising oil imports that in 2017 passed the 8.5 million barrels a

¹⁰ Anthony Dipaola and Mahmoud Habboush, *China Wins Big With Stakes in \$22 Billion Abu Dhabi Oil Deal*, Bloomberg News, 19 February 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-02-19/abu-dhabi-awards-china-s-cnpc-stake-in-main-onshore-oil-deposits>

¹¹ Simeon Kerr, *Will China Buy Aramco?* Financial Times, 21 August 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/0141ef20-0e4f-3b1b-b48e-d3c3c5a17968>

¹² Julie Zhu, Reem Shamseddine, and Rania El Gamal, *China gathers state-led consortium for Aramco IPO—sources*, Reuters, 19 April 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-aramco-ipo-china-exclusive/exclusive-china-gathers-state-led-consortium-for-aramco-ipo-sources-idUSKBN17L1F3>

¹³ John Kemp, *Saudi Arabia's oil reserves: how big are they really?*, Reuters, 5 July 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-oil-kemp/saudi-arabias-oil-reserves-how-big-are-they-really-kemp-idUSKCN0ZL1X6>

day mark,¹⁴ reduced domestic production from its Daqing and Shengli fields, and problems in developing new sources, including unconventional tight oil in the Ordos basin.¹⁵

While China's economic and commercial ties to the Middle East expand steadily and military cooperation tightens, Arab perceptions of China political support lagged. To be sure, China endorsed autocratic rule, ignored increased repression and violations of human rights, and supported major Arab emotional causes like the Palestinians. China was however less empathetic to Muslim causes such as the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar and steered away from regional disputes like that between Saudi Arabia and Iran and between Qatar and a UAE-Saudi-led alliance of Arab, African, and Indian Ocean states. Russian intervention in Syria and Trump's backing away from support of rebels opposed to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad resolved differences with China that unlike most Arab countries supported the Syrian regime. Nonetheless, China, insisting on its principle of non-interference, cold-shouldered repeated calls by Gulf states for it to take a more active role in Middle Eastern affairs, including the Israel-Palestine conflict, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya and at best launched feeble, short-lived mediation efforts.¹⁶

The contours of what an updated policy would have to look like and the assumptions on which it would have to be based have begun to emerge and have shaped debate in Chinese policy, academic, and intellectual circles. The debate has taken on greater urgency with the rise of Trump, uncertainty of how his Middle East policy will evolve and how committed the United States will remain to the defence of its allies. Trump's tougher line towards Iran and alignment of his anti-Iran policy with that of Saudi Arabia has compensated for a loss of US prestige among Arab autocrats during the Obama administration that benefited China.

¹⁴ Cheng Fang, Dominique Patton and Tom Daly, China June crude oil imports up over 16 pct on year -customs, Reuters, 12 July 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/07/12/reuters-america-update-1-china-june-crude-oil-imports-up-over-16-pct-on-year-customs.html>

¹⁵ Tim Daiss, China's Oil Production Peaks, Creating Problems For Beijing, Forbes, 16 August 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timdaiss/2016/08/26/chinas-oil-production-peaks-creating-problems-for-beijing/#32007e57c12b>

¹⁶ Martin Harrison, Relations between the Gulf Oil Monarchies and the People's Republic of China, 1971–2005, Lancaster University, Unpublished PhD thesis, 2006

At the same time, Trump's emboldening of Saudi Arabia in its 40-year proxy war with Iran has made it more difficult for China to tiptoe through a Saudi-Iranian minefield that was expanding into the Indian Ocean, South Asia, and Africa.¹⁷ By embroiling key partners in the Belt and Road initiative like Pakistan and the Maldives, the fight between the two regional rivals strengthened China's reluctance to clearly articulate its strategic interests or intentions in the Middle East and North Africa beyond its drive to secure resources, investments, and people and expand its influence through economic ties. Trump's hard line towards Iran reinforced Chinese perceptions that US hostility towards the Islamic republic was driven by a determination to prevent the rise of a regional power that refused to bow to America's dictate rather than a desire to secure the flow of oil and prevent nuclear proliferation. Chinese scholars argued that US policy towards Iran coupled with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would sap America's strength and hasten its decline.¹⁸ Working in America's favour, scholars noted, was the fact that Trump had removed a major irritant in relations with Middle Eastern autocrats by de-emphasizing the promotion of democratic values.

The impact of tensions in the Middle East, nonetheless, persuaded China to expand the focus of its strategic dialogues with the six-nation, Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as well as Israel from free trade arrangements to limited forms of military cooperation. Even so, China remained what scholars Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader called "a wary dragon" that "exhibits a deep sense of vulnerability in its engagement with the Middle East." Scobell and Nader argued that China's insistence on not being sucked into regional conflict precludes the public articulation of a Middle East policy or strategy and the making of "hard commitments to any states in the region beyond those that are required to maintain cordial business relations and pragmatic diplomatic and security ties."¹⁹

Publication on the eve of Xi's visit to the Middle East in early 2016 of the People's Republic's first ever white paper on policy towards the Arab

¹⁷James M. Dorsey, Policy differences emerge among Gulf states days after wooing President Trump, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, 27 May 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.co.uk/2017/05/policy-differences-emerge-among-gulf.html>

¹⁸Multiple interviews with the author 2011–2017

¹⁹Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, *China in the Middle East, The Wary Dragon*, Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2016, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1229.html#page-content

world that promised to deepen military cooperation fit that bill.²⁰ With the pledge, China, however, took its first steps towards exploiting what it saw as waning US influence under the Obama administration. An Huihou of Shanghai International Studies University's (SISU) Middle East Institute, who served as Chinese ambassador in five Arab countries, pointed to the Russian negotiated resolution of the Syrian chemical weapons issue in the summer of 2014 after US President Barack Obama shied away from acting militarily on what he had earlier described as a red line. "US backing off on the Syrian chemical weapons issue signalled the end of US hegemony," An said.²¹ The sense that United States was waning was reinforced by the Obama administration's effort to focus on Asia rather than the Middle East as a focal point of its foreign policy.

Doubts about US reliability, shared by China and the Gulf states, were further fuelled by cuts in the US defence budget under Obama and repeated statements by the president that the United States would reduce its involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. During his 2012 re-election campaign, Obama noted that fracking technologies that significantly boosted domestic US oil production made the United States "less dependent on what's going on in the Middle East."²² That maxim, with the exception of the perceived threats posed by jihadism and Iran and opportunities for increased arms sales, remained true in the Trump era.

China recognized the increasing importance it attributes to the Middle East and North Africa and its inability to isolate itself from the region's volatility already in a 2008 publication edited by Shanghai Institutes for International Studies President Chen Dongxiao. The publication noted that "West Asia (the Middle East) has become an extension of China's neighbourhood. China's major strategic target is to maintain sub-regional peace, participate in the process to solve hotspot issue there, ensure energy security, enhance economic and trade links, and develop its relations with relevant states and organisations in a balanced and all-round way."²³

²⁰ Xinhua, Full text of China's Arab Policy Paper, 13 January 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-01/13/c_135006619.htm

²¹ James M. Dorsey, China and the Middle East: Embarking on a Strategic Approach, RSIS Commentary, 16 September 2014, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CO14183.pdf>

²² Kathy Gill, Barack Obama Acceptance Speech—DNC—28 August 2008, [About.com](http://uspolitics.about.com/od/speeches/a/obama_accept.htm), 28 August 2008, http://uspolitics.about.com/od/speeches/a/obama_accept.htm

²³ Cheng Dongxiao et al., *Building up a Cooperative & Co-progressive New Asia: China's Asia Strategy towards 2020*, Shanghai: Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, 2012

In approaching the region, China, like the Gulf states, is careful not to provoke the United States to a point at which it would consider playing games with the flow of oil from the region, something both believe has entered the realm of the possible because of America's sharply reduced dependence on Gulf production. Both China and the Gulf rely on the fact that US allies remain dependent on Gulf oil, US dependence on Gulf investment has picked up since 9/11 when it tapered off for a while and ballooned with the rise of Trump, and the US need for Arab allies in its fight with the Islamic State (IS) and Iran. China, moreover, realized that if predictions that the United States could become one of the world's foremost oil exporters by 2030 prove correct, it eventually could find itself increasingly dependent on oil from the United States.²⁴

As a result, Chinese reliance on the US security umbrella in the Gulf has been a cornerstone of its approach towards the Middle East and North Africa. "China benefits a lot from the current world order. ... China will never rock the boat," said Wu.²⁵ China's recognition of its need to work with the United States paved the way for the establishment in 2012 of an annual senior level Middle East Dialogue to facilitate understanding and avoid misunderstandings and/or mishaps.²⁶

Uncertainty about the degree to which United States will maintain its security umbrella is forcing China to revisit its long-term reliance on the Americans. A transition from a US- to a Chinese-led security infrastructure may still be years away with Trump giving no indication of wanting to reduce the US commitment as long as Gulf states shoulder the bill. It is nonetheless an option that military planners and security experts were taking a close look at. Ironically, Chinese involvement in security would trace the steps of the Americans whose oil relations with the Saudis dating back to the 1930s led them half a century later to military engagement in a bid to protect the kingdom from domestic and external threats. For China, the risk is that greater involvement means getting sucked into the region's problems one of the most volatile, disruptive periods in its post-colonial history.

²⁴ Institute for Energy Research, U.S. Overtakes Saudi Arabia and Russia as Largest Oil Producer, 10 July 2014, <http://instituteforenergyresearch.org/analysis/u-s-overtakes-saudi-arabia-russia-worlds-biggest-oil-producer/> International Energy Agency, World Energy Outlook 2012, <http://www.iea.org/publications/freepublications/publication/English.pdf>

²⁵ Ibid. Wu Jianmin

²⁶ U.S. Department of State, U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue Outcomes of the Strategic Track, 14 July 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/07/229239.htm>

In another twist, the US presence in the Middle East and North Africa benefited China not only in security terms. US educational institutions act at times as a facilitator when it comes to expanding Chinese soft power in the Middle East and North Africa. In a region that has few of the linguistic and cultural links that the United States can command such as the influence of English or Western music and cinema, New York University in Abu Dhabi teaches Chinese and encourages its students to attend summer programmes at its campuses in Shanghai and Beijing as well as courses on classical Chinese philosophy, Arab crossroads in China, education and nationalism in Modern China, and environmental history of China.²⁷

The university in effect was supporting long-standing Chinese efforts to forge cultural links on its own steam with the opening in the Gulf of the first Confucius Institutes, China's equivalent of Britain's British Council or France's Alliance Francaise, at the University of Dubai and Zayed University in Abu Dhabi.²⁸ China further sought to increase its soft power through retail. Dubai's Dragon Mart, a 1.6-kilometre-long mall in which some 4000 Chinese vendors sell everything from basic goods to Qur'ans, attracts consumers from across the Gulf. China has also emerged as a major exporter of halal meat.²⁹

The strategy—which also relied on news media, including a poorly distributed Arabic version of *China Today*, a monthly magazine; displays of traditional Chinese art forms; scientific collaborations; the projection of technological prowess; development aid; and massive infrastructure investment as part of the Belt and Road initiative—has however not been an unmitigated success. Joseph Nye, the intellectual father of the concept of soft power, argued that China was flailing because popular culture was largely produced by civil society, including private enterprise, rather than government.

“China ... make(s) the mistake of thinking that government is the main instrument of soft power. In today's world, information is not scarce, but

²⁷ Sara Hamdan, UAE Becomes a Magnet for Chinese Students, *The New York Times*, 15 September 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/16/world/middleeast/uae-becomes-a-magnet-for-chinese-students.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0

²⁸ Rania Moussly, Chinese Language, Culture Classes on Offer in Dubai, *Gulf News*, 22 August 2010, <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/education/chinese-language-culture-classes-on-offer-in-dubai-1.671263>

²⁹ IRIB World Service, China: Ningxia aims to become capital of Halal food processing, 18 September 2013, <http://english.irib.ir/news/world/asia/item/164325-china-ningxia-aims-to-become-capital-of-halal-food-processing>

attention is, and attention depends on credibility. Government propaganda is rarely credible. The best propaganda is not propaganda. For all the efforts to turn Xinhua and China Central Television into competitors to CNN and the BBC, there is little international audience for brittle propaganda,” Nye wrote in 2013, sparking Chinese ire.³⁰ In effect, Nye was asserting that China had failed to turn his approach into “soft power with Chinese characteristics.”

In another indication of China’s difficulty in developing soft power, Gulf scholar Sean Foley took a series of pictures that showed a 150,000-square metre China-Middle East Investment and Trade Promotion Center in Dubai as all but abandoned.³¹ Cultural centres and retail space were the latest iteration of Chinese public diplomacy dating back to the 1950s when China would regularly dispatch acrobatic troupes and displays of Chinese calligraphy for Chinese New Year celebrations and other cultural events that sought to portray the People’s Republic as the heir to one of the world’s great civilizations. China’s current efforts were, however, being drowned out by the popularity of successive genres of Western music and film as well as the rise South Korean K-pop.

Kyle Haddad-Fonda, a scholar of China-Arab relations, noted while teaching at a university in Morocco that his students, who wanted to continue their studies overseas, looked at the United States, France, and South Korea—all states that not only boasted world-class universities but also had cultural exports that resonated among Moroccan youth. Haddad-Fonda’s students would go to Friday prayers and after leaving the mosque blare songs by K-pop singer Psy and watch Korean television shows in their dormitories. China with no cultural attributes with which they could associate did not figure in their aspirations.³²

Nonetheless, China’s efforts to harness education as a soft power tool have not been a total failure. Centres for the study of China are proliferating across the Middle East and North Africa. Some 1500 Egyptians enrol in Egyptian universities to study Chinese, while another 1000 gravitate

³⁰ Joseph S. Nye, What China and Russia Don’t Get About Soft Power, *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/>

³¹ Sean Foley, Seek Knowledge Even If It Takes You to China (Via Washington): America, China, and Saudi Arabia in the Twenty-First Century, Presentation at China in the Middle East Conference, Beijing, 18 March 2015

³² Kyle Haddad-Fonda, China’s New Challenge: How to Win the Soft-Power War, *The National Interest*, 24 July 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/chinas-new-challenge-how-win-the-soft-power-war-21651?page=show>

towards non-academic institutions like the Chinese Cultural Centre and the Egypt-China Friendship Association in Cairo. The city's Ain Shams University hosts Africa's largest Chinese department, while even Islam's traditional citadel of Islamic learning, Al-Azhar, offers Chinese-language classes.³³ China donated a thousand Chinese-language books and magazines to Cairo University's China programme.³⁴

Taking the educational offensive a step further, Egypt hosts China's first university in the Middle East and North Africa and has agreed to build Chinese schools in each of Egypt's 29 governorates.³⁵ Hundreds of Egyptians travel to China each year for technical training as part of an Africa-wide programme sponsored by the Forum for Chinese-African Cooperation.³⁶ Beyond Saudi government scholarships for study in China, Chinese companies operating in the kingdom also sponsor Saudi students.³⁷ The numbers of Arab students pale however in comparison to the tens of thousands attending English-language courses at Western institutions in the Middle East and North Africa like the British Council as well as other outreach programmes offered among others by the United States and Britain.

That China had failed to fully exploit its potential cultural assets in the greater Middle East, despite educational advances as well as Middle Eastern and North African perceptions of China as a rising power that prefers to wield soft rather than hard power, finally dawned on Beijing a decade after President Hu Jintao advocated the promotion of Chinese socialist and traditional culture based on Confucianism at a Communist Party congress.³⁸ A Pew Research Center poll in 38 countries concluded that China's standing among populations in the Middle East and North

³³ Jon B. Alterman, Chinese Soft Power and its Implications for the United States, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2009, p. 73, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/090403_mcgiffert_chinesesoft-power_web.pdf

³⁴ People's Daily Online, Chinese studies available in Egypt's top university, 10 October 2014, http://en.people.cn/200410/10/eng20041010_159608.html

³⁵ Reem Leila, The Chinese arrived, Al Ahram Weekly Online, 18–24 September, 2008, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2008/915/eg4.htm>

³⁶ Ibid. Alterman, Chinese Soft Power

³⁷ Roula Khalaf, Richard McGregor, and Sundeep Tucker, "The Great Bridge of China: How Energy Hungry Beijing Hews Its Mideast Links," *FT.com*, 12 February 2007, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/582bb7aeba3d-11db-89c8-0000779e2340.html>

³⁸ [China.org.cn](http://www.china.org.cn), Hu Jintao's report at 17th Party Congress, 15 October 2007, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/congress/229611.htm#7>

Africa was at 15% or less among the lowest of the countries ranked.³⁹ Xi Jinping put soft power high on Beijing's agenda a year after publication of the poll. "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world," Xi told top Communist Party leaders.⁴⁰

China signalled that it was changing tacks with its New Year celebration in Cairo in 2017. Inflated roosters adorned the city's largest park, Al-Azhar. Revellers were treated not only to acrobatic and martial arts performances but invited to learn Chinese calligraphy and paper cutting, fly kites, paint Chinese opera masks, and enjoy tea and snacks offered by local Chinese restaurants.⁴¹ Theme parks and malls in Abu Dhabi featured similar events. An Abu Dhabi-based television station broadcast documentaries about Chinese history and culture after the state-owned China Intercontinental Communication Center invested \$300 million in a joint venture with a media and entertainment company controlled by the emirate.⁴² The events served not only to promote China but also to attract Chinese tourists.

Similarly, China launched a series of initiatives that showcased Chinese television shows, cinema, publishing, and literature. Liu Qibao, head of the Communist Party's propaganda department, visited Morocco to bring to Moroccan television Chinese shows and films. His initial gift was a 40-episode series, "We Love You, Mr. Jin," a comic drama about an educated young couple whose parents do not approve of their relationship—a far cry from the heavy traditional fare that had long dominated the People's Republic's cultural export menu.⁴³ The first Chinese series to be exported with dubbed versions in Arabic, Swahili, and Burmese, "We

³⁹ Pew Research Center, America's Global Image Remains More Positive than China's, 18 July 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/07/18/americas-global-image-remains-more-positive-than-chinas/>

⁴⁰ Reuters, China's Xi strikes conciliatory note, broadens diplomatic focus, 30 November 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-southchina-sea-idUSKCN0JE04J20141130>

⁴¹ Hany Mohamed, Chinese, Egyptians celebrate Chinese Spring Festival at Al Azhar Park (الصينيون والمصريون يحتفلون بعيد الربيع الصيني بمدينة الأزهر بالصورة بالصين والمصريون), Youm al-Sabaa, 20 January 2017, <http://www.youm7.com/story/2017/1/20/3064820/>

⁴² Matthew Garrahan, Chinese group teams with Image Nation for \$300m film fund, Financial Times, 13 November 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/e2644fc2-a7a8-11e6-8b69-02899e8bd9d1>

⁴³ Gu Shi Xin, Liu Qibao attended the signing of the Chinese film and television drama in Morocco and the launching ceremony (刘奇葆出席中国影视剧在摩洛哥展播签约及开播仪式), CRI Online, 21 April 2017, <http://news.cri.cn/20170421/593331af-625f-194d-61cc-32f3dc361bd7.html>

Love You, Mr. Jin,” had a successful test run on Egyptian television in 2014. Earlier, Egyptian television broadcast another Chinese series, *Golden Wolf’s Happy Life*.⁴⁴ Various films dubbed in Arabic, including Jackie Chan action flick *CZ12*, were also slated for release.⁴⁵

Similarly, China was the guest of honour at the 2017 Abu Dhabi International Book Fair. China’s 650-square metre pavilion featured not only a 2-kilometre-long rice paper scroll that told the history of Chinese painting but also hundreds of Chinese titles translated into Arabic, including biographies of prominent businessmen like Baidu co-founder Robin Li and Alibaba Group’s Jack Ma. Some of the People’s Republic’s greatest living writers, including Yu Hua, Cao Wenxuan, Liu Zhenyun, Mai Jia, and Xu Zechen, made appearances at the fair.⁴⁶

China’s revised soft power approach reflected a growing realization that traditional approaches to Chinese foreign and defence policy would not allow the People’s Republic to secure its increasingly massive interests in the Middle East and North Africa. The experience of Western countries served as a cautionary lesson for China as did the fact that it was forced since 2011 to deploy military assets to evacuate its nationals from mushrooming herds of conflict in the region. As a result, China was coming to grips with the fact that it could not rely exclusively on economic relations and non-interference and would progressively also have to project hard power.

China’s ability to expand its influence in the greater Middle East suggests that China and the United States need to focus their relationship in the region on issues on which they can find common ground. International relations scholar Jian Junbo argued that if China can cooperate with the United States and other Western countries in countering political violence, “they should also be able to help each other to protect their interests overseas.”⁴⁷ Cooperation was, however, complicated by major policy differences symbolized by the frequent blocking of resolutions regarding Syria by China and Russia that have largely rendered the United Nations

⁴⁴ Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, “Golden Wolf’s happy life” Egypt premiere success (《金太狼的幸福生活》埃及首播成功), 19 March 2017, <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/i/jyjl/k/201403/20140300523029.shtml>

⁴⁵ Ibid. Gu Shi Xin

⁴⁶ Sarvy Geranpayeh, China embosses its mark on Abu Dhabi book fair, Gulf News, 26 April 2017, <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/society/china-embosses-its-mark-on-abu-dhabi-book-fair-1.2017886>

⁴⁷ Ibid. Jian Junbo

Security Council impotent. Like Russia, China's approach to the Syria-related resolutions was rooted in a sense that the United States had abused a 2011 UN Security Council resolution authorizing humanitarian intervention in Libya to pursue the toppling of Qaddafi.

China's policy approach to the Middle East was reinforced by its conclusion from the US predicament in the region that no one power could help the region restore stability and embark on a road of equitable and sustainable development. "Replacing the US is a trap China should not fall into," Wang Jian, director of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences' (SASS) West Asia and North Africa Research Centre, said. At the same time, he justified Chinese non-interference with the government's conviction that the chaos in the region meant that this was not the time to intervene—an approach that many in the Chinese policy community believe allowed China to let the United States stew in its own soup. Doubts about US reliability and perceptions of waning US influence were, however, at the same time forcing China to prepare for the day when it would need or want to ensure its own energy security.

Current and former Chinese officials often frame the policy debate by emphasizing external rather than domestic drivers of crisis in the Middle East and potential volatility in Central Asia. To be sure, Chinese policymakers and politicians do not have to take into account powerful ethnic and national lobbies like the Israeli, Gulf, Turkish, Armenian, and Greek groupings that play an important role in the formulation of policy in the United States.

Yet, in the spirit of all foreign policy being a function of domestic policy, China is not void of domestic drivers that play an increasingly important role in its foreign policymaking. Those drivers stem from evolving definitions of national interest and the increased number of players in China's foreign policy debates as China's global economic footprint expands.⁴⁸ These players include major state-owned enterprises such as national oil companies whose interests in the Middle East and North Africa have mushroomed.

Their influence has been enhanced by mergers of competing entities in a bid to reduce overcapacity and eliminate inefficiencies. This created

⁴⁸Linda Jakobsen and Dean Knox, *New Foreign Policy Actors in China*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2010, <http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRIIPP26.pdf>

commercial giants like the CRRC Corporation, a fusion of railroad equipment makers that has become the world's second-biggest industrial company; COSCO, cobbled together from state-owned shipping firms that has emerged as the world's fourth-largest shipping company; and China National Chemical Corporation, a giant in chemicals of all kinds, industrial equipment, and petrochemical processing. Their sheer size and exposure to the Middle East and North Africa meant that they needed to ensure that Chinese policies took their interests into account.

Numbers tell the story of the clout of China's shipping industry and, in concert with oil companies, of the argument that China's lack of engagement and insistence on non-intervention deprives the People's Republic of leverage required to negotiate pricing and supply in energy contracts in a market that is virtually inelastic.⁴⁹ China controls 20% of the world's container fleet; its shipping companies carry more cargo than those of any other nation. Five of the top ten container ports in the world are in mainland China, plus another in Hong Kong.⁵⁰ China possesses a 300-ship navy and a 200-ship maritime law enforcement fleet, more than Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines combined.⁵¹

The domestic drivers of Chinese foreign policy further involve popular insistence that the government ensures the safety and security of the growing number of Chinese nationals and jobs in the region. China Institute of Contemporary International Relations' Li Shaoxian estimated that 550,000 Chinese nationals lived in 2014 in the Middle East.⁵² Of the Chinese companies active in Saudi Arabia, 70 employ a total of 16,000 Chinese workers.⁵³ Dubai boasts the Middle East's largest Chinese expatriate community with 200,000 nationals and an estimated

⁴⁹ Chaoling Feng, *Embracing Interdependence: The Dynamics of China and the Middle East*, Brookings Doha Center, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/04/28-middle-east-china-feng/en-embracing-interdependence-pdf.pdf>

⁵⁰ Lt General Naresh Chand (Retd), *China's Maritime Strategy for South Asia*, SP's Naval Forces, Issue 4/2014, <http://www.spsnavalforces.com/story/?id=332>

⁵¹ Oxford Analytica Daily Brief Service, *ASIA: Geopolitics will heat up in the Indian Ocean*, 4 January 2016

⁵² Li Shaoxian, *Characteristics of the Current Political Situation in the Middle East*, *Contemporary International Relations*, Vol 24:1, p. 37–58

⁵³ Naser M. Al-Tamimi, *China-Saudi Arabia Relations, 1990–2012: Marriage of Convenience or Strategic Alliance?* London: Routledge, 2014, p. 126–143.

3000 companies.⁵⁴ Some 230 Chinese companies have set up shop in Dubai's Jebel Ali Free Zone.⁵⁵ A report by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute suggested that popular insistence on the government's role in protecting Chinese nationals overseas would make that "much more likely to lead ... toward greater intervention than the protection of energy interests."⁵⁶

⁵⁴Dania Thafer, *After the Financial Crisis: China-Dubai Economic Relations*, Middle East-Asia Project (MAP), 15 September 2013, <http://www.mei.edu/content/after-financial-crisis-dubai-china-economic-relations>

⁵⁵Danielle Greene, *More than 230 Chinese businesses have chosen Jafza as their home*, Vision, October 2016, <http://vision.ae/business/more-than-230-chinese-businesses-have-chosen-jafza-as-their-home>

⁵⁶Mathieu Duchatel, Oliver Braunel, and Zhou Hang, *Protecting China's Overseas Interest: The Slow Shift Away from Non-interference*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 2014, <http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRI41.pdf>



Avoiding the Pitfalls of Diverging Interests

The Chinese debate on the management of relations with the United States informed China's first articulation of a Middle East policy with the publication in January 2016 of an Arab Policy Paper.¹ The paper was published on the eve of President Xi Jinping's visit to the Middle East and North Africa, the first by a Chinese head of state in seven years. It shied away from spelling out concrete policies in a bid to shield China from being sucked into the region's multiple conflicts and ensure that potential differences with the United States over, among others, Iran, Pakistan, and the modalities of countering extremism and political violence did not get out of hand. As a result, the paper reiterated long-standing principles of Chinese foreign policy like non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, dialogue, and win-win modes of cooperation as they applied to the Arab world and emphasized China's key interests in the region: economics, energy, counterterrorism, security, technical cooperation, and its Belt and Road initiative.

Addressing the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress in October 2017, Xi made no mention of the Middle East by name. But his references to gaps between rich and poor, hotspot issues, and unconventional security threats like terrorism had a direct bearing on Chinese policy towards the region. In doing so, Xi implicitly conceded that policy was driven by developments on the ground rather than Beijing's objectives. He was also

¹Ibid. Xinhua, Full text of China's Arab Policy Paper, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-01/13/c_135006619.htm

signalling that China opposed external intervention by the United States as well as by the People's Republic, an approach that potentially puts China at odds with Russia's activism in the region.²

Despite perceptions of unconditional support for Russia in the United Nations Security Council, China signalled unease by refraining from casting a veto on 5 of the 11 proposed Syria-related resolutions in the period from the Russian military intervention till November 2017. Chinese sentiment was evident in expressions of joy on tightly controlled websites and blogs when Turkey downed a Russian fighter plane in November 2015.³

Xi's assertion in his report to the Congress that "we should ... resolutely reject the Cold War mentality and power politics" and "oppose acts that impose one's will on others or interfere in the internal affairs of others as well as the practice of the strong bullying the weak" appeared to be directed as much at Russia as it was addressed to the United States.⁴

Supporters of an investment and commerce-driven approach to the greater Middle East insist, despite realities on the ground that have already forced China to diverge from its traditional policy, that the People's Republic will be able to uphold its basic principles by employing the Belt and Road initiative to forge what Middle East scholar Jin Liangxiang termed "a new type of major-power relations" based on a "concept of shared interests compatible to justice." Rejecting US allegations that China is free-riding on its protective umbrella in the Gulf to secure the flow of oil as false and a result of a misunderstanding and poor communication, Jin charged that US policy had damaged Chinese interests.

"Oil prices had soared for almost a decade due to the turmoil in the region, which could be attributed at least in part to the US's blunder in launching the Iraq War. That is why the Chinese government has been reiterating the importance of maintaining regional stability by peaceful means," Jin said.⁵ Underlying Jin's oil argument was China's concern about what scholars Andrew Scobell and Nader Alireza called the "wary dragon"

² Yitzhak Shichor, Seeking truth from facts: China and the Middle east after the 19th CCP congress Middle East Institute NUS, Insight 176, 29 December 2017, https://mei.nus.edu.sg/index.php/web/publications_TMPL/insight-176-seeking-truth-from-facts-china-and-the-middle-east-after-the-19

³ Ibid. Shichor

⁴ Ibid. Shichor

⁵ Jin Liangxiang, China's Role in the Middle East: Current Debates and Future Trends, *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3:1, p. 39–55

symptom.⁶ China feared that shouldering part of the burden of securing the Gulf alongside the United States would drag it into regional conflicts and undermine its status as the one major power that maintains good relations with all parties. “This strong aversion precludes the public articulation of a Middle East policy or strategy and the making of hard commitments to any states in the region beyond those that are required to maintain cordial business relations and pragmatic diplomatic and security ties,” Scobell and Alireza wrote. So does the realization that despite perception, China has yet to become a world power. For the time being, it remains what Scobell and other researchers describe as a regional power with a global presence.

As a result, neither the Arab Policy Paper nor the proposition that the Belt and Road initiative is the cure-all for the greater Middle East’s woes answers influential Chinese blogger Ma Xialing’s question: “What’s China’s strategy in the Middle East?” Xialing argued already in 2014 that China does not have a strategy.

Strategy, for one, depends on theory. In this regard, China still follows the general principle set out by Deng Xiaoping—we don’t really care too much about outside developments, for now we just make our economy stronger. In Zhongnanhai (the headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party), leaders don’t care much about the Middle East, but about China’s domestic interest. Moreover, even in the times of (former president) Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, China does not aim to develop strategy, but rather short-term policies. That is why China will not play an important role in the Middle East. ... China is hesitant to get deeply involved in the Middle East, as it is very complex and a troublesome place. China is not prepared for the risks that could be encountered there. Often, Chinese political leaders and scholars say that the Middle East is a graveyard for empires, as many big empires through history collapsed after getting involved and failing in the Middle East,

Xialing noted.⁷

A belief that China can enhance its economic relations and secure resources without becoming embroiled in the Middle East and North Africa’s pitfalls continued to be the basic instinct of Chinese leaders even though facts on the ground inevitably pushed them towards greater engagement. Reflecting the government’s hesitancy, Xue Li, an

⁶ Andrew Scobell and Nader Alireza, *China in the Middle East, the wary Dragon*, Rand Corp., 2016, http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1229.html

⁷ Ma Xiaolin, #38 Event Report: Islamic Caliphate in Iraq: What Can China Do? think-INchina, 22 October 2014, <http://www.thinkinchina.asia/38-event-report/>

international strategist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of World Economics and Politics, argued together with a student of his, Zheng Yuwen, that it "is beyond any great power to solve the Middle East's problems. ... In the next decade, the prospect of China's relations with Middle Eastern states mainly lies in the potential for economic cooperation. ... China's critical task is still developing its domestic economy and society; thus, it is inappropriate for China to undertake too many international responsibilities and obligations that might interfere with its internal progress," they said. Li and Yuwen acknowledged that China was hampered by its difficulty in harnessing culture to extend its soft power.

The stakes for China are, nonetheless, rising as its interests in the greater Middle East and North Africa mushroom. Energy and resource security were key to China's continued economic growth and rising standards of living on which the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rides. "The Middle East will remain China's largest source of oil imports, and that is the strategic significance of the Middle East for China," Middle East scholars Niu Xinchun and Xing Haibing said.⁸ The combination of energy dependence, massive investment, and markets made China's effort to avoid embroilment in the region's conflicts and politics unsustainable as its strategic importance were set to progressively expand.

Add to that, the geostrategic importance of Middle Eastern and North African states as hubs for access to African and European markets and their centrality to China's Belt and Road initiative. Finally, as was evident in China's complex and at times clever compliance with international sanctions against Iran and Xi's visit to the Middle East, balancing Chinese relations with rival Middle Eastern states as well as the United States as they relate to the region increasingly resembled the act of a dancer on a tightrope. The balancing act was complicated by the fact that China sees Iran as a strategic ally and over the decades was far less concerned than the United States and its Arab allies that the Islamic republic could become a nuclear power. China viewed Iran's nuclear and military programmes, which it supported, as Iran's response to a US effort to impose its will and whip Iran into line and a response to calls and at times efforts to force regime change. In contrast, the United

⁸ Niu Xinchun and Xing Haibing, *China's Interests in and Influence over the Middle East, Contemporary International Relations (当代国际关系)*, Vol. 1, 2014, p. 37-58

States asserted that a nuclear Iran would destabilize the region and enhance the risk of fissile materials falling into the hands of militants. The widely divergent approaches fuelled tension between the two countries, sparked repeated US sanctioning of Chinese companies, and caused an embarrassing incident in 1993 when US and Saudi officials inspected a Chinese vessel docked in the Saudi port of Jeddah on suspicion that it was ferrying poison gas ingredients to Iran. The officials, it turned out, had acted on faulty intelligence.⁹

China nonetheless reduced its oil imports from the Islamic republic while the sanctions were still in place. Chinese imports of Iranian oil dropped from 555,000 barrels a day in 2011 to 402,000 in the first quarter of 2013.¹⁰ Chinese compliance however came at a price. China repeatedly pushed the United States to grant it a sanctions waiver that allowed it to purchase additional amounts of Iranian oil. As a result, Iran by early 2014, according to the International Energy Agency, was able to increase exports to 1.32 million barrels per day, 32% above the limit allowed by a November 2013 agreement that was part of the US-led negotiations to end the nuclear crisis.¹¹ Xi ensured that he became the first foreign leader to visit Iran after the lifting of the sanctions in the wake of an international agreement in 2015 that severely curtailed the Islamic republic's nuclear programme. Xi's visit in January 2016 and an agreement to raise trade tenfold from \$60 billion in 2015 to \$600 billion over a ten-year period held out the prospect that Iran would be able to win back its lost share of the Chinese oil market.¹² Within a year of the conclusion of the nuclear accord, Iranian oil exports to China had soared by 20%.¹³ By 2017, Iranian oil exports to

⁹Patrick E. Tyler, No Chemical Arms Aboard China Ship, *The New York Times*, 6 September 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/09/06/world/no-chemical-arms-aboard-china-ship.html>

¹⁰US Energy Information Administration China, 4 February 2014, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/China/china.pdf>

¹¹International Energy Agency, IEA releases Oil Market Report for February, 13 February 2014, <https://www.iea.org/newsroomandevents/news/2014/february/ieareleasesoilmarketreportforfebruary.html>

¹²James M. Dorsey, China & the Middle East: Tilting Towards Iran? RSIS Commentary, 28 January 2016, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/CO16020.pdf>

¹³Reuters, Asia's Iranian crude oil imports, Undated, [http://graphics.thomsonreuters.com/iran-oil/index.html/Press TV, China's oil imports from Iran up 19.5%, 21 June 2016, http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2016/06/21/471506/Chinas-oil-imports-from-Iran-up-195](http://graphics.thomsonreuters.com/iran-oil/index.html/Press+TV,+China's+oil+imports+from+Iran+up+19.5%,+21+June+2016,+http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2016/06/21/471506/Chinas-oil-imports-from-Iran-up-195)

China had risen to 605,699 barrels per day, bringing Iran closer to its goal of recovering market share lost because of the sanctions.¹⁴

Iran's market share remained nonetheless but a small slice of a mushrooming business that illustrated increased Chinese dependency on the Middle East. In 2007, China imported 3.2 million barrels of oil a day with 1.46 million barrels, or 46%, coming from the Middle East.¹⁵ Seven years later, in 2014, China imported an average of 6.1 million barrels of oil a day. Of that, more than 52%—or 3.2 million barrels—came from the Middle East with Saudi Arabia in the lead.¹⁶ China's increased dependency was counterbalanced by the fact that China emerged in the twenty-first century not only as a major buyer of Gulf oil but also as a significant competitor in the global sale of refined product.¹⁷

China has sought to enhance its energy security within the limitations of its interdependency with the United States and its continued reliance on the US defence umbrella in the Gulf by investing significantly in resource-related sectors in Middle Eastern and North African states, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Qatar, Algeria, Iran, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Somalia, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), or 15 of the 22 member states of the Arab League. At the same time, China took steps to shield its currency, the renminbi, against the fallout of US dollar-linked crises with billions of dollars with currency swaps with countries like Qatar and Russia.¹⁸

Chinese energy companies, in a significant economic shift that could over time influence the United States' commitment to Gulf security, replaced US oil majors as major investors in Middle Eastern and North

¹⁴Irina Slav, Iran To Boost Oil Exports To China Further In August, *Oilprice.com*, 3 August 2017, <http://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Iran-To-Boost-Oil-Exports-To-China-Further-In-August.html>

¹⁵Michael Meidan, Amrita Sen and Robert Campbell, China: "the new normal," The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, February 2015, <http://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/China-the-new-normal.pdf>

¹⁶Keith Johnson, China Tops U.S. as Biggest Oil Importer, *Foreign Policy*, 11 May 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/11/china-tops-u-s-as-biggest-oil-importer-middle-east-opec-sloc/>

¹⁷Gabe Collins and Andrew Erickson, China Now Exports as Much Diesel Fuel and Gasoline as Saudi Arabia Does, *China Signpost*, 14 November 2016, <http://www.chinasignpost.com/2016/11/14/china-now-exports-as-much-diesel-fuel-and-gasoline-as-saudi-arabia-does/>

¹⁸Kenneth Rapozza, Internationalization of China Currency Continues with Qatar Deal, *Forbes*, 4 November 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2014/11/04/internationalization-of-china-currency-continues-with-qatar-deal/>

African national oil companies. Saudi Arabia mulled a private sale to China of a 5% stake in its national oil company, Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Aramco) rather than initial public offering.¹⁹ The absence of a US stake in the development of hydrocarbons in the UAE, with the departure of Exxon Mobil as an Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) shareholder, called into question a long-standing assumption that security in the Gulf would be a US national interest because of US economic stakes. China National Corporation with its \$1.8 billion acquisition of an 8% stake in Abu Dhabi's major oil concessions and China with an \$888 million 4% stake became ADNOC's single largest foreign shareholder.²⁰

China's footprint and associated interests were evident across the Eurasian landmass that it envisions as part of its Belt and Road initiative. In 2010, China overtook the EU as Iran's largest trading partner²¹ and has more recently agreed to press ahead with the construction of a natural gas pipeline linking Iran with Pakistan that potentially could reduce Pakistan's energy dependence on Iran's arch rival Saudi Arabia.²² The pipeline is part of a \$56 billion infrastructure spending plan in Pakistan dubbed the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China's largest planned investment to date in any one single country.²³ It amounts to approximately the equivalent of 20% of the Pakistan's GDP²⁴ and aims to turn Balochistan, a region wracked by ethnic tensions that is divided between Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, into a geopolitical hub. The plan

¹⁹ Simeon Kerr, Will China Buy Aramco? Financial Times, 21 August 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/0141ef20-0e4f-3b1b-b48e-d3c3c5a17968>

²⁰ Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, ADNOC Awards China National Petroleum Corporation 8% Stake in ADCO Onshore Concession, 19 February 2017, <https://www.adnoc.ae/en/news-and-media/press-releases/2017/adnoc-awards-china-national-petroleum-corporation-stake-in-adco-onshore-concession>

²¹ Najmeh Bozorgmehr, China overtakes EU to become Tehran's largest trading ally, The Irish Times, 9 February 2010, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/china-overtakes-eu-to-become-tehran-s-largest-trading-ally-1.619509>

²² Saeed Shah, China to Build Pipeline from Iran to Pakistan, The Wall Street Journal, 9 April 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-to-build-pipeline-from-iran-to-pakistan-1428515277>

²³ Saeed Shah and Jeremy Page, China Readies \$46 Billion for Pakistan Trade Route, The Wall Street Journal, 16 April 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-to-unveil-billions-of-dollars-in-pakistan-investment-1429214705>

²⁴ Andrew Stevens, Pakistan Lands \$46 Billion Investment from China, CNN Money, 20 April 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/04/20/news/economy/pakistan-china-aid-infrastructure/index.html>

involves investments that in their totality equal in value all foreign direct investment inflows into Pakistan since 1970.²⁵ They include a \$1 billion pipeline that would link Gwadar's planned \$2 billion liquefied natural gas terminal to Iran's South Pars gas field, offering energy-starved Pakistan access to Iranian supplies.

The lifting of the UN sanctions and Xi's visit opened the door to significant, badly needed Chinese investment in Iran's energy sector. Already the largest foreign investor in Iranian energy since the United States in 2009 imposed sanctions on the Islamic republic's gasoline exports, China has since the lifting signed a \$3 billion deal to improve Iran's gasoline refinement, a \$4.7 billion agreement to develop the South Pars Phase 11 gas field, and a \$1.5 billion joint venture with a South Korean company to upgrade the Isfahan's oil refinery.²⁶ Furthermore, a Chinese company inked a \$550 million contract to build a new oil loading terminal on Qeshm Island atop the strategic Strait of Hormuz with a storage capacity of 30 million barrels of oil.²⁷ Chinese petrochemical giant Sinopec secured weeks later an agreement to develop a \$1.2 billion mega refinery in the Shatt Al-Arab port city of Abadan that would be Iran's largest.²⁸

A reading of the energy market's tea leaves tells, however, a story that goes beyond the dynamics of Iranian oil exports to China. It tells a story that goes to the heart of the Great Game, the competition for influence in Eurasia between world and regional powers. It also weaves a tale, particularly in the case of Iran, of how China walks a tightrope as it pursues goals that are diametrically at odds with those of the United States, yet goes out of its way to accommodate Washington to the minimal degree necessary. It is a tale that suggests that China is likely to find it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to ensure that Iran does not become a flashpoint in its relations with the United States as well as Saudi Arabia, the Islamic republic's most bitter, US-backed rival. That is even more the case with China at odds with the United States after US President Donald J. Trump in 2018 withdrew from the nuclear agreement with Iran. China, together

²⁵ Umbreen Javaid, *Assessing CPEC: Potential Threats and Prospects*, Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan, Vol. 53:2, p. 254–269

²⁶ Janet Xuanli Liao, *China's Energy Diplomacy and Its "Peaceful Rise" Ambition: The Cases of Sudan and Iran*, Asian Journal of Peacebuilding, Vol: 1:2, p. 197–225

²⁷ Fars News Agency, Iran, China to Launch Oil Export Terminal in Qeshm Island, 15 June 2016, <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950326001000>

²⁸ AsiaNews, Tehran signs billion dollar energy agreements with China and Russia, 17 July 2016, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Tehran-signs-billion-dollar-energy-agreements-with-China-and-Russia--38605.html>

with Russia and Europe, has vowed to defy reimposed US sanctions in a bid to keep the agreement in place.

The rise of Trump with his deep-seated animosity towards Iran and almost singular focus on confronting Islamic militants threatened to put China at loggerheads with America not only over Iran but also Pakistan. Trump's targeting of the Iranian nuclear deal constituted a potential flash-point not only because China would be affected by any re-introduction of US secondary sanctions that would aim at non-American companies doing business with the Islamic republic, but also because the US pull-out from the accord ran the risk of sparking a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, particularly if Tehran abrogated the agreement in response to the US withdrawal. China's effort to remain neutral and avoid a wider trade war was further complicated with countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel falling in line with the US assault on the nuclear agreement.

Balancing relations with the United States backed by its closest Middle Eastern allies who were determined to contain Iran and perhaps even change its regime is in the longer term likely to prove increasingly difficult given that Iran is pivotal to China's energy future as well as the success of its Belt and Road initiative. With or without the nuclear accord, China will not be able to ignore the fact that Iran boasts the world's second largest natural gas reserves and its fourth largest oil reserves.

In a study published in 2015, energy scholar Micha'el Tanchum suggested that it would be gas supplies from Iran and Turkmenistan, two Caspian Sea states, rather than Saudi oil that would determine which way the Eurasian energy architecture tilts: China, the world's third largest LNG importer,²⁹ or Europe.

Iran, within five years, will likely have 24.6 billion cubic meters of natural gas available for annual piped gas exports beyond its current supply commitments. Not enough to supply all major markets, Tehran will face a crucial geopolitical choice for the destination of its piped exports. Iran will be able to export piped gas to two of the following three markets: European Union (EU)/ Turkey via the Southern Gas Corridor centring on the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), India via an Iran-Oman-India pipeline, or China via either Turkmenistan or Pakistan. The degree to which the system of energy relationships in Eurasia will be more oriented toward the European Union or China will depend on the extent to which each

²⁹ International Gas Union, 2016 World LNG Report, 2016, www.igu.org/download/file/fid/2123

secures Caspian piped gas exports through pipeline infrastructure directed to its respective markets,

Tanchum said.³⁰

In other words, Tanchum argued that to determine the balance of power in Eurasian energy and establish the Belt and Road as the key determinant of the Eurasia's energy architecture, China would need to position itself as the main recipient of Iranian and Turkmen gas. That, in turn, would enhance China's growing economic influence in Central Asia and further extend it to the Caucasus and the eastern Mediterranean. Iranian and Turkmen natural gas would also allow it to reduce its dependence on domestic coal for electricity generation that has severely polluted Chinese cities.

China already has many of the building blocks in place to secure a hold on Iranian and Turkmen gas a reality: close and long-standing relations with Iran, significant investment in Turkmen gas production and pipeline infrastructure, and the construction of Pakistan's section of the Iran-Pakistan pipeline. Supplies from Turkmenistan as well as more recently from Kazakhstan allow China to diversify and reduce its dependency on Middle Eastern producers.³¹ A cable from the US embassy in Dushanbe noted already in 2009 that "Tajikistan's increasing indebtedness to its eastern neighbour (China) may limit its future economic freedom."³² Similarly, China's state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in a joint venture with France's Total became the first major foreign company to conclude an energy agreement with Iran in the wake of the lifting of the sanctions. CNPC took a 30% stake in a \$4.8 billion natural gas development project in which Total and Iran's Petropars divvied up the remaining 70%.³³

Hooking the Iran-Pakistan line to the Belt and Road would allow China to receive Iranian gas not only by sea on its eastern seaboard but also in Xinjiang. Pakistan's top military commander, General Qamar Javed

³⁰Micha'el Tanchum, *A Post-Sanctions Iran and the Eurasian Energy Architecture*, Atlantic Council, September 2015, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Iran_Energy_Architecture_web_0925.pdf

³¹Wade Shepherd, *China's Hunger For Energy Resources Is What's Driving The Belt And Road*, Forbes, 13 October 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/10/13/chinas-hunger-for-energy-resources-is-whats-driving-the-belt-and-road/#33ab819e67ef>

³²US Embassy Dushanbe, Chinese interest in Tajikistan increases, Wikileaks, 7 August 2009, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09DUSHANBE954_a.html

³³Xinhua, *Iran, China, France sign \$4.8 billion gas deal*, 4 July 2017, http://www.china-daily.com.cn/business/2017-07/04/content_29985566.htm

Bajwa, appeared to acknowledge Iran's pivotal role by noting that "enhanced Pakistan-Iran military-to-military cooperation will have a positive impact on regional peace and stability."³⁴ Bajwa's comment came as Pakistan walked a tightrope with retired Pakistani General Raheel Sharif at the helm of a 41-nation, Saudi-led, barely disguised anti-Iranian military alliance.

Linking the Iran-Pakistan pipeline to CPEC would increase Iran's importance for the success of China's Eurasian infrastructure play. Iran's geopolitical strengths were however not wholly dependent on aligning the Islamic republic with China. With the development of Iran's \$500 million Indian-built Chabahar port, a project that was revived with lifting the sanctions on Iran, and the undersea Iran-Oman-India pipeline that would potentially create an alternative Asia-to-Europe energy corridor, Iran was in a position in which it could play both ends against the middle as well as a key role in the trans-Atlantic community's effort to strengthen relations with India as an anti-dote to the rise of China.

Iran's geopolitical significance was further enhanced by the fact that competition for Iranian gas favour occurred against the backdrop of expectations that Iranian cooperation with Russia in Syria and elsewhere was opportunistic and may not prove to be sustainable. Coupled with Iranian-Russian competition in the Caucasus and Central Asia, this could work in Europe's rather than China's favour. At the same time, Iran was likely to deepen energy cooperation with Turkey in a bid to enhance its influence and curtail Russian inroads in the Islamic republic's northern neighbours, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Armenia where Russia's state-owned Gazprom has invested in an Iran-Armenia gas pipeline.

Chinese interest in expanding and deepening its economic and commercial ties to Iran, a country whose large untapped energy resources had not yet been staked out by Western and Russian energy majors, was at times hampered by the fact that win-win often proved to be China wins more. In 2014, Iran cancelled a \$2.5 billion contract with the CNPC for the development of the South Azadegan oil field citing repeated delays as well as the high cost and poor quality of Chinese equipment and services.³⁵

³⁴ Dawn, Stronger Pak-Iran defence ties to serve regional peace: Bajwa, 5 March 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1318523>

³⁵ Benoit Faucon, Iran Cancels \$2.5 Billion Contract with Chinese Oil Company, The Wall Street Journal, 29 April 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303939404579531111999051656>

China's prestige was further tarnished by the fining that year of Chinese workers for hunting and eating soft-shelled Euphrates turtles, a protected species, in the wetlands that surround the North Azadegan field. China's saving grace was the fact that its companies, unlike their Western counterparts, were willing to transfer technology even if it was not as advanced as that of the West.

The damage caused by the cancellation of the South Azadegan contract was repaired when the two sides agreed a year later that the CNPC would develop the second phase of the North Azadegan field.³⁶ Chinese technicians, who became involved in the Azadegan fields when in 2010 international sanctions that were still in place forced Japan's Impex Corp. to disengage, have since taken over the field's control room situated in snake-infested marshlands on Iran's border with Iraq.

Iranian businessmen were nonetheless cautious on the eve of Xi's visit, raising questions about the degree to which China would benefit from the lifting of international sanctions against the Islamic republic. Prior to the lifting of international sanctions in 2015, Iran was forced to barter its oil exported to China for Chinese goods, ranging from consumer products to automobiles. The Iranian commerce ministry in 2010 revoked import licences for 170 goods, most of which were household items, toys, and electronics produced in China because they failed to meet Iranian quality standards.

Businessmen charged that Chinese banks and businesses had exploited the sanctions to bill them high commissions and delay deliveries in the knowledge that they had no choice but to buy Chinese products that many Iranians complained were inferior, prone to breakdowns, and alien to Iranian taste. Some Iranians also charged that an influx of cheap Chinese goods was crowding out local manufacturers and aggravating unemployment.³⁷

The stakes for Chinese companies were high and have only become higher with the reimposition of US sanctions against Iran. Iran said that when the sanctions were lifted that it would need up to \$50 billion in foreign investment in energy; road, rail, and air transportation; agriculture;

³⁶ Press TV, Iran Awards New Oil Project to China Company, 5 May 2015, <http://presstv.com/Detail/2015/05/05/409557/Iran-oil-China-Azadegan>

³⁷ Tehran Bureau, China floods Iran with cheap consumer goods in exchange for oil, The Guardian, 20 February 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2013/feb/20/china-floods-iran-cheap-consumer-goods>

and industries such as household, textile, and ceramics.³⁸ Despite some setbacks, China was well positioned to capitalize on Iran's needs. Besides being the largest importer of Iranian oil, China was likely to remain Iran's largest trade partner.³⁹ To secure its position, China in 2016 raised its quota for investment in Iranian oil, gas electricity, and water projects to \$52 billion from \$25 billion.⁴⁰ China is also building hospitals, roads, and railways. Moreover, with the largest expatriate community in Iran, China's presence is highly visible symbolized by the hundreds of Chinese employees that streamed each day out of the central Tehran headquarters of telecommunications company Huawei to go for lunch.

In a symbolic gesture, the first train ferrying 32 containers loaded with Chinese products to traverse China's 10,399-kilometre-long Belt and Road land expanse across Central Asia arrived in February 2016 at the end of a 14-day trip from Yiwu City in eastern Zhejiang province in Tehran within weeks of Xi's visit. Mohsen Pourseyed Aqayi, the head Iran's railway company, greeted the train, which in a revival of the ancient Chinese-Iranian Silk Route will operate on a once-a-month schedule in the presence of the ambassadors of China and Turkmenistan with the words: "The revival of the Silk Road is crucial for the countries on its route."⁴¹ The opening of the Trans-Kazakh railway was expected to cut the journey to only eight days or far less than the more than a month-long sea route. It posed moreover a serious competitive challenge to Russia's Trans-Siberian railway.⁴² Eager to ensure its place as a key Eurasian transport hub, Iran

³⁸ Charles Clover, Heba Saleh, Najmeh Bozorgmehr, and Simeon Kerr, Xi faces diplomatic test on first Middle East visit, *Financial Times*, 18 January 2016, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6ce8bb08-bdbf-11e5-846f-79b0e3d20eaf.html?ftcamp=published_links%2Frss%2Fworld_asia-pacific_china%2Ffeed%2F%2Fproduct#axzz3xcDnbvIw

³⁹ *Iran Daily*, Iranian, Chinese Officials to Hold Oil Talks, 7 April 2015, <http://www.iran-daily.com/News/115047.html>

⁴⁰ BBC News, China to double Iranian investment, 16 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-30075807>

⁴¹ Agence France Press, First "Silk Road" train arrives in Tehran from China, 16 February 2016, https://news.yahoo.com/first-silk-road-train-arrives-tehran-china-134703954.html?soc_src=mail&soc_trk=ma

⁴² John C. K. Daly, China and Kazakhstan to Construct a Trans-Kazakhstan Railway Line From Khorgos to Aktau, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 12:94, 20 May 2015, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43934&cHash=30f9f55ce09e00fc849b8d0e8572761b

allocated \$25 billion or 1% of its oil and gas sales to modernizing and adding 10,000 kilometres of new rail lines to its rundown infrastructure.⁴³

The Yiwu City-Tehran train is part of the China-Central-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC), one of six corridors that constitute the architecture of the Belt and Road initiative. The CCWAEC runs from western China, through Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, and ends in Iran and Turkey. Iran's strategic importance is underlined not only by the fact that it is an endpoint of one of the corridors and adjacent to a second one, the CPEC, but also by the fact that the Gulf is not part of any corridor. The same logic applies to Turkey, with whom Saudi Arabia and the UAE have strained relations because of differences over Qatar in the Gulf crisis as well as the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, Iran and Turkey enjoy an advantage in their relations with China through their association with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that has no formal ties to any Gulf state.⁴⁴

Extension to Turkey of the rail link to Iran could offer China once its plans for high-speed railway across Central Asia become a reality yet another fall-back option alongside Israel should instability endanger shipping through the Suez Canal. The rail link offered Iran a leg up in competition with Afghanistan and Pakistan for China's attention and focus. It demonstrated that instability in Afghanistan could be neutralized and circumvented. Construction of the high-speed rail link involved less engineering challenges than Pakistan's insurgency-wracked Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces and far fewer security threats.

One indication of China's efforts to manage US sensitivities was the fact that China has so far expressed verbal support for Iran's request, first tabled in 2008, to convert its observer status with the SCO that groups China, Russia, and Central Asian states into full membership, but not acted on it. China's hesitancy was rooted not only in the Islamic republic's contentious relationship with the United States but also because of its virulent anti-Israel rhetoric and the religious nature of its regime.

Nonetheless, Chinese military relations with Iran were likely to become a point of friction with the United States even without the US pull-out from the

⁴³ Reuters, Iran and Italy sign 1.2 billion euro railway deal: Fars, 11 July 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-italy-railway/iran-and-italy-sign-1-2-billion-euro-railway-deal-fars-idUSKBN19W1PY>

⁴⁴ Jonathan Fulton, The G.C.C. Countries and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Curbing Their Enthusiasm? Middle East Institute, 17 October 2017, http://www.mei.edu/content/map/gcc-countries-and-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative#_ftnref13

nuclear agreement. The United States cited Iranian tests of ballistic missiles that are based on Chinese designs as a major example of what it terms the spirit of the accord and a threat to its national security interests.⁴⁵ The Federation of American Scientists published in 2012 a declassified report to Congress by the US Director of National Intelligence that asserted that China alongside Russia and North Korea had enabled Iran to “move towards its goal of becoming self-sufficient in the production of ballistic missiles.”⁴⁶

For China, relations with Iran have been complex ever since a revolutionary movement toppled the country’s monarchy and established an Islamic republic in 1979. China shared with Iran the trauma of foreign domination and a desire to forge a non-Western path towards development and ensure that Asian affairs would be governed by Asians rather than non-Asians, a perspective that contrasts starkly with Saudi Arabia’s alliance with the United States and the kingdom’s insistence that the United States plays a major role. China’s extensive military support of Iran stroked with China’s rejection of US efforts to limit or control efforts of others to arm themselves and its insistence that sovereignty included the right to acquire whatever means necessary to defend themselves. China insisted that sovereign states were the only ones who could curtail that right by signing on to international treaties or voluntarily agreeing to restrictions.

The relation between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is ... about two ambitious emerging powers who view each another as sharing many common interests and perspectives. ... The Sino-Iranian relationship is about two like-minded and ambitious countries unhappy with the current state of US dominance of world affairs, who view a strong Sino-Iranian partnership as an important element of the post-US unipolar world that both aspire to create. ... Of all the major powers in Asia, Iran offers the best prospect of being a partner with China in the construction of a new international order in Asia when the era of multipolarity arrives and the US role in Asia is much reduced,

said international relations scholar John W. Garver.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Nolan D. McKaskill, Trump knocks Iran deal after Tehran tests missile, Politico, 23 September 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/23/trump-iran-deal-missile-test-243058>

⁴⁶Federation of American Scientists, Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions, 1 January Through 31 December 2011, February 2012, <https://fas.org/irp/threat/wmd-acq2011.pdf>

⁴⁷John W. Garver, China and Iran: Expanding Cooperation under Conditions of US Domination in Niv Horesh (ed), *Toward Well-Oiled Relations? China’s Presence in the Middle East Following the Arab Spring*, Houndsmill, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 180–206

China and Iran also shared a history of ancient and mediaeval empire in which geographic distance allowed them to cooperate with Persia playing an important role in exposing China to Islamic advances in the sciences and serving as a key link on the Silk Road on which Chinese goods moved westwards. One Chinese scholar asserted in an unpublished study that relations between China and Persia went back to the early days of *anno Domini*.⁴⁸ Relations were facilitated by the fact that the two countries were on either end of the Asian continent which reduced the risk of conflict. In 1920, Persia became the first nation to sign a treaty with China that did not include the onerous clause of extra-territoriality.⁴⁹ Then as now, Chinese-Iranian relations were about much more than oil; they were about geopolitics.

Developing relations with revolutionary Iran proved, however, to be a conundrum for China. Already hampered by initial Iranian distrust of China because of its support of US-backed efforts by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the toppled shah, to stymie the Soviet Union's ambition to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean, South Asia, and the Middle East, China had to manoeuvre even more cautiously after militant Islamic students occupied the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979. The 444-day occupation made it more difficult to rebuild China's relations with Iran in ways that would not provoke the ire of the United States. Recreating trust with post-revolution Iran was not made easier by the shah's honouring of China in his memoirs, published almost immediately after his death in Cairo. Describing his sense of isolation on the eve of his overthrow, Pahlavi said he was under the "impression that the Chinese were alone in favour of a strong Iran."⁵⁰ China and revolutionary Iran, moreover, were moving in opposite directions. China was focussing on economic development, while Iran in the immediate years after the toppling of the shah was driven by its revolutionary zeal. The fervour dampened, however, with the eruption of the 1980 Iraq-Iran war given that the Islamic republic needed all the help it could get, making it easier for Beijing to do business with Tehran.

⁴⁸ Zhu Jiejun, *Zhongguo he yilang guanxi shigao* (Draft history of China-Iran relations), Urumqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 1998, quoted in Garver, *China and Iran*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Garver

⁵⁰ Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, *The Shah's Story*, London: Michael Joseph, 1980, p. 147

Ultimately, China emerged as the Islamic republic's main military hardware supplier during the war, suggesting that the People's Republic saw a militarily strong Islamic republic as serving not only its commercial but also its strategic interests.⁵¹ To maintain its façade of non-interference and neutrality, China also sold weapons to Iraq during the war. Yet, the sales to Iran were particularly crucial because of Iran's difficulty in buying arms on the global market due to Western sanctions imposed because of the 1979 occupation of the US embassy in Tehran and the holding hostage of American diplomats. They took on added significance after the war when Iran in 1992, the year China signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), launched a five-year, \$50 billion rearmament campaign to replenish its depleted armoury.⁵²

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimated that China sold Iran \$808 million worth of arms between 2001 and 2012, making it ultimately the country's foremost arms supplier.⁵³ But already in 1987, Chinese arms sales heightened tension with the United States when Iran fired Chinese-made Silkworm missiles at Kuwaiti vessels in the Gulf.⁵⁴ Forced to halt the supply of sophisticated weaponry, China helped Iran kick-start the development of an indigenous military-industrial sector with know-how and technology that is evident in the design and technology of Iranian-made missiles.⁵⁵ Missiles, viewed by China as a military equalizer, played a key part.

Much of China's military assistance in the 1990s was in support of Iranian efforts to develop, with the help of North Korea, ballistic missiles and to enhance its ability to fend off littoral attacks with the sale of C-801 and C-802 anti-ship missiles that were modelled on France's Exocet, and Hudong missile-armed fast attack boats.⁵⁶ SIPRI reported the sale of 899

⁵¹ Reuters, China aims to boost military relations with Iran, 5 May 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/05/05/uk-china-iran-idUKKBN0DL0DU20140505>

⁵² John Calabrese, *Peaceful or Dangerous Collaborators? China's Relations with the Gulf Countries*, Pacific Affairs, Vol. 65:4, p. 471–485

⁵³ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

⁵⁴ Mark Thompson and James M. Dorsey, Pentagon Pool report, US Department of Defence, 23 July 1987

⁵⁵ Jane's Strategic Weapons Systems, Surrey: Jane's Information Service, Volume 100–101, 1990

⁵⁶ John W. Garver, *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006, p. 182–189

such missiles in the first decade of the twenty-first century.⁵⁷ China often facilitated military cooperation between Iran and North Korea, particularly in the exchange of ballistic missile technology. China was also believed to have served as a transit station for shipments of proscribed components.⁵⁸

At times, Chinese support would wane as in the middle of the twenty-first century's first decade to avoid friction with the United States only to pick up again a bit later.⁵⁹ By 2008, China was again Iran's foremost arms supplier.⁶⁰ In 2010, China inaugurated a missile plant in Iran near the city of Isfahan that produced the Nasr anti-ship missile which was identical to China's C-704.⁶¹ To hide the supply line, China at times filed off the serial numbers of weapons to hide their origin.⁶² China also forged bilateral maritime security cooperation with Iran.⁶³

Building on their history of military cooperation, Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan said during a visit in 2014 to Beijing by his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Dehqan, that he hoped to deepen military ties.⁶⁴ Chinese Admiral Sun Jianguo, in anticipation of the lifting of the sanctions, visited Iran in October 2015. Sun, who is widely seen as the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) next naval commander, produced a draft memorandum of understanding for closer cooperation in counterterrorism, cyberwarfare, and intelligence sharing. Sun's visit followed joint Chinese-Iranian

⁵⁷ Ibid. SIPRI

⁵⁸ Louis Charbonneau, North Korea, Iran trade missile technology: U.N., Reuters, 15 May 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-korea-north-iran-un/north-korea-iran-trade-missile-technology-u-n-idUSTRE74D18Z20110515> / Interviews with diplomats 2011–2014

⁵⁹ John Garver, China–Iran Relations: Cautious Friendship with America's Nemesis, China Report, Vol 49:1, p. 69–88

⁶⁰ Robert F. Worth and C. J. Chivers, Seized Chinese Weapons Raise Concerns on Iran, The New York Times, 2 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/world/middleeast/seized-arms-off-yemen-raise-alarm-over-iran.html>

⁶¹ United Press International, China opens missile plant in Iran, 23 April 2010, http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2010/04/23/China-opens-missile-plant-in-Iran/82791272037022/

⁶² Michael Mazza, China-Iran Ties: Assessment and Implications for U.S. Policy, American Enterprise Institute, 21 April 2011, <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/michael-mazza-china-iran-ties-assessment-and-implications-us-policy-april-21-2011>

⁶³ Zachary Keck, China Calls Iran a "Strategic Partner," The Diplomat, 6 May 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/china-calls-iran-a-strategic-partner/>

⁶⁴ Scott Harold and Alireza Nader, China and Iran, Economic, Political, and Military Relations, RAND Corporation, 2012, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP351.pdf

search-and-rescue naval exercises and training exercises in 2014 in the Gulf. The exercises, involving two Chinese warships, were held close to the base of the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain at a time of tension between the United States and Iran over the Islamic republic's nuclear programme.⁶⁵

The lifting of the sanctions did nothing to halt US efforts to complicate Chinese contributions to Iranian military development, particularly regarding missiles. The US Treasury in January 2016 imposed sanctions on Mingfu Chen, a Chinese national and owner of Hong Kong-headquartered Anhui Land Group Co, as well as China and UAE-based Mabrook Trading Co LLC on charges that they had “obfuscated the end user of sensitive goods for missile proliferation by using front companies in third countries to deceive foreign suppliers.”⁶⁶ Later that year, the Commerce Department sanctioned ZTE Corporation, one of China's largest telecom equipment manufacturers, and said it was investigating Huawei, ZTE's foremost Chinese competitor.⁶⁷

ZTE pleaded guilty to the US accusation that it sold US-made electronics to Iran and agreed to pay a \$1.19 billion fine.⁶⁸ “We are putting the world on notice: The games are over. Those who flout our economic sanctions and export control laws will not go unpunished—they will suffer the harshest of consequences,” said US Commerce Secretary Wilbur L. Ross,⁶⁹ suggesting that Chinese failure to adhere to US-imposed sanctions could have consequences for future US-China trade negotiations. Renewed US sanctions brought ZTE in 2018 to the brink of bankruptcy.

The penalties and investigation of the two Chinese companies related to violations of US sanctions on Iran as well as North Korea.

⁶⁵ Ben Blanchard, Chinese admiral visits Iran, wants closer defense cooperation, Reuters, 14 October 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-iran-idUSKCN0S907Q20151015>

⁶⁶ US Department of the Treasury, Treasury Sanctions Those Involved in Ballistic Missile Procurement for Iran, 17 January 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0322.aspx>; US Department of the Treasury, Non-proliferation Designations, 17 January 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20160117.aspx>

⁶⁷ Paul Mozur, U.S. Fines ZTE of China \$1.19 Billion for Breaching Sanctions, The New York Times, 7 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/08/technology/us-restricts-sales-to-zte-saying-it-breached-sanctions.html>

⁶⁸ US Department of Commerce, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur L. Ross, Jr. Announces \$1.19 Billion Penalty for Chinese Company's Export Violations to Iran and North Korea, 7 March 2017, <https://www.commerce.gov/news/press-releases/2017/03/secretary-commerce-wilbur-l-ross-jr-announces-119-billion-penalty>

⁶⁹ Charles Riley, Chinese firm fined \$1.2 billion for violating U.S. sanctions on Iran, CNN, 78 March 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2017/03/07/technology/zte-china-iran-sanctions/>

The sanctions took on added significance with Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran. China had long successfully shielded its strategic state-owned oil and other companies from running afoul of the US Treasury. That has become more difficult with Trump's undermining of the agreement. A senior Chinese foreign ministry official, discussing as far back as 2008 the involvement in Iran of China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation, or Sinopec, told visiting staff members of US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he "can't imagine" the consequences if the company were to be sanctioned by the United States.⁷⁰

China's approach towards the Iranian nuclear crisis before the 2015 nuclear agreement was reflected on the tightrope it walked across the Middle East and North Africa's pitfalls. China as a permanent member of the UN Security Council was part of negotiations to end the crisis. Like most in the international community, it was opposed to Iran becoming a nuclear military power even if its opposition was more a function of maintaining its relationship with the United States than a matter of principle. China often sought to alleviate pressure on the Iranians during the negotiations, but ultimately aligned itself at each bend in the process with the US-led consensus. Overall, China appeared more sanguine about the Iranian programme given the history of its own nuclear capabilities as well as Pakistan's employment of secrecy and deceit in its successful pursuit of nuclear weapons. China became a nuclear power in the 1950s but only joined the NPT in 1993. Chinese policy towards Iran's nuclear ambitions moreover acknowledged that 40% of Iran's nuclear capability predated the fall of the shah in 1979. International relations scholar Pan Guang summarized Chinese opposition to a potential US and/or Israeli military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities in his warning that "if you bomb Iran, you radicalize them."⁷¹ Chinese officials and pundits suspected the United States of using the nuclear issue as a pretext to change the regime in Tehran. Writing in the aftermath of 2011 popular Arab revolts that toppled autocratic leaders in four countries, Yang Zian, the Middle East correspondent of *The People's Daily*, the organ of the Chinese Communist Party, suggested that "the reason why the nuclear issue ... heated up rapidly was related to intensification of Western efforts to accomplish regime change in Iran.

⁷⁰ US Embassy Beijing, Staffdel Januzzi discusses non-proliferation, Iran and DRK with MFA arms control director general, Wikileaks, 26 March 2008, https://wikileaks.org/pluss/cables/08BEIJING1141_a.html

⁷¹ Ibid. Pan Guang

Following the complete regime change in Egypt, Libya and other countries, it is now the turn of Iran.”⁷²

China’s attitude was also informed by the fact that it had supported Iran’s nuclear development in the 1980s and 1990s when it assisted the Islamic republic with uranium enrichment. China knew that the programme had a military dimension but nonetheless provided Iran with various types of critical nuclear technology and machinery. It also assisted Iran with the exploration of uranium and mining and enabled Iran to master the use of lasers for uranium enrichment. Chinese experts trained Iranian nuclear engineers and played a key role in the establishment in 1984 of the Isfahan Nuclear Research Centre that was central to Iran’s budding nuclear programme.⁷³ China shipped one metric tonne of uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) to Iran in 1990,⁷⁴ a year after the two countries signed a nuclear cooperation agreement, which the Islamic republic used to test centrifuges at its Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant.⁷⁵ It further provided Iran with laser technology, zirconium tube protection to hold uranium, the Tokamak nuclear fusion reactor,⁷⁶ nuclear isotopes, the design for a uranium conversion facility,⁷⁷ dual-use centrifuges, and electronic isotope separation devices. In fact, the Iranian nuclear crisis was in part sparked by the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) discovery in 2003 that Iran had failed to report the import from China of uranium hexafluoride in 1991⁷⁸ as well as 50 kilogrammes of natural uranium metal, electron beam guns,⁷⁹ and copper laser.⁸⁰

⁷² Ibid. Garver, *China-Iran Relations*

⁷³ Ibid. Garver, p. 156–158

⁷⁴ David Albright and Andrea Stricker, *Iran’s Nuclear Program in Roin Wright (ed), The Iran Primer*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2010

⁷⁵ United Nations Security Council, Note by the President of the Security Council, 29 November 2013 http://repository.un.org/bitstream/handle/11176/24591/S_2013_668-EN.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y

⁷⁶ Maria Sultan, *Iran, Proliferation Magnet*, SAIS Review of International Affairs, Vol. 25:1, p. 123–138

⁷⁷ Manochehr Dorraj, *The Future of Sino-Iranian Relations in Niv Horesh (ed), Toward Well-Oiled Relations? China’s Presence in the Middle East Following the Arab Spring*, Houndsmill, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 206–216

⁷⁸ Dan Coughlin, *US Sounds Alarm over Iranian Nuclear Threat*, *The Telegraph*, 23 February 1997

⁷⁹ Director General, IAEA, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, International Atomic Energy Agency, GOV/2004/60, 1 September 2004, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2004/gov2004-60.pdf>

⁸⁰ Mark Hibbs, *US Warned Not to Try Using IAEA to Isolate or Destabilize Iran*, *Nuclear Review*, April 1996

US pressure persuaded China in 1997 to substantially reduce its support of Iran's nuclear programme, including the supply of nuclear plants in acknowledgement of its understanding that curbing nuclear proliferation, particularly in Iran and North Korea, was a keystone of US perceptions of the two countries' common interest. China, pressured by the United States, had two years earlier already cancelled an agreement to supply Iran a heavy water reactor even though the deal was legal under the NPT. US officials had insisted that the reactor would be used to produce up to 6 kilogrammes of plutonium a year.⁸¹ They also feared that agreement would involve supply of machinery to manufacture fuel rods capable of producing military-grade fissile materials.⁸² The cancellation did not stop China from supplying Iran of heavy water and natural uranium.⁸³

China, however, continued its technical and knowledge transfers, which were difficult to track. Reluctantly, China also voted with the United States in four rounds of imposition of sanctions on Iran by the United Nations Security Council. The sanctions worked for China in two ways. It ensured in the negotiations prior to each round that its key economic interests would not be damaged by the sanctions and it positioned itself as Iran's foremost trading partner, ready to pounce once sanctions were lifted. When they were lifted in 2015, China moved cautiously to restore nuclear cooperation with Iran. Iran's government-controlled Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA) reported that China had agreed to redesign the Arak nuclear reactor under US supervision.⁸⁴

China's lack of a history of conflict with Iran as well as its past contribution to Iranian nuclear development enabled it at crucial points in US-led negotiations to resolve the crisis to put forward solutions that broke impasses. When the future of Iran's Arak heavy water reactor emerged as a serious stumbling block because of its potential to produce plutonium needed to build atomic weapons, China successfully suggested a redesign that would eliminate that potential.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Daniel Byman and Roger Cliff, *China's Arms Sales, Motivations and Implications*, Rand Corp. 1999, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1119.html#download

⁸² Bates Gill, *Chinese Arms Exports to Iran* in P. R. Kumaraswamy, *China and the Middle East, the Quest for Influence*, New Delhi: Sage, p. 117–141

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Garver, *China–Iran Relations*

⁸⁴ Iranian Students' News Agency, *Contract Signed to Redesign Arak Reactor* (قرارداد-بازطراحی-راکتور-اراک-امضا-شد), 21 April, 2017, www.isna.ir/news/96020301473/
قرارداد-بازطراحی-راکتور-اراک-امضا-شد

⁸⁵ Harold Pachios, *Let's look at China's role in the Iran nuclear deal*, The Hill, 21 August 2015, <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/251657-lets-look-at-chinas-role-in-the-iran-nuclear-deal>

With Iran by and large likely to be an issue of continued contention in US-Chinese relations, China and the United States could find themselves competitively complementing each other in accelerating the arms race in the Middle East and fuelling a nuclear race that could significantly escalate tensions and take hostilities in the region to a whole new, more dangerous level. With the United States refusing to share its drone technology, China and Saudi Arabia agreed in 2017 that China would open its first overseas defence production facility in the kingdom with state-owned China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) manufacturing its CH-4 Caihong, or Rainbow drone, as well as associated equipment in Saudi Arabia.⁸⁶ The CH-4 is comparable to the US armed MQ-9 Reaper drone. The deal was likely to persuade Iran and other states to match the kingdom's newly acquired capability. Some critics charged that the risks involved in armed drones went further by reducing the threshold to engage in military confrontations with the use of unmanned weaponry that could escalate into all-out war.⁸⁷

Beyond drones, China also agreed during Saudi King Salman's visit to Beijing in 2017 to help the kingdom develop nuclear energy and a potential nuclear weapons capability to counter a possible Iranian nuclear ability that would enhance efforts to ensure that Saudi Arabia emerges at least on par with Iran, inevitably one of the Middle East's long-term, dominant powers. Cooperation on nuclear energy was one of 14 agreements worth \$65 billion signed during Salman's visit. The agreements included a feasibility study for the construction of high-temperature gas-cooled (HTGR) nuclear reactors in the kingdom as well as cooperation in intellectual property and the development of a domestic industrial supply chain for HTGRs built in Saudi Arabia.⁸⁸ The HTGR agreement built on an accord signed in 2012 that pledged "to enhance cooperation between the two countries in the development and use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes." That accord involved maintenance and development of nuclear power plants and research reactors, as well as the provision of Chinese nuclear fuel.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Middle East Eye, China's Saudi drone factory compensates for US ban

⁸⁷ Ian Armstrong, What's Behind China's Big New Drone Deal? The Diplomat, 20 April 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/04/whats-behind-chinas-big-new-drone-deal/>

⁸⁸ Alvin Cheng-Hin Lim, King Salman's Visit Deepens Sino-Saudi Cooperation, IPP Review, 21 March 2017, <http://ippreview.com/index.php/Home/Blog/single/id/379.html>

A report by the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) released shortly after Salman's visit concluded that the 2015 international agreement dubbed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to curb Iran's nuclear programme warned that it had "not eliminated the kingdom's desire for nuclear weapons capabilities and even nuclear weapons. ... There is little reason to doubt that Saudi Arabia will more actively seek nuclear weapons capabilities, motivated by its concerns about the ending of the JCPOA's major nuclear limitations starting after year 10 of the deal or sooner if the deal fails," the report said.⁸⁹ Potentially, Saudi Arabia moved closer to that goal with its announcement in 2017 that it planned to extract uranium from its estimated 60,000 tonnes of uranium ore as part of its nuclear power programme in a bid to achieve self-sufficiency in producing atomic fuel.⁹⁰

Perhaps one of the murkiest areas of Sino-Saudi military cooperation was persistent albeit unconfirmed reports of the continued sale of Chinese ballistic missiles and Chinese cruise missiles to the kingdom. Military experts argued that satellite imagery of missile bases in Saudi Arabia and other open-source circumstantial evidence, including Saudi press coverage of graduation ceremonies at the kingdom's Strategic Missile Force School in Wadi ad-Dawasir, appears to confirm the transfers. "Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in conventional ballistic and cruise missiles to provide the kingdom a shot of strategic deterrence," said non-proliferation expert Jeffrey Lewis said.⁹¹ Lewis' conclusion was confirmed by Anwar Eshqi, a retired Saudi major general and advisor to the joint military council of Saudi Arabia. "The Saudi military did indeed receive DF-21 missiles from China and the integration of the missiles, including a full maintenance check and upgraded facilities, is complete," Eshqi said

⁸⁹ Sarah Burkhard, Erica Wenig, David Albright, and Andrea Stricker, Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Ambitions and Proliferation Risks, Institute for Science and International Security, 30 March 2017, http://freebeacon.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/SaudiArabiaProliferationRisks_30Mar2017_Final.pdf

⁹⁰ Sylvia Westall, Saudi Arabia to extract uranium for "self-sufficient" nuclear program, Reuters, 30 October 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-nuclear/saudi-arabia-to-extract-uranium-for-self-sufficient-nuclear-program-idUSKBNICZ1ON>

⁹¹ Sean O'Connor, Saudi ballistic missile site revealed, IHS Jane's Defence Weekly, 10 July 2013 / Jeffrey Lewis, Saudi Arabia's Strategic Dyad, Arms Control Wonk, 15 July 2013, <http://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/206688/saudi-arabias-strategic-dyad/>

Jeffrey Lewis, Why Did Saudi Arabia Buy Chinese Missiles? Foreign Policy, 30 January 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/30/why-did-saudi-arabia-buy-chinese-missiles/>

referring to the Middle Kingdom's East Wind solid-fuel, medium-range ballistic missile.⁹²

In his memoirs, Saudi General Khalid bin Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, a son of the late Saudi crown prince and defence minister, Sultan bin Abdul Aziz al Saud, and commander of the US-led international alliance that forced Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait in 1991, was equally unequivocal:

When our Strategic Missile Force was close to being operational, I wrote an analysis for the high command suggesting that, if our acquisition of Chinese missiles was not detected by November 1988, this would be an advantage; if not by February 1989, this would be greatly in our favour; if, however, it was not detected by June 1989, we should consider leaking the news ourselves as the object of acquiring the weapon would not have been achieved. As it happened we had no need to do so, because the Americans broke the news first,

Bin Sultan said.⁹³

Khalid recalled that in acquiring the CSS-2 it was “my task to negotiate the deal, devise an appropriate deception plan, choose a team of Saudi officers and men and arrange for their reigning in both Saudi Arabia and China, build and defend operation bases and storage facilities in different parts of the kingdom, arrange for the shipment of the missiles from China and, at every stage, be ready to defend the project against sabotage or any form of attack.” Khalid recounted how a young soldier stationed at one of the bases revealed its location to his father over the telephone, unaware that his calls were monitored. The father was convinced that his son was lying about being posted to a secret missile base in the desert. In a bid to plug the breach of operational security, Khalid bought the father off by appointing him as the base's imam.⁹⁴

The transfers highlighted the reversal of China's long-standing caution in its military contacts with the Middle East and North Africa. The 1985 \$3.5 billion deal that was only disclosed three years later, the first ever Saudi military acquisition from China Saudi Arabia, involved 36 CSS-2 East Wind missiles that were known to be highly inaccurate in conven-

⁹²Ali Bin Ghirsan, East Wind strengthens anti-tank and aircraft defense «رياح الشرق» تعزز «تعزيز الدفاع الجوي» (الدبابية) الطائرة «هجومية مدمرة» (ترسانة الردع و), Okaz 17 September 2014, <http://okaz.com.sa/article/946108/>

⁹³Khaled bin Sultan with Patrick Seale, *Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War* by the Joint Forces Commander, New York: HarperCollins, 1995, p. 150

⁹⁴Ibid. Bin Sultan, p. 148

tional use.⁹⁵ Coming five years before the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, it helped China persuade Saudi Arabia to downgrade its relations with Taiwan, buy into Beijing's One China policy, and eventually establish the fiercely anti-communist kingdom's first formal ties to a nominally communist country. The successful Chinese bid exploited the fact that pro-Israeli members of Congress had blocked the sale to the kingdom of US ballistic missiles capable of targeting Israel.

The deal said much about the attitude of Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern and North African states towards China. Saudi Arabia saw the deal as a way to counter Iran's missile strength that in a twist of irony was built on Chinese technology and design, and as leverage to persuade the United States to be more forthcoming with weaponry that had offensive capabilities.⁹⁶ It took China 30 years to persuade Saudi Arabia to acquire the more up-to-date DF-21 missile. China's next goal is selling the kingdom its JF-17 Thunder fighter jet.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Saudi Arabia and China: The Security Dimension*, Middle East Institute, 9 February 2016, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/saudi-arabia-and-china-security-dimension>

⁹⁶ John Calabrese, *Saudi Arabia and China Extend Ties Beyond Oil*, *China Brief*, Vol.5:20, 27 September 2005

⁹⁷ Zachary Keck, *Saudi Arabia May Buy Pakistani-Chinese Fighter Jets*, *The Diplomat*, 24 January 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/01/saudi-arabia-may-buy-pakistani-chinese-fighter-jets/>



Navigating Regional Rivalries and Sensitivities

Chinese President Xi Jinping's January 2016 visit to the Middle East illustrated the increasing degree to which China was walking a tightrope in its efforts to avoid being bogged down and mired in the region's numerous wars, conflicts, disputes, and animosities. That was proving to be a gargantuan, if not impossible, task. While Xi made sure that he visited both Riyadh and Tehran on his Middle East tour, he left little doubt that the lifting of international sanctions against Iran as part of the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear program allowed China to reinforce ties with the Islamic republic, with whom it shared a sense of ancient civilization and history of empire.

Xi's visit to the kingdom was accompanied by talk of brotherly relations and strategic cooperation. The rhetoric however did little to mask serious differences on issues ranging from Syria to Saudi propagation of a puritan and Sunni Muslim ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam that many argue enables radicalization and breeds extremism, a relative decline in Chinese reliance on Saudi oil in favour of Russian product, and the fact that the Gulf figured primarily in the maritime aspect of the Belt and Road initiative while Iran was key to both the sea and land routes.

No doubt, Saudi Arabia's role in thwarting, rolling back, or derailing the 2011 popular Arab revolts strengthened its standing in Beijing, which like the kingdom saw autocratic rule as the best guarantor for stability in the greater Middle East. In ensuring the failure of the revolts, Saudi Arabia, despite its bitter rivalry with the Islamic republic, inadvertently

removed a potential irritant in China's relations with Iran, which saw its 1979 revolution as having grandfathered the revolts. Like Saudi Arabia, China feared the revolt's potential domino effect in Xinjiang and elsewhere in the country. It was against the backdrop of the revolts that Premier Wen Jiabao promised in a series of Internet chats to combat corruption and curb inflation and rising real estate prices.¹ Chinese concern was further evident in increased policing of the web, including the blocking on the Internet of searches using keywords that potentially referred in any way to the Arab revolts.

On the plus side, religious affinity with the Uyghurs, a Turkic Sunni Muslim ethnic group in China's troubled north-western province of Xinjiang, was something China had to worry less about with Shiite-majority Iran, which has long projected itself as a revolutionary not a sectarian power. Although hampered by sect and language with Farsi rather than Arabic being Iran's lingua franca, Iranian organizations nevertheless established a small number of religious seminaries or madrassahs in Xinjiang without going through official channels and clandestinely invited Uyghurs to pursue their studies in Iran.²

China was quick to make clear to post-revolution Iran that cooperation would depend on strict adherence to the principle of non-interference, which included a halt to the Islamic republic's religious activity in Xinjiang. The eruption in September 1980 of the Iran-Iraq war, which supplanted Iran's initial revolutionary zeal with more nationalist sentiments, drove the point home. China further benefited from a dearth of knowledge about the People's Republic among Iranian leaders and used its Muslim community to paint a picture of a Chinese Muslim community that enjoyed unfettered freedom of religion. To drive the point home, China nominated Al-hajj Mohammad Ali Zhang Jie, the deputy chief of the official China Islamic Association, to head the first official Chinese delegation to visit Iran a year after the revolution.³

Xi hoped that close ties with non-Arab Muslim nations such as those in Central Asia as well as Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey would nudge Uyghurs to follow the path of China's Hui Muslims, together with Uyghurs China's largest Muslim community, who have assimilated into society by adopting a form of Islam that has Chinese characteristics. His hopes regarding Iran

¹ Keith B. Richburg, China tamps down Middle East-inspired protests before they can gain momentum, *The Washington Post*, 28 February 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/27/AR2011022700606.html>

² John W. Garver, *China & Iran, Ancient Partners in a Post-imperial World*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006, p. 132

³ *Ibid.* Garver, p. 67

were grounded in China's perception of the country following the toppling of the shah in the 1979 Islamic revolution. The revolution coincided with the launch of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening policy that was intended to modernize China. Iran, beyond the revolutionary rhetoric it shared with China, claims to defend the oppressed, and opposition to US imperialism. Its elite Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), modelled on China's Red Guard, saw mileage in exploiting differences between Beijing and Washington over Taiwan.⁴

China's perception of a communality of values and interests was reinforced by a shared concern about the resurgence of the Taliban and the flow of drugs from Afghanistan. China, moreover, supported the Iranian-backed regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and favoured Russian intervention in Syria to prop up the Assad government—a position that put it at odds with Saudi Arabia that long backed the anti-government rebels. Russian and US airstrikes against Saudi-backed Islamists and jihadists allowed Syrian and Kurdish forces to gain increasing control of much of Syria's borders, making it more difficult for Uyghurs from northwest China to find their way to Syria. In addition, Chinese hopes that Shiism could serve as an anti-dote to Saudi-inspired Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism, the prime anti-Chinese mobilizer in Xinjiang in Beijing's view, further paved the way for close Chinese-Iranian cooperation in areas ranging from Chinese support for the development of an Iranian missile and nuclear industry to the creation of transportation links across Central Asia.⁵

The notion of shared revolutionary values with Iran and Shiism's potential in offering Uyghurs an alternative perspective paved the way for a watershed visit to Xinjiang in 1992 by then Iranian President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani during which he signed agreements to link Iran and northwest China by air and with a railway that would traverse Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.⁶ In Kashgar's Etkar mosque, Uyghurs and Central Asians welcomed Rafsanjani as a rock star.⁷

⁴Baris Adibelli, *Sino-Iranian Relations since the Cold War in Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Yukiko Miyagi, The Emerging Middle East—East Asia Nexus*, New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 112–113

⁵James M. Dorsey, *China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, WP 296, 18 March 2016, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/wp296/>

⁶Michael Dillon, *The Middle East and China*, in Hannah Carter and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds), *The Middle East's Relations with Asia and Russia*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 51

⁷*Ibid.* Dillon, p. 51

A visit to the region five years later by reformist Iranian President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami in the wake of a Uyghur uprising highlighted Iran's initial ability to influence Chinese policy. China at first acceded to Khatami's request to reopen mosques that had been closed because of suspicion that they were centres of radicalism. China also loosened restrictions it had placed on communal prayers but maintained its efforts to cut links between the Uyghurs and groups in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley, Afghanistan, and Pakistan that it blamed for growing militancy in its north-western province.⁸ Fallout from the militant Uyghur presence ultimately contributed to Iranian advocacy of a more inclusive Chinese approach that fell on deaf ears in Beijing as China reverted to a policy that aimed to restrict Uyghur religious and cultural identity and squash nationalist sentiment.

In contrast to Iran, Chinese officials worried that alleged Saudi funding of Islamic seminaries in Xinjiang and scholarships for study in the kingdom made available to Chinese Muslims were encouraging Uyghur militancy. Lack of religious educational opportunity in China increased the appeal of Saudi offers and fostered the emergence of underground networks by Uyghurs, a Turkic people, who resented discrimination, repression, and the dilution of their majority status in Xinjiang or New Frontier, by Chinese Han immigration. It also helped spark intermittent political violence as part of a low-intensity campaign for equal rights and autonomy, if not independence. The networks established dozens of Islamic colleges at a time that the government officially sanctioned only one.⁹ Chinese officials said they were discovering and closing scores of clandestine seminaries every month.¹⁰

The Uyghurs' long-standing refusal to be assimilated in much the same way that their Muslim Hui cousins have melted into the fabric of Chinese society amounts to a potential time bomb that could blow a huge hole in the Belt and Road initiative. China hopes that the Chinese-built infrastructure in Pakistan and Central Asia that would create commercial corridors to neighbouring countries such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan will increase interdependency and spur economic development in Xinjiang. A job boom in

⁸Baris Adibelli, *Cin'in Diplomatik Yenilgisi (The Diplomatic Defeat of China)*, *Cumhuriyet Strateji*, No. 110, 7 August 2006, pp. 18–19

⁹Wai-Yip Ho, *Islam and China's Hong Kong: Ethnic Identity, Muslim Networks and the new Silk Road*, New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 85–87

¹⁰Interviews with the author, 20–24 October 2017

Xinjiang, fuelled by the infrastructure development, would allow the government to accelerate the dilution of Uyghurs through the immigration of non-Uyghurs.

Analysing trade statistics, researchers Raffaello Pantucci and Anna Sophia Young concluded that the Chinese strategy was not working. “So far, the results have been underwhelming ... Xinjiang’s trade volume has not increased, and it still constitutes an unchanging portion of total Chinese trade with Central Asia,” Pantucci and Young said after looking at Xinjiang’s trade with Central Asia in the years between 2007 and 2015. The scholars argued that the Belt and Road initiative had added little to Xinjiang’s already existing regional trade relationships that were dominated by energy and commodities.¹¹

China’s social engineering in Xinjiang constituted an attempt to learn from experience in recent history. The opening in 1979, the year of Iran’s Islamic revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, of the Karakoram highway connecting Xinjiang with Pakistan’s region of Gilgit-Baltistan had unintended side effects. It promoted not only increased traffic of people and goods but also of Islamic awareness and militant forms of the faith. The highway facilitated travel and communication of Uyghur militants who were educated in Pakistani madrassahs that often served as recruiting grounds for fighters in the Islamist resistance against the Soviets in Afghanistan as well as the 2001 US-led invasion of the country.¹² In a further twist of irony, some of those fighters were trained by China itself as part of its desire to make life difficult for the Soviets.¹³

China’s stakes in Xinjiang go, however, far beyond wanting absolute control and concern that acknowledging Uyghurs as an ethnic minority could fuel nationalism and/or prompt others to make similar demands. Xinjiang is home to key resources and military facilities. It hosts 15% of China’s proven oil reserves, 22% of its gas reserves, and 115 of the 147 raw materials found in the People’s Republic.¹⁴ With 2800 kilometres of

¹¹ Raffaello Pantucci and Anna Sophia Young, Xinjiang trade raises doubts over China’s “Belt and Road” plan, Financial Times, 10 August 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/dd55c5e4-ba94-33b2-bcaf-c6d4dc042824>

¹² Ziad Haider, Sino-Pakistan Relations and Xinjiang’s Uighurs: Politics, Trade and Islam along the Karakoram Highway, Asian Survey, Vol. XLV:4, pp. 522–545

¹³ John Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America, and International Terrorism*, London: Pluto Press, 2002, pp. 57–58

¹⁴ Stephen Blank, Xinjiang and China’s security, Global Economic Review, Vol. 32:4, pp. 121–148.

border with Central Asian nations, Xinjiang is China's gateway to Eurasia. Its 1.6 million square kilometres account for 16.6% of China's territorial landmass on which China has built some of its most sensitive military facilities, including its nuclear arsenal.

The threat turned from perception to reality when Chinese police aided by satellite images captured by China's National Space Administration detected in August 2014 dozens of cross-border tunnels in Xinjiang that could facilitate the infiltration of operatives of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and other militant Uyghur groups.¹⁵ The tunnels raised the spectre of militants gaining access to nuclear weapons stored in tunnels under the Xinjiang capital of Urumqi as well as under the Lop Nur nuclear weapons testing facility, a former salt lake in the southeast of the province.¹⁶

The threat perception also went a long way to explain why Chinese concerns went beyond what happens in Xinjiang itself and its efforts to counter militant Uyghur ability to operate from neighbouring countries. Those concerns were heightened when a US drone in 2012 seriously wounded militant Uyghur leader Abdul Haq al-Turkistani, a member of al-Qaeda's executive council and emir of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), in the border regions of Pakistan.¹⁷ US-led forces had earlier captured Uyghurs fighting against coalition forces in Afghanistan, some two dozen of whom were imprisoned in Guantanamo.

Chinese fears were also reaffirmed when it emerged that of the 15 non-Afghans killed in 2008 in fierce fighting between Pakistani security forces and militant Islamists holed up in Islamabad's Lal Masjid or Red Mosque, 12 had been Uyghur men and women.¹⁸ China had earlier blamed Uyghurs for the kidnapping of seven Chinese nationals in an Islamabad massage parlour in 2007 by militants associated with Jamia Hafsa, a madrassah

¹⁵China Radio International English, Satellite Spots Cross-border Tunnels, 25 August 2014, <http://english.cri.cn/12394/2014/08/25/2281s841656.htm>

¹⁶Eli Jacobs, China's Underground "Great Wall": A Success for Nuclear Primacy, Center for International and Strategic Studies, 25 October 2011, <https://csis.org/blog/chinas-underground-great-wall-success-nuclear-primacy>

¹⁷Bill Roggio, Turkistan Islamic Party emir thought killed in 2010 reemerged to lead group in 2014, The Long War Journal, 11 June 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/turkistan-islamic-party-emir-thought-killed-in-2010-reemerged-to-lead-group-in-2014.php>

¹⁸Ravi Shekhar Narain Singh Singh, The Military Factor in Pakistan, New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 2008, p. 426

located in the Pakistani capital not far from the Red Mosque.¹⁹ The incident sparked high-level Chinese pressure on Pakistan to crack down on the militants and was widely seen as paving the way for the subsequent siege of the Red Mosque in which more than 100 people died.

The Islamic State (IS)'s caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, put China on alert in 2014 by identifying what he termed East Turkistan as one of the group's target areas and listed the People's Republic at the top of his list of countries that violate Muslim rights.²⁰ Maps circulating at the time on Twitter purporting to highlight the group's expansion plans included substantial parts of Xinjiang.²¹ Al-Qaeda expressed a similar attitude, condemning Chinese policy towards Xinjiang as "occupied Muslim land" to be "recovered [into] the shade of the Islamic Caliphate."²²

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State's targeting of China followed the failure of ultra-conservative Muslim scholars with close links to jihadist groups to convince the People's Republic that resolving its problems in Xinjiang by addressing Uyghur grievances would allow it to reduce the global influence of the West. "Today it is our duty to stand with the plight of the Uyghur Muslims against Chinese repression (a) because this is our duty with all the Muslim people, (b) to send a strong message from our nation to China that the persecution of Muslims in China will only benefit the West, which will take advantage of this racial discrimination in order to deepen the hostility between China and the Islamic world," said Hamid Al-Ali, a Kuwaiti Salafi cleric, whom the US Treasury has described as an al-Qaeda facilitator and fundraiser.²³

The Islamic State and al-Qaeda threats added to the pressure on Beijing to ensure the safety and security of China's massive overseas investments and large number of nationals overseas. Militant Uyghur groups, not all associated with the global jihadists, have over the last two decades attacked

¹⁹ B. Raman, How China Forced Musharraf To Move, Outlook, 4 July 2007, <http://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/how-china-forced-musharraf-to-move/235015>

²⁰ Suhaib Anjarini, Al-Baghdadi following in bin Laden's footsteps, Al Akhbar English, 2 July 2014, <https://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20400>

²¹ Don Mackay, ISIS Militants in Iraq Proclaim New Islamic State and Pose Threat to All Countries, Mirror, 30 June 2014, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/isis-militants-iraq-proclaim-new-3790221> / https://twitter.com/Third_Position

²² James Griffiths, Al-Qaeda magazine calls for Xinjiang to be "recovered by the Islamic Caliphate," October 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1621190/new-al-qaeda-magazine-calls-xinjiang-be-recovered-islamic-caliphate/> https://twitter.com/Third_Position/status/478626230418173952/photo/1

²³ Al-Tamimi, *China-Saudi Arabia Relations*, pp. 92–93

Chinese targets, including diplomatic missions, companies, pro-Chinese activists, businessmen, and workers. Al-Qaeda moreover vowed that it would take revenge for 180 reported Uyghur deaths in the worst ethnic riots in the region since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949²⁴ by attacking Chinese workers in Algeria and sub-Saharan Africa.²⁵

The Islamic State targeted Iraq's northern oil resources in a bid to secure revenue streams and to weaken the Baghdad government economically and strategically. China has invested heavily in Iraq's energy sector. China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (COPCO), also known as Sinopec Limited, has stakes in oil fields in Iraqi Kurdistan, while state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has interests in multiple fields in the south.²⁶ Two Uyghurs were sentenced in Dubai in 2010 to lengthy prison terms on charges of planning to attack the emirate's Dragon Mart, a popular Chinese shopping centre.²⁷ "The stability of the Middle East, an important link on the new Silk Road, is crucial to the success of this economic structure and the cooperation between China and the region," said Li Haidong, a scholar at Beijing's China Foreign Affairs University.²⁸

China hopes that economic growth in Pakistan as well as a resolution of conflict in Afghanistan or at least an understanding with the Taliban will contribute to steering Uyghurs in Xinjiang towards the Hui model remain in the realm of wishful thinking. An attack in March 2014 in which knife-wielding Uyghur militants stabbed passengers at random in Yunnan's Kunming train station, killing more than 30 and injuring more than 140, points in the opposite direction. The attack, one of a series of

²⁴The Economist, The riots in Xinjiang: Is China fraying? 9 July 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/13988479>

²⁵Malcolm Moore, Al Qaeda vows revenge on China over Uighur deaths, The Telegraph, 14 July 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/5822791/Al-Qaeda-vows-revenge-on-China-over-Uighur-deaths.html>

²⁶Zachary Keck, China Doubles Down on Iraqi Oil Gamble, The Diplomat, 18 October 2013, Bree Feng and Edward Wong, China Keeps a Close Eye on Oil Interests in Iraq, *The New York Times*, 17 June 2014, http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/china-keeps-a-close-eye-on-oil-interests-in-iraq/?_r=0

²⁷Hassan Hassan, Revealed: the plot to blow up Dragon Mart, The National, 9 July 2010, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/courts/revealed-the-plot-to-blow-up-dragonmart#full>

²⁸Pu Zhendong, Rise of ISIS surpasses other Middle East chaos, China Daily USA, 4 September 2014, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2014-09/04/content_18546632.htm

violent incidents in recent years, was one of the ten deadliest in China's recent history.

News that the attackers had resided for a period in Shadian, a largely Hui city that hosts a house of worship modelled on Medina's Nabawi mosque that was originally built by the Prophet Mohammed, prompted large numbers of the country's majority Han Chinese to portray the city as China's Islamic State. Some depicted Shadian as evidence of the risk involved in allowing too many Muslims to congregate in one place and granting them too much freedom. "Can these yellow-skinned Arabs stop disgusting us Chinese people? We know that *huaxia* (a Han concept of Chinese civilization) is a pile of shit in your hearts. Why are you still here?" one commenter charged. In response, the government sought to showcase its authority and project the Hui as part of China by planting flags in front of mosques, painting green roofs white, and expelling from Yunnan religious students and teachers from other provinces as well as hundreds of Uyghurs.²⁹

The emergence of the militants and ultra-conservatives spoke to the risks involved in China's approach towards Xinjiang that has significantly hardened in recent years with the opening of re-education camps and ever more intrusive surveillance. Despite playing at times both ends against the middle, China refused to recognize the role Islam plays in Uyghur life, identity, and social relations as well as its importance in Uyghur history.³⁰ Islam is a key player in the Uyghurs' coming to grips with modernity, a development that many Uyghurs saw as alien and designed to favour the country's majority Han.

Uyghur demands for independence date back to a century after China's Qing dynasty completed its annexation of what is now Xinjiang when in 1865 Muhammad Yaqub Beg, a Tajik chieftain, led an uprising. Exploiting a Hui revolt in the region, Beg initially captured Kashgar and Yarkand. His fierce resistance, grounded in religious and ethnic identity, won him diplomatic recognition from the Ottomans, Russia, and Britain. Ottoman military officers served as Yaqub Beg's advisors and supplied him with arms.³¹ He was nonetheless defeated by China's armies 12 years after he launched the revolt.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ James M. Dorsey, *China's Uighurs: A Potential Time Bomb* in James Reardon-Anderson, *The Red Star and the Crescent*, London: Hurst, 2017, pp. 241–259

³¹ Hodong Kim, *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864–1877*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004)

China's refusal to acknowledge the link between religion and ethnicity in Uyghur identity and its policy aimed at forced assimilation produced a vicious circle in which acculturation was identified with foreign domination and refusal to become Chinese led to cultural and economic marginalization. The vicious circle meant that areas in which Uyghurs were willing to accommodate narrowed. Uyghur willingness, for example, to accept Chinese control of Islam through the training and nomination of imams and the censoring of sermons was undermined by government repression of cultural and religious expression that went beyond political control to the core of being able to practise the faith.³²

The result was a return to more literal interpretations of Islam that positioned the faith as an anchor of identity and a bastion of resistance to foreign encroachment and reinforced what China saw as the three forces of evil: ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and international terrorism. Chinese scholars Yufan Hao and Weihua Liu, in a reflection of China's approach, asserted that "the direct international threat to Xinjiang is Pan-Turkism along with Pan-Islamism."³³ The vicious circle further weakened Beijing's ability to capitalize on advances it had achieved, including the fact that an increasing number of Uyghurs spoke Mandarin and had integrated into Chinese political and economic networks. Those advances translated into a majority of Uyghur's desire for greater cultural and political autonomy rather than secession.³⁴

China's inability to capitalize on its successes instead of focussing on countering militancy contributed to rising Uyghur resentment. "We are very worried about this. We are worried that young Chinese will go through Turkey to Syria and then come back to China," said Pan Guang, director of the Shanghai Center for International Studies and Institute of European & Asian Studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.³⁵ Concern about Xinjiang alongside the principle of non-intervention also informed Chinese opposition to Western, Gulf, and Iranian military aid to rebel groups in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. It further prompted China to significantly expand its

³² Ibid. Dorsey

³³ Yufan Hao and Weihua Liu, Xinjiang, increasing pain in the heartland of China's borderland, *Journal of Contemporary China*. Vol. 21:74, pp. 205–225

³⁴ Sebastien Peyrouse, Security And Islam In Asia: Lessons From China's Uighur Minority, FRIDE, 18 July 2011, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/28072011-security-and-islam-in-asia-lessons-from-china%E2%80%99s-Uighur-minority/>

³⁵ Pan Guang, Keynote Speech at International Conference on China in the Middle East, Indiana University and Peking University, Beijing, 17–18 March 2015

international cooperation on counterterrorism through regional frameworks like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and in its bilateral relations.

Adudulkrep Tumniaz, deputy director of the Xinjiang Islamic Association, warned that a lack of respected Chinese Muslim leaders had put the country at a disadvantage in its ideological battle with IS. “If the religious leaders compete with the extremists on Islamic knowledge, I cannot guarantee that they would win. That’s what worries me. The extremists often start by teaching people about the parts of the Qur’an—Islam’s holy book—that have never been mentioned by their imams and then inject violent thoughts in people by misinterpreting doctrines,” Tumniaz said.³⁶

Two Chinese white papers on religion and Xinjiang seemed to fail to consider realities on the ground. The first one, entitled “Historical Witness to Ethnic Equality, Unity and Development in Xinjiang” and published in September 2015, focussed on improving living conditions in the region, emphasized ethnic equality, opposed any form of ethnic oppression or discrimination, and vowed to eliminate “ethnic misunderstandings carried over from the past.”³⁷ The second, made public almost a year later on the eve of Ramadan and in advance of the seventh anniversary of the 2009 riots, insisted that “respect for and protection of freedom of religious belief is a long-term basic national policy of the Chinese government.” The paper was part of a broader government effort to win the hearts and minds in Xinjiang that involved instructing the military to learn local Uyghur folk songs and dances and sending thousands of cadres to the region to befriend local villagers to “explain the party’s ethnic and religious policies ... and refute rumours.”³⁸ In a statement to the People’s Liberation Army Daily, the Communist Party committee for the Xinjiang military said that “with face-to-face communication and heart-to-heart exchanges (we can) increase ethnic unity and feelings, like the closeness between fish and water.”³⁹

³⁶Ucan, China Losing Battle Against Extremist Islamic Teachings, *Says Muslim Official*, Eurasia Review, 30 March 2015, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/30032015-china-losing-battle-against-extremist-islamic-teachings-says-muslim-official/>

³⁷Xinhuanet, Full Text: Historical Witness to Ethnic Equality, Unity and Development in Xinjiang, 25 September 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-09/24/c_134655252.htm

³⁸South China Morning Post, China’s military in restive Xinjiang told to learn Uyghur folk songs and dances, 16 September 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1858710/chinas-military-restive-xinjiang-told-learn-uyghur-folk>

³⁹Ibid.

The paper asserted that the government's approach to the region was in accordance with China's constitution. "No citizen suffers discrimination or unfair treatment for believing in, or not believing in, any religion," the paper said. It said the government respected religious customs and did not interfere with a restaurant owner's decision on whether to open his establishment for business during Ramadan. The government had also allocated funds for the renovation of historic mosques and other sites as well as "to protect and edit" the Qur'an and a biography of the Prophet Mohammed, the translation of other historic religious texts, and the training of clerical personnel, the paper said.⁴⁰

It said the government managed religious affairs in accordance with laws and regulations "protecting the legal, stopping the illegal, containing the extreme, resisting infiltration, and combating crimes." Insisting that "no Xinjiang citizen has been punished because of his or her rightful religious belief," the paper noted that individuals and organization were banned "from splitting the country, disseminating extremist religious thoughts, inciting ethnic hatred, undermining national unity, disturbing the social order, or impairing citizens' physical and mental health in the name of religion."⁴¹

The paper blamed "religious extremism" in Xinjiang, which it defined as "anti-human, anti-society, anti-civilization and anti-religion," "an important ideological foundation for violent and terrorist activities," and "the common enemy of all humanity," on radical foreign influences. "The Chinese government resolutely opposes the politicization of religious matters and any other country's interference in China's internal affairs in the name of religion," the paper said.⁴²

Xinjiang's "de-extremization" policy had contained the spread of religious extremism, the paper said. It said that Xinjiang's religious leaders guided "believers to master advanced technologies, participate in economic construction and improve living conditions. They encourage religious believers to become better off through diligent work, for instance, contract of land, setting up businesses, planting, animal breeding, transportation and food processing. They hold demonstrations to introduce experiences of achieving prosperity through hard work and hold up model households as examples," the paper reported.⁴³

⁴⁰ State Council Information Office, Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang, 2 June 2016, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7238246.htm

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

Uyghur activists dismissed the paper as government propaganda. They noted that males had to be 18 years of age before they could enter mosques and that all places of worship needed to be licenced by the government. Uyghur exiles said that despite the white paper authorities had detained people calling for compliance with the Ramadan fast. They said sermons during Ramadan had to be vetted before being delivered in mosques.⁴⁴ “The government is not giving Uyghurs their constitutionally guaranteed rights. They are cracking down brutally and lumping Uyghurs with Islamic extremists in Xinjiang and abroad. It is a policy that radicalizes people by forcing Uyghurs to give up their way of life to be accepted as Chinese citizens. Uyghurs want to be left alone,” said Nury A. Turkel, a Washington-based lawyer and leader of the Uyghur Human Rights Project.⁴⁵

Five people, including a warden of Uyghur descent, were killed in a juvenile prison in Xinjiang in a riot, days before the white paper was issued. The incident occurred when up to 60 inmates attacked wardens in response to the harsh disciplining of a prisoner who had been praying. A notice in a police department said that ten prisoners had escaped during the riot. Many of the inmates were sentenced for endangering state security and watching religious films on cell phones.⁴⁶

Uyghur students at Kashgar Normal University reported as early as 2014 that they had been forced to share a meal with their professors during Ramadan to demonstrate that they were not fasting. Students who refused received official warnings and risked not obtaining their degrees. “Most of us would like to fast. But with the current situation most of us have decided against it,” one of the students said. “If you want a normal life here then you’d better not fast,” said another. The students said fasting had been banned at all universities in Xinjiang. A similar ban was imposed on civil servants. At least one government hospital obliged its staff to sign a pledge that they would not observe the daytime fast. State-run newspapers ran articles and editorials warning of about the health dangers of

⁴⁴ Qiao Long, China Enters Ramadan With Round-The-Clock Surveillance of Mosques, Uighurs, Radio Free Asia, 6 June 2016, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/Uighur/ramadan-06062016113750.html>

⁴⁵ Interview with the author, 3 June 2016

⁴⁶ Shohret Hoshur, At Least Five Dead in Uighur Prisoner Uprising, Radio Free Asia, 1 June 2016, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/Uighur/at-lesat-five-06012016164430.html>

refraining from eating and drinking.⁴⁷ At about the same time, authorities in various parts of Xinjiang banned the wearing of face-covering veils by women in public.⁴⁸

Betting on the Belt and Road's expected economic impact on Xinjiang was but one leg of a three-prong Chinese policy that aimed to fundamentally alter Uyghur identity in a bid to turn them into a religious rather than an ethnic minority. Repression and criminalization of expressions of Uyghur national identity, of which religion is an integral part, constituted the two other legs. At stake were the terms on which Uyghurs would be integrated into a majority Han society and on which the two groups would interact.⁴⁹ Uyghurs resisted the Chinese policy framework based on the three evils that risked further alienating and radicalizing Uyghurs who turned to Saudi-inspired militant interpretations of Islam. It also complicated achievement of China's foreign policy goals anchored in the Belt and Road initiative and demonstrated limitations to China's economics-driven ability to impose its will on others.

Uyghurs, Turkic rather than Chinese speakers, account for 46% of Xinjiang's 22 million inhabitants and together with their cousins of Central Asian and Tartar origin for 52%.⁵⁰ While still the largest group in Xinjiang, Uyghurs have seen their relative numbers dwindle over the decades as the result of a government effort to marginalize them in their own homeland. Economic policy aimed at fuelling growth favoured the country's Han majority. Han, who once accounted for a mere 5% of the region's population, constitute today Xinjiang's second largest ethnic group with 40%.⁵¹

The Uyghurs' disenfranchisement was evident in statistics quoted by the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region's census office. The numbers showed that the percentage of Uyghurs working in agriculture, 80.51%, was higher than the national average of 61.6% and far higher than the

⁴⁷ Martin Patience, China Xinjiang: Muslim students 'made to eat' at Ramadan, BBC News, 11 July 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-28263496>

⁴⁸ Jeremy Page and Josh Chin, Xinjiang Authorities Ban Wearing of Face-Covering Veils, The Wall Street Journal, 11 December 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/xinjiang-authorities-ban-wearing-of-face-covering-veils-1418303682>

⁴⁹ Ibid. Dorsey

⁵⁰ Stanley Toops, Spatial Results of the 2010 Census in Xinjiang, University of Nottingham China Blog, 7 March 2016, <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicy-institute/2016/03/07/spatial-results-of-the-2010-census-in-xinjiang/>

⁵¹ Christopher M. Clarke, Xinjiang—Where China's Worry Intersects the World, YaleGlobal, 19 March 2012, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/xinjiang-where-chinas-worry-intersects-world>

36.7% among Han in the region. Similarly, only 5.3% of the Uyghur had moved into professional and technical jobs, while 11.1% of Han had graduated into those slots. The same was true for managerial and administrative jobs. Less than 1% of the Uyghur workforce occupied such positions as opposed to 3.9% of the Han labour force.⁵²

Demographics matter in a region in which Urumqi and other major cities like Kashgar are far closer to Central Asia than they are to Beijing. Urumqi is 2400 kilometres from Beijing but only 1000 kilometres from the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek and 1800 kilometres from Kabul. Further west, Kashgar is a mere 400 kilometres from Bishkek and 800 kilometres from Kabul. To compensate for this geostrategic weakness in what Beijing considers its soft belly, China enhanced its grip on Xinjiang in the 1980s and 1990s with the dispatch to the region of the Han paramilitary Xinjiang Construction and Production Corps. Initially focussed on securing China's borders, the Corps took control of 48% of Xinjiang's land.⁵³ It has since the demise of the Soviet Union and the eruption of Uyghur protests expanded its focus to include the quelling of domestic unrest.⁵⁴

The ethnic and religious tensions ensuing from Chinese policy in Xinjiang go to the core of the country's national and security interests and the People's Republic's ability to project itself in Central and South Asia. While ethnic unrest in Xinjiang has a long pedigree, Chinese concern about the region has risen on Beijing's list of priorities since the demise of the Soviet Union, the gaining of independence of Central Asian nations with ethnic and cultural affinity to the Uyghurs, and the rise of Islamism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵⁵ It is likely to increase as competition with the United States, Russia, and India for influence and resources mounts in Central Asia, a region with which many associate Xinjiang and that a British geographer described already in the early twentieth century as a "geographical pivot of history."⁵⁶

⁵² Population Census Office of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, Tabulation on the 2000 Population Census of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 2002, quoted in Yufan Hao and Weiha Liu, Xinjiang, increasing pain in the heartland of China's borderland, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 21:74, pp. 205–225

⁵³ Nicholas Becqueline, Xinjiang in the Nineties, *The China Journal*, No. 44, pp. 65–90

⁵⁴ Nicholas Becqueline, Staged Development in Xinjiang, *The China Quarterly*, No. 178, pp. 358–378

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Dorsey

⁵⁶ Halford J. Mackinder, "The geographical pivot of history," *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 23:4, pp. 421–437

Chinese policymakers hope that infrastructure development in Central Asia and Pakistan coupled with hundreds of millions of dollars of investment in Xinjiang will provide an incentive to Uyghurs to model themselves on Hui Muslims in the province of Yunnan and elsewhere in China. The Hui pride themselves on their Islam with Chinese characteristics, a blend of Islamic and Confucian principles that has encouraged them to identify as Chinese, albeit a Chinese minority. Assimilation has allowed Hui Muslims to become successful businessmen with significant interests in mining despite a history of massacres dating back to the nineteenth century and a memorial in the city of Shadian in Yunnan Province that commemorates those killed during the Cultural Revolution in 1975 by the People's Liberation Army.⁵⁷

China's problem is that in contrast to the Hui, Uyghurs have always identified themselves as Central Asians rather than Chinese or in other words as an ethnic minority. As a result, Uyghur nationalists argued that Chinese efforts to weaken their identity through repression and strict control of religious practices were backfiring. Rather than turning Uyghurs into compliant Chinese citizens, government policy was fuelling political and religious radicalism. In response, China's internal security budget has surpassed that of its military every year since it put down the 2009 uprising.⁵⁸

I travelled throughout East Turkistan until I was forced to leave in 1994. There was no radicalization. I had no idea who was a Sunni, a Shia or a Sufi. Imams would go to the opera. There was dancing and singing. That started to change in the 1990s when religious schools began to be closed and the first restrictions on religious freedom were imposed. Students at the time were returning from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan with Wahhabi ideology. Those who had been in Egypt were influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood. Repression is at the root of religious conservatism and political radicalization,

said Dolkun Isa, secretary of the World Uyghur Council (WUC), an exile group that opposes what it terms Chinese occupation of East Turkistan.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Alice Su, *Harmony and Martyrdom Among China's Hui Muslims*, *The New Yorker*, 6 June 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/harmony-and-martyrdom-among-chinas-hui-muslims>

⁵⁸ Christina Y. Lin, *ISIS Caliphate Meets China's Silk Road Economic Belt*, IDC Herzliya Rubin Center, 15 February 2015, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2015/02/isis-caliphate-meets-chinas-silk-road-economic-belt/>

⁵⁹ Interview with the author, 24 June 2016

The returning students often saw their religious credentials enhanced by the fact that government-employed imams were lacking in their religious knowledge.⁶⁰ Contributing to radicalization was a repressive policy starting in the mid-1990s that saw an Uyghur in Xinjiang executed on average every four days.⁶¹

In the process, Uyghurs joined the ranks of the Taliban, some of whom were believed to be responsible for attacks in Xinjiang.⁶² Militant Chinese Muslims have since expanded their international links beyond the Taliban and increased their popularity among Uyghurs as well as some Hui Muslims who adhere to the most puritan schools of Islam, Wahhabism, Salafism, and jihadism.⁶³ Up to 1000 Uyghurs are believed to have joined IS as of 2015. By 2017, estimates increased to as many as 5000. That is up from an estimate by the *Global Times*, a state-owned Chinese paper, of 300 in 2014.⁶⁴

A video posted on YouTube by a user who identified himself as ayahm84 that has since been removed featured a purported Chinese fighter in Syria brandishing a Kalashnikov. Subtitling named the fighter as Bo Wang, who speaking in Mandarin said he had been studying in Libya before joining the struggle to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria.⁶⁵ The Iraqi defence ministry posted on its Facebook page in September 2014 a picture of an Asian man with a bruised and bloodied face. It said the man was a Chinese Islamic State fighter captured by Iraqi forces.⁶⁶

Islamic State published a video in October 2014 with Chinese subtitles claiming that it portrayed “a Chinese brother before he did a martyrdom operation (suicide bomb attack) in the town of Suleiman.”⁶⁷ Muhammed

⁶⁰World Uighur Congress, “Seeking A Place to Breathe Freely, Current Challenges Faced by Uighur Refugees & Asylum Seekers,” June 2016, http://www.Uighurcongress.org/en/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/WUC-Seeking-a-Place-to-Breathe-Freely-June-2016.pdf

⁶¹Joshua Tschantret, *Repression, opportunity and innovation: The evolution of terrorism in Xinjiang, China, Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 28:4

⁶²Ahmed Rashid, *Why Pakistan is Sinking*, *The New York Review of Books*, 2 April 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/04/02/fierce-pressures-facing-pakistan/>

⁶³Ibid. Fardelli

⁶⁴Qiu Yongzheng, *Turkey’s ambiguous policies help terrorists join IS jihadist group: analyst*, *Global Times*, 15 December 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/896765.shtml>

⁶⁵<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hTJr9rgCx0&utm> (no longer accessible)

⁶⁶Iraqi Ministry of Defense, Facebook, 2 September 2014, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=731771496858619&id=611071662261937

⁶⁷Ibid. Yongzheng

Amin, an 80-year-old Uyghur-speaking cleric from Xinjiang, called on Muslims in a 15-minute video published by IS in July 2015 to join the group and kill “Chinese infidels.”⁶⁸

The video also featured a classroom filled with Uyghur boys dressed in headgear bearing the black-and-white Islamic State logo. One of the boys pointed to the group’s flag as he pledged: “O Chinese infidels ... we will come to you and raise this flag in Turkestan.”⁶⁹ In December 2015, IS’s foreign-language media arm, Al-Hayat Media Center, distributed a chant in Mandarin exhorting Muslims to revolt.⁷⁰ Islamic State greeted 2016 by hacking the website of Tsinghua University, one of China’s most prestigious educational institutions, with a call to jihad.⁷¹

Chinese media have accused Turkey, historically a refuge for Uyghur nationalists who long saw secular Turkish nationalism as a model that has since been pushed aside by militant Islamic ideology, and Syria of supporting and training Xinjiang militants recruited by the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Istanbul-based East Turkistan Educational and Solidarity Association (ETESA).⁷² Pictures on the Chinese website Guancha and in the Daily Mail suggested that Chinese nationals had also joined Kurdish Peshmerga forces fighting the Islamic State. The pictures showed what appeared to be a Chinese male holding an automatic weapon and Chinese graffiti on a wall.⁷³ In its first detailed listing of Xinjiang-related incidents of violence, China asserted in 2002 that ETIM was “supported and funded” by al-Qaeda.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Heavy, WATCH: 80-Year-Old ISIS Soldier Gives Interview, 2 June 2015, <http://heavy.com/news/2015/06/oldest-islamic-state-isis-soldier-interview-video-turkestan-youtube-video/>

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Aaron Y. Zelin, New nashīd from The Islamic State: “Mujāhid,” Jihadology, 2 December 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/12/06/new-nashid-from-the-islamic-state-mujahid/>

⁷¹ Stephen Chen, “Islamic State hackers” attack top tier Chinese university’s website urging holy war, South China Morning Post, 18 January 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1902268/islamic-state-hackers-attack-top-tier-chinese>

⁷² Lin Meilian, Xinjiang Terrorists Finding Training, Support in Syria, Turkey, Global Times, 1 July 2013, <https://services.globaltimes.cn/epaper/2013-07-02/2F27552.htm>

⁷³ John Hall, Meet the Peshmerga’s International Brigade: From IT workers to ex-soldiers, the men from the West teaming up with Kurdish forces to fight ISIS, The Daily Mail, 21 April 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3049019/Peshmerga-s-foreign-legion-fighting-alongside-defeat-ISIS-workers-ex-soldiers-brave-men-world-teaming-Kurdish-forces.html>

⁷⁴ Information Office of State Council, “East Turkistan” Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity, 21 January 2002, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Jan/25582.htm>

Chinese analysts have compared the presence of Uyghur nationalists and Islamists in Turkey to the Taliban's harbouring of Osama bin Laden.⁷⁵ Chinese officials, hoping to exploit Turkey's conflict with the Kurds, also insisted in discussions with their Turkish counterparts over the last two decades that the two countries needed to combat the "three evil forces of separatism, terrorism and extremism," including "East Turkistan terrorism."⁷⁶ Ultimately, China's highlighting of the discrepancy between Turkish support for Uyghur nationalist demands and Turkey's refusal to recognize similar rights for its Kurdish population coupled with the gradual rise of China as an economic power persuaded Turkey to moderate its support for Uyghur independence. China enhanced its leverage as Chinese oil companies became the first foreign firms to invest in Kurdish energy without coordinating with the central government in Baghdad.⁷⁷ The Chinese position was strengthened when Turkey in 2017 responded angrily to a referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan in which most Kurds voted for secession from Iraq.

Turkey's changing attitude was enshrined in a directive in 1999 issued by then Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz that recognized Xinjiang for the first time as a part of China and banned government officials from attending events promoting the concept of Eastern Turkistan.⁷⁸ Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit described the Uyghurs during a visit in 2002 by his Chinese counterpart, Zhu Rongji, as a "friendship bridge" between the two countries.⁷⁹ The effect of the Chinese pressure proved however to be double-edged. The departure to Europe and the United States of some Uyghurs provided nationalists like Isa, the exiled activist, a voice in countries that were less susceptible to China's carrot-and-stick approach.

Much like their Turkish counterparts, Saudi officials assured their Chinese counterparts that they did not support the violence even though

⁷⁵ Shichor, *Ethno-Diplomacy: The Uighur Hitch in Sino-Turkish Relations*

⁷⁶ Michael Clarke, *Uighur Militants in Syria: The Turkish Connection*, The Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol.14:3, 4 February 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45067&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=200344abdd89976c56dee55481597515

⁷⁷ Armando Cordoba, *China Looks to Kurdistan as Growing Oil Partner*, Rudaw, 29 July 2013, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/29072013>

⁷⁸ Selcuk Colakoglu, *Dynamics of Sino-Turkish Relations: A Turkish Perspective*, *East Asia*, Vol. 32:1, pp. 7-23.

⁷⁹ *China Daily*, *Zhu in Turkey, Vows to Fight Terrorism*, 17 April 2002, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Apr/30829.htm>

the Uyghurs, some of whom have joined jihadist groups, are Sunni Muslims. Their assurances were backed up by Pakistani political parties with historic relations to the Saudis like Jamaat-i-Islami who travelled to China in 2009 to sign a cooperation agreement with the Communist Party, which supported the Chinese position on the Uyghurs.⁸⁰ The Saudi assurances have, however, done little to put Chinese concerns to rest. “Our biggest worry in the Middle East isn’t oil—it’s Saudi Arabia,” a Chinese analyst told the *Asia Times*.⁸¹

Although Saudi-style Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism in China traces its roots to the Yehewani (Brotherhood), a group founded in the late nineteenth century,⁸² China’s lifting in the late 1970s of restrictions on religious expression opened the door to increased contact and funding from the kingdom. Chinese Muslims were allowed to perform the hajj, the obligatory Muslim pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. Official representatives of the Xinjiang autonomous region eventually joined the pilgrimage and met with Saudi officials while in the kingdom.⁸³

Chinese scholars were invited to workshops in China and Pakistan, while students were provided with scholarships for study in the kingdom. They were exposed to what to them was a new, ultra-conservative Saudi interpretation of the faith. They often returned with large quantities of ultra-conservative literature, religious rulings, Qur’anic readings, and sermons on tapes and CDs.⁸⁴ Moreover, many of the pilgrims were influenced by family members long resident in the kingdom with whom they were able to reconnect as a result of the opening. Those family members were part of a large community of Chinese Muslim origin in Saudi Arabia that had embraced its ultra-conservatism.⁸⁵

Based on interviews in 2005 and 2006, China scholar Jackie Armijo concluded that most of the students and graduates may not have embraced

⁸⁰ Interview with Jamaat-i-Islami leader Maulana Siraj ul Haq, 15 July 2016

⁸¹ David P. Goldman, Saudi Arabia stews in policy hell: Spengler, *Asia Times*, 3 January 2016, <http://atimes.com/2016/01/saudi-arabia-in-policy-hell/>

⁸² Susan McCarthy, If Allah Wills It: Integration, Isolation and Muslim Authenticity in Yunnan Province in China, *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 33:2, pp. 121–136

⁸³ Nasser M. Al-Tamimi, *China-Saudi Arabia Relations, 1990–2012*, New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 62

⁸⁴ Elisabeth Alles, Leïla Cherif-Chebbi and Constance-Helene Halfon, *Chinese Islam: Unity and Fragmentation*, Vol. 31:1, pp. 7–35

⁸⁵ Maris Boyd Gillette, *Between Mecca and Beijing: modernization and consumption among urban Chinese Muslims*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 80

the kingdom's austere Wahhabi and Salafi interpretation of Islam, but that some had returned with a "degree of intolerance regarding some of the local practices of Islam within China."⁸⁶ They campaigned against Chinese-style mosques that featured architectural designs similar to traditional Buddhist temples which they viewed as foreign as opposed to more "authentic" Middle Eastern styles. This led to the destruction of many historic mosques that were replaced with allegedly more authentic, Saudi-inspired ones.⁸⁷

Moreover, Saudi-backed organizations, including the Muslim World League that for decades has been headed by a prominent Saudi official or member of the kingdom's ruling family, the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, and the Islamic Development Bank, operating under the auspices of the official Islamic Association of China (IAC), founded Muslim institutions, renovated mosques, and established a Qur'anic printer and distributor. Saudi King Fahd funded in 1987 distribution of a million Qur'ans.⁸⁸ Since then, Saudi organizations and donors have financed mosque construction and schools across the country.

Liberalization in the 1980s enabled Saudi organizations and missionaries to increasingly operate beyond the purview of the IAC and popularize ultra-conservative approaches that the association would have frowned upon. An estimated 652 Chinese Muslim students benefited from scholarships in the 40 years between 1961 and 2001, the vast majority of whom studied at Saudi academic institutions in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of those scholarships were offered by Al Haramain Islamic Foundation, a Saudi-controlled NGO that was designated by the United Nations as a terrorist organization in 2004. Al Haramain also funded Arabic-language schools that doubled as ultra-conservative educational institutions.⁸⁹ The impact was that Saudi influence stretched beyond doctrine and rituals to adoption of Saudi attire and grooming etiquette as well as mosque architecture.

⁸⁶ Jackie Armijo, *Islamic Education in China*, Harvard Asia Quarterly, 2009, http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_551_600/islamic_education_in_china.htm

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* Armijo

⁸⁸ Mohammed Al-Sudairi, *Changing State-Religion Dynamics in Xi Jinping's China: And its Consequences for Sino-Saudi Relations*, King Faisal Center For Research and Islamic Studies, January 2017, <http://kfcris.com/pdf/32a413c468c1b66c84d974e0b34c1efa58d77ebe4d1a1.pdf>

⁸⁹ Mohammed Al-Sudairi, *Chinese Salafism and the Saudi Connection*, The Diplomat, 23 October 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/chinese-salafism-and-the-saudi-connection/>

The Saudi-backed spread of ultra-conservatism, particularly among China's more integrated Hui Muslims, a majority of whom live in the country's least developed provinces, prompted authorities to revisit their opening of the door to Saudi proselytization.⁹⁰ Starting in the 1990s, China began to bar entry to Saudi scholars, stopped students from going to study in the kingdom, and introduced increasingly repressive legislation restricting foreign religious activity, including donations made without IAC approval. More recently, China closed allegedly Wahhabi schools in Yunnan, restricted students in their travel from one province to another for further religious education, detained Muslim activists outside of Xinjiang,⁹¹ ordered ethnic minority Muslim families to surrender to authorities religious items including prayer mats and copies of the Qur'an,⁹² and shut down one of China's most popular online communities for Muslims after it posted a petition asking Xi to stop his "brutal suppression" of activists.⁹³ Saudi funding continued despite the crack-down and close ties between Saudi donor organizations and Chinese officials as well as the political utility of Saudi praise for China's policy towards its Muslims.⁹⁴

Hui Imam Ma Jun enjoyed a scholarship in the 1990s to study Islamic law and Arabic at the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia. He returned in 2000 a Muslim firebrand to his hometown of Gansu, the capital of Lanzhou. "I was on fire when I came back from Saudi Arabia. I felt a strong responsibility. Chinese Muslims didn't have enough belief. They were impure and too shallow," Ma said. To correct the situation, Ma established two informal religious seminaries as well as a private Arabic

⁹⁰ Interviews with the author, 20–27 October 2016

⁹¹ Ibid. Al-Sudairi

⁹² Qiao Long, Chinese Police Order Xinjiang's Muslims to Hand in All Copies of The Qur'an, Radio Free Asia, 27 September 2017, http://www.rfa.org/english/news/Uighur/chinese-police-order-xinjiangs-muslims-to-hand-in-all-copies-of-the-quran-09272017113203.html?utm_content=buffer4e532&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

⁹³ Al Jazeera, Chinese Muslim website blocked after Xi Jinping letter, 14 December 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/chinese-muslim-website-blocked-xi-jinping-letter-161214134354018.html>

⁹⁴ CCTV, A special meeting with His Eminence Sheikh Saleh Al-Talib, 5 August 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-yl7rt6GfI> / عائض القرني يمدح شعب الصين العظيم بأعجوبة (Ayad al-Qarni praises the people of China's great miracle), 13 June 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0J4VAVmEc0>

school in Guanghe, a mostly Hui town between Lanzhou and Linxia. He also started giving religious lessons at a public middle school in Lanzhou. Chinese law forbids teaching religion in school, but Ma infused his language lessons with Islamic scripture and Saudi-style Salafi exegesis. By 2010, authorities had shut both programmes down. Ultimately, Ma dropped his subversive approach and opted to work within the state, arguing that a gradual approach would be more effective in China.⁹⁵

Chinese leaders have since adopted in public a harder line towards Saudi-backed ultra-conservatism. Xi told a national conference on religion in April 2016 that religious institutions should “resolutely guard against overseas infiltrations through religious means” and stick to moderate theologies that “merge religious doctrines with Chinese culture.” Xi’s remarks were directed as much against Saudi activity as they were against the Vatican and Christian groups. At the Islamic Association of China’s 10th National Congress in Beijing in November of that year, the head of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, Wang Zuoran, warned that Islamic extremism was spilling into eastern and central China. Islamic clergy should “stand in the front line in the fight to curb religious extremism,” Wang said, emphasizing that “converting the mindset” of people was critical to countering potential violence and terrorism.⁹⁶

Months later, the government anchored in law existing measures to curb Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism. The legal sanctioning involved outlawing “abnormally” long beards, the wearing of veils in public places, refusing to watch state television, not allowing children to attend government schools, not abiding by family planning policies, and marrying using only religious procedures. It also required employees in public spaces, such as train stations and airports, to “dissuade” those who fully cover their bodies, including veiling their faces, from entering, and to report them to the police.⁹⁷ In 2018, the government in an expression of the

⁹⁵Alice Su, Meet China’s State-Approved Muslims, *Foreign Policy*, 2 November 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/02/meet-chinas-state-approved-muslims-hui-linxia-beijing-compromise/>

⁹⁶Xu Wei, Clergy urged to lead battle against extremism spread, *The State Council*, 28 November 2016, http://english.gov.cn/news/top_news/2016/11/28/content_281475502569856.htm

⁹⁷BBC News, China Uighurs: Xinjiang ban on long beards and veils, 1 April 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-39460538?ocid=socialflow_twitter

spread of Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism among the Hui barred the group from receiving religious education.⁹⁸

The hard line built on a campaign in Chinese media more than a decade earlier that questioned Saudi Arabia's ability to cope with the threat of Wahhabism breeding radicalism⁹⁹ and hinted at Xinjiang's potential in becoming an irritant in Chinese-Arab relations. In response to the media reports, Saudi Arabia's Arab News rankled China's ire in an editorial that compared China to Israel in the way it dealt with Xinjiang. The Arab News referred to Xinjiang as East Turkistan, the anti-Chinese Uyghur reference to the region.¹⁰⁰ In his PhD thesis, Martin Harrison cautioned that "a prolonged downturn in the Xinjiang security situation would have consequences to which Riyadh could not long tum a blind eye."¹⁰¹ Mohammed Turki Al-Sudairi, a Hong Kong-based scholar, noted that Saudi traditional and social media have remained critical of China, particularly regarding its treatment of Uyghurs, its atheistic identity, and its support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.¹⁰²

The Chinese crackdown on Muslims in Xinjiang and creeping Islamophobia put Saudi Arabia that projects itself as the leader of the Muslim world in a predicament, but not one that would lead them to jeopardize the kingdom's strategic and economic interests. Like in the case of US President Donald J. Trump, whom the kingdom publicly endorsed despite his administration's seemingly anti-Muslim policies, Saudi Arabia opted to look the other way in China despite the growing number of anti-Muslim incidents involving the more assimilated Hui rather than restless Uyghurs that were often instigated by senior members of the Communist Party. The incidents included denunciations on social media and refusals to cater to Muslims' religious needs. In one instance, the government of Gansu, home to a large group of Hui, banned religion in nursery schools after a video of a little Hui girl wearing a black head

⁹⁸ Michael Martina, China's Hui Muslims fearful after Chinese New Year education ban, Reuters, 17 February 2018, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2018/02/17/China-s-Hui-Muslims-fearful-after-Chinese-New-Year-education-ban-.html>

⁹⁹ China Daily, Saudis face dilemma over Islamic militancy, 2 February 2002, <http://www.highbloom.com/doc/1P2-8785765.html>

¹⁰⁰ Arab News, Uighurs, 24 March 2002, <http://www.ilaam.net/Intl/Uighurs.html>

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Harrison

¹⁰² Mohammed Turki Al-Sudairi, China in the Eyes of the Saudi Media, GRC Gulf Papers, Gulf Research Center, February 2013, <http://www.ictsd.org/downloads/2013/04/china-in-the-eyes-of-the-saudi-media.pdf>

covering and reciting the Qur'an was posted online.¹⁰³ China's largest online catering service, Meituan, was forced to remove its halal category because of intense online criticism.¹⁰⁴ It took the government several years to decide to crack down on anti-Muslim hate speech.¹⁰⁵

Standing up for the rights of Chinese Muslim would put at risk China as Saudi Arabia's largest oil customer and an increasingly important investment partner. China and Saudi Arabia have, moreover, stepped up military cooperation and work together closely to counter political violence. Apparent Chinese leniency towards ultra-conservatism among the Hui as opposed to among Uyghurs has, moreover, made it easier for Saudi Arabia to remain silent. So does China's projection of the Hui as its link to the Muslim world through "blood, faith and customs."¹⁰⁶

The projection of the Hui amounted to a harking back to policies adopted by China prior to the 1949 revolution when in 1931 Chinese Muslim students, funded by the government, first arrived in Cairo to study at Al-Azhar, at the time the Muslim world's foremost institution of learning. The government saw the 35 Hui students as a way to strengthen relations with the Muslim world.¹⁰⁷ China scholar Włodzimierz Cieciora described the students as not only "bridge builders" but also community leaders who contributed to the survival of Chinese Islamic culture at a time of political upheaval.¹⁰⁸ Many of them returned from Al-Azhar and became intellectual and political leaders of the Hui community in both China and after 1949 in Taiwan too. They sought to combine principles

¹⁰³ Samuel Osborne, Chinese nursery schools ban religion after little girl recites Qur'an, *The Independent*, 16 May 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/chinese-nursery-schools-ban-religion-after-little-girl-recites-quran-a7029156.html>

¹⁰⁴ Leng Shumei, Net users slam Meituan for implying non-halal food is "unsafe, unclean," *Global Times*, 19 July 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1057134.shtml>

¹⁰⁵ *The Times of India*, China bans use of anti-Islam words on social media, 21 September 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/china-bans-use-of-anti-islam-words-on-social-media/articleshow/60778028.cms>

¹⁰⁶ China-Arab States Expo, 5 September 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/regional/2015-09/05/content_21822030.htm

¹⁰⁷ Maurice Gajan, Chinese students of Al-Azhar and their impact on Sino-Egyptian relations, *Arab West Report*, 2015, <http://www.arabwestreport.info/en/chinese-students-studying-islam-egypt>

¹⁰⁸ Włodzimierz Cieciora, *Bringing China and Islam Closer: The First Chinese Azharites*, Middle East Institute, 28 January, 2015, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/bringing-china-and-islam-closer-first-chinese-azharites>

of Arab purity that they had absorbed while in Cairo with the Chinese components of Hui identity.¹⁰⁹

Saudi's silence about the crackdown in Xinjiang that increasingly amounts to a Chinese assault on Islam was further facilitated by men like Hussein, a Saudi-trained scholar who operated a madrassah in the north-western city of Lanzhou. Unlike Ma Jun in Gansu, Hussein said his problem was foreign media that paint Salafis as extremists. "The government doesn't interfere with us," he said.¹¹⁰ Similarly, Abdelhalim, a Hui Muslim, had no compunction about showing a visitor stacks of books in a mosque's library on the life and teaching of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism. "I got these for free when I went to Saudi Arabia for hajj," Abdelhalim said.¹¹¹

Al-Sudairi said he had found numerous schools in the north-western Chinese cities of Guanghe and Linxia that "were using the same Saudi high school textbooks on fiqh (Islamic legal scholarship) and tawhid (divine oneness) that we used growing up in Saudi Arabia. They were probably brought back and copied by Chinese students who'd been at Medina University," Al-Sudairi said.¹¹²

Chinese leniency has allowed Saudi scholars to launch what Al-Sudairi called "a new missionary approach" on the back of an influx of non-Muslim Chinese workers into the kingdom. The presence of thousands of Chinese workers as a result of the awarding in the first decade of the twenty-first century of massive infrastructure projects to Chinese construction companies, including in a US\$3 billion aluminium smelter in the southern province of Jizan as part of King Abdullah's effort to forge closer ties with the Middle Kingdom sparked "a China craze" among clergymen who viewed China as "the new frontier" of proselytization.¹¹³ One of those projects, the 453-kilometre-long Haramain railway linking Mecca and Medina, proved particularly controversial because it involved the

¹⁰⁹ Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *Taking Abduh to China: Chinese-Egyptian Intellectual Contact in the Early Twentieth Century*, in James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (eds.), *Global Muslims in the Age of Steel and Print*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014, pp. 249–267

¹¹⁰ Alice Su, *China Doesn't Mind Islamic Extremists*, *Foreign Policy*, 16 December 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/16/china-doesnt-mind-islamic-extremists/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2AEditors%20Picks

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* Su

¹¹² Interview with the author, 16 January 2017

¹¹³ Mohammed Al-Sudairi, *Converting the Heathen in Mecca and Battling the Shi'ii Menace in the Far East: A Look at the China-Oriented Missionary Phenomenon in Saudi Arabia*, *China-Arabia Encounters and Engagements*, Singapore, 15 December 2016

entry of non-Muslim workers into the two holy cities that grant access exclusively to the faithful. The government defended the violation of the rules by arguing that the presence of the Chinese created opportunities to convert them to Islam. It also stepped in to solve problems over the allocation of land and cover cost overruns.

Massive media coverage of conversions destroyed the long-standing Saudi notion that Chinese culture was so alien that persuading Chinese to become Muslim was an all but impossible task. Saudi scholars began touring China and focussing their social media activity on the Chinese. They also targeted Chinese workers in the kingdom itself. A video of Mohamad bin Abdel Rahman Al-Arefe, a member of the Muslim World League who had been banned entry into various countries because of his militant views, showed him stopping his car in Mecca to talk to Chinese workers. The first two whom he approached turned out be Muslim, possibly ones that were converted by their companies before being dispatched to the kingdom.¹¹⁴

Al-Arefe, whose social media following competes with that of Trump, asked a third worker named Steve to say the shahada, the Islamic creed declaring belief in the oneness of God (tawhid) and the acceptance of Muhammad as God's prophet. Pronunciation of the shahada constitutes a conversion according to the Islamic law. Steve followed Al-Arefe's instructions having no idea of what it meant. Al-Arefe prided himself on his ability to secure a convert within a minute. Popular Sheikh Aaidh ibn Abdullah al-Qarni tweeted in Chinese for several months until he realized that Twitter was banned in China.¹¹⁵

The Saudi ministry of Islamic affairs, to advance the proselytization campaign, funded the creation of the Sino-Saudi Cultural Dialogue Center that produced a massive amount of Sunni Muslim ultra-conservative texts in Chinese. The centre also held open days at factories and labour camps in which converts were seduced with food and games. It further operated on social media and ran Arab-language training centres and a Chinese-language television station.¹¹⁶

The China craze was fuelled by a wave of inaccurate reports on the Internet of Shiite and Iranian inroads into China that at times were repeated by the Saudi government. A Saudi diplomatic cable, disclosed by

¹¹⁴ Ibid. *The Economist*

¹¹⁵ Ibid. Al-Sudairi

¹¹⁶ Ibid. Al-Sudairi

WikiLeaks, reported that Iran had succeeded in converting seven million people in China. “Islam between the Hammer of Communism and the Anvil of Shiism,” said one website. Another website falsely depicted a Japanese imam as a Chinese Shiite scholar. An imagined exchange in the 1960s between Mao Zedong and Ahmed Shukairy, the first president of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), had the Chinese leader asking: “How can I teach you revolution when you have Imam Hussein to learn from?” Al-Hussein ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib was the son of the Prophet Mohammed’s son-in-law Ali, the first Shiite imam.

Saudi Arabia’s willingness to ignore the religious crackdown in Xinjiang contrasted starkly with the kingdom’s support of Uyghur exile organizations and ensuring that they were represented at international Third World and Islamic conferences dating back to the 1960s¹¹⁷ as well as efforts in the late 1990s to ignite an armed Uyghur struggle in the strategic province. Prominent, award-winning Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir recalled being advised by a senior Taliban official to talk to Fazlur Rehman Khalil, a founder of the banned Saudi- and Pakistani-backed group *Harakat ul-Mujahedeen*, who has served as a go-between between Pakistani intelligence, al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In an interview, Khalil disclosed that he had been asked by the World Muslim League to foment trouble in Xinjiang using his Afghan contacts. The Saudis wanted Khalil to establish camps in which fighters would be trained and from which Saudi Arabia would help infiltrate them with their arms into the north-western Chinese province. The Taliban and Khalil refused.¹¹⁸

The failed Saudi plan was hatched amid increased cross-border contacts between Saudi-inspired ultra-conservative Sunni Muslims and Uyghurs, primarily from southern Xinjiang. Uyghur traders travelling for business in the 1990s to Pakistan, a country that was a particular target of massively funded Saudi proselytization, returned home buoyed by the piety of their commercial counterparts.¹¹⁹ Scores of Uyghur students attended

¹¹⁷Yitzhak Shichor, *Dialogue of the Deaf: The Role of Uyghur Exile Organizations Versus Beijing* in Güljanat Kurmangaliyeva Ercilasun and Konuralp Ercilasun (eds), *The Uyghur Community: Diaspora, Identity and Geopolitics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 121–137

¹¹⁸Interview with Hamid Mir, 12 April 2017

¹¹⁹Sean R. Roberts, A “Land of Borderlands:” Implications of Xinjiang’s Trans-Border Interactions in S. Frederick Starr (ed), *Xinjiang, China’s Muslim Borderland*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharp, 2004, pp. 226–227

Saudi-funded religious seminaries in Pakistan.¹²⁰ Increasingly, China became concerned about missionary groups with ties to the Saudis and Pakistani intelligence like Tablighi Jamaat.

“The threat implicit in this agenda for such a secular-oriented regime as China was clear and made even more salient by the existence of linkages between Xinjiang and Pakistan. The opening of the Karakoram Highway to trade between Xinjiang and Pakistan in the late 1980s had facilitated the generation of cultural flows that worked against the state’s integration-ist project in the region. Pakistani traders played a role in generating an Islamic revival in Xinjiang by providing a link for Xinjiang’s Muslims to the wider Islamic world,” noted China scholar Michael E. Clarke.¹²¹

Moreover, simultaneous Saudi efforts in cooperation with Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the Pakistani intelligence arm that worked hand-in-glove with its Saudi counterpart, proved more successful. ISI with Saudi support encouraged training of Uyghurs by militant Pakistani groups in several camps, including near Mirpur just across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) from India, Balochistan, and in the Al-Badr camp at Ooji on the Afghan-Pakistani border. Uyghur community centres in major Pakistani cities facilitated enrolment in militant Saudi-inspired, if not Saudi-funded, seminaries and passage to Afghanistan. To stop infiltration, China in 1997 restricted Uyghur travel to Pakistan and Central Asia and built a 750-kilometre barbed wire fence along the Xinjiang-Pakistan border. Pressured by China, Pakistan ultimately cracked down on the Uyghurs.¹²²

The Saudi government’s willingness to turn a blind eye to events in Xinjiang did not necessarily extend to independent scholars and businessmen as well as jihadist groups like the Islamic State that constitute a retrograde revolutionary force. With no relation to jihadists, individual Muslim businessmen and scholars have taken on their Chinese counterparts in conferences and private meetings for their repression of Muslims and their

¹²⁰ Graham E. Fuller and Jonathan N. Lipman, *Islam in Xinjiang* in S. Frederick Starr (ed), *Xinjiang, China’s Muslim Borderland*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharp, 2004, pp. 320–353

¹²¹ Michael E. Clarke, *Xinjiang and China’s Rise in Central Asia—A History*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2011, p. 150

¹²² Yitzhak Shichor, *The Great Wall of Steel: Military and Strategy in Xinjiang* in S. Frederick Starr (ed), *Xinjiang, China’s Muslim Borderland*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharp, 2004, pp. 120–163

utilitarian view of China's relations to the Muslim world.¹²³ The discussions were a reminder not only of Muslim sensitivities but of perceptions across the greater Middle East of China being a global power that refuses to take on its obligation of pursuing peace, security, and stability through engagement rather than non-interference.

Nonetheless, China's stepped-up repression in Xinjiang in the wake of 9/11 and the ethnic tensions in 2009 failed to spark protests by Muslim governments beyond that of Saudi Arabia with the exception of Turkey¹²⁴ and Islamic scholars associated with them. Persuaded by China's economic engagement, its increasingly hollowed-out principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of others, and similarities in Chinese and autocratic Muslim efforts to criminalize Islamist opposition forces, the silence contrasted starkly with responses to earlier riots in 1997. Then, Saudi scholars urged their government to support the Uyghurs, while the kingdom's mufti, Sheikh Abdulaziz Bin Baz, insisted that Muslims had a duty to come to the aid of their brethren in Xinjiang.¹²⁵

China's wielding of its economic clout to stifle criticism benefited from its long-standing support for causes in the Muslim world, including the Palestinian struggle for nationhood, opposition to US domination, the resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and the Islamic revolution in Iran that toppled the shah, an icon of US influence in the region.¹²⁶ Author Lillian Craig Harris noted that China long recognized since the birth of the People's Republic the significance of linkages between its Muslim minorities, including the Uyghurs, and the Muslim world. "Since 1949, China's ten Muslim 'nationalities' or ethnic groups have consistently been dealt with more favourably than any other religious group, not only because their treatment has international repercussions, but also because they have been ... useful to Peking as links to the Islamic world," Harris wrote.¹²⁷ China has since radically broken with that approach by turning Xinjiang into the surveillance state of the future, an updated version of George Orwell's 1984, in its bid to force Uyghur assimilation and quell Uyghur notions of ethnic identity, nationalism and religiosity.

¹²³ Closed-door conferences and private meetings witnessed by the author in the period between 2014 and 2016

¹²⁴ The Associated Press, Thousands of Turks protest China violence, 13 July 2009, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/thousands-of-turks-protest-china-violence.aspx?pageID=438&n=thousands-of-turks-protest-china-violence-2009-07-13>

¹²⁵ Al-Tamimi, *China-Saudi Arabia Relations*, p. 91

¹²⁶ Lillian Craig Harris, China's Islamic Connection, *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 8:5, pp. 291–303.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*



Pakistan: The Belt and Road's Soft Underbelly

Pakistani General Raheel Sharif walked into a hornet's nest when he stepped off a private jet in Riyadh in April 2017 to take command of a Saudi-led, 41-nation, Sunni Muslim military alliance.¹ Things were going from bad to worse. Straddling Pakistan's borders with Iran and Afghanistan, Balochistan, a crown jewel in China's Belt and Road initiative that links the People Republic's restive Xinjiang region to the Gulf, was being drawn into the vortex of Saudi-Iranian rivalry as a potential launching pad for US-backed Saudi efforts to destabilize Iran.

Sharif had barely landed when Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman dashed Pakistani and Chinese plans of defusing Saudi-Iranian tension by including Iran in the threat perception of the alliance that nominally was created to fight terrorism rather than confront the Islamic republic. The general's hopes focussed on balancing Pakistan's close alliance with Saudi Arabia with the fact that it shared a volatile border with Iran and was home to the world's second largest Shiite Muslim community and preventing an escalation of violence in Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province nestled in the southwest of the country at the edge of the Iranian plateau.

Saudi Arabia, by inviting Sharif to become commander, had put Pakistan in a tight spot and cast a cloud over Chinese efforts to harness economic development to pacify nationalist and religious militants in both

¹Geo News, Former COAS Raheel Sharif departs for Riyadh to head Saudi-led military alliance, 21 April 2017, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/138930-Former-COAS-Raheel-Sharif-departs-for-Riyadh-to-head-Saudi-led-military-alliance>

Balochistan and Xinjiang. Rejecting the invitation would have strained Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia and multiple Arab states and in the words of a senior former Pakistani military and intelligence commander who played a role in Pakistan and Sharif's acceptance of the command "given Iran negative leverage over Pakistani policy making."²

Sharif's China-backed plan to invite Iran was a stillborn baby from day one that dashed Chinese hopes that the alliance could emerge as a force capable of filling a vacuum that would emerge with the gradual decline of the United States. Senior Saudi officials had long made clear that they viewed Iran rather than Islamic State as the foremost terrorist threat.³ As if that were not enough to complicate Sharif's life, Mohammed, who also served as the kingdom's defence minister, toughened Saudi Arabia's stance. Seemingly encouraging Muslim sectarian strife in Pakistan and along China's Belt and Road, Mohammed squashed prospects of talks with Iran to reduce tensions. The crown prince charged that Shiites as a religious group rather than Iran as a nation state believed that "the Imam Mahdi (the redeemer) will come and they must prepare the fertile environment for the arrival of the awaited Mahdi and they must control the Muslim world 'How do you have a dialogue with this?'" Mohammed asked.

In line with statements by senior US government and military officials, Mohammed went on to hold out the possibility of exploiting aspirations of ethnic minorities in Iran to weaken, if not destabilize, its Islamic regime⁴ in a bid to topple its regime. In doing so, Mohammed, then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and General Joseph L. Votel, head of US Central Command, raised the spectre of increased violence in Balochistan, a volatile, once independent region that straddles both sides of the Iranian-Pakistani border, as well as among other ethnic minorities like Iranian Arabs in the Iranian province of Khuzestan, the Islamic republic's oil-rich but impoverished region that is home to Iranians of Arab descent, Kurds, and Azerbaijanis.

² Interview with the author, 12 May 2017

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Remarks Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir Munich Security Conference Munich, Germany 19 February 2017, <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/aboutMinistry/Minister/PressConferences/Pages/ArticleID2017220124736828.aspx>

⁴ Ben Hubbard, Dialogue With Iran Is Impossible, Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister Says, The New York Times, 2 May 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-defense-minister.html?_r=0

In contrast to Mohammed, Tillerson and Votel steered clear at any hint of sectarianism as a tool. “Our policy towards Iran is to ... to work toward support of those elements inside of Iran that would lead to a peaceful transition of that government. Those elements are there, certainly as we know,” Tillerson told the House Foreign Affairs Committee.⁵ For his part, Votel told the US Senate Armed Services Committee in early 2017 that “in order to contain Iranian expansion, roll back its malign influence, and blunt its asymmetric advantages, we must engage them more effectively in the ‘grey zone’ through means that include a strong deterrence posture, targeted counter-messaging activities, and by building partner nations’ capacity. ... (We) believe that by taking proactive measures and reinforcing our resolve we can lessen Iran’s ability to negatively influence outcomes in the future.”⁶

The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in an even more worrying development for China, selected the covert operations officer who oversaw the hunt for Osama bin Laden as its point man on Iran. The appointment of Michael D’Andrea, a hard-charging, chain-smoking operative, alternatively nicknamed the Dark Prince or Ayatollah Mike, suggested that the CIA could take a more operational approach in confronting Iran in line with US President Donald J. Trump’s Saudi-backed hard line towards the Islamic republic, which involves a possible push for regime change. D’Andrea, who converted to Islam to marry his Muslim wife rather than out of religious conviction, has an impressive covert operations record, including involvement in the use of torture in interrogations under President George W. Bush and the killing in 2008 of Imad Mugnyiah, the international operations chief of Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah who maintained close ties to Iran. Mugnyiah was assassinated in Damascus in an operation carried out with Israel’s intelligence agency, Mossad. D’Andrea was also responsible for the ramping up of the US drone programme in Pakistan and Yemen that targets Islamist militants.⁷

⁵ Adrienne Mahsa Varkiani, Tillerson calls for regime change in Iran, ThinkProgress, 16 June 2017, <https://thinkprogress.org/tillerson-calls-for-regime-change-in-iran-ad2ded82f945>

⁶ General Joseph L. Votel, Statement of General Joseph L. Votel on the Posture of US Central Command, US Central Command, 9 March 2017, <http://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>

⁷ Matthew Rosenberg and Adam Goldman, C.I.A. Names New Iran Chief in a Sign of Trump’s Hard Line, The New York Times, 2 June 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/02/world/middleeast/cia-iran-dark-prince-michael-dandrea.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share&_r=0

D'Andrea's appointment stroked with Saudi Arabia's mulling of a strategy to escalate its proxy war with Iran to involve a bid to destabilize the Islamic republic and potentially topple its regime. The kingdom had been signalling for a while that it may attempt to achieve that by stirring trouble in Tehran's backyard. It publicized its thinking with the attendance of rallies of the exiled People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran or Mujahedin-e-Khalq by former Saudi intelligence chief and ambassador to the United States and Britain, Prince Turki al-Faisal, the man the ruling family uses to make statements and pursue policies the government backs but does not want to officially acknowledge. The Mujahedeen is a militant left-wing, cult-like group that advocates the overthrow of Iran's Islamic regime and traces its roots to resistance against the shah who was toppled in the 1979 revolution. "Your legitimate struggle against the (Iranian) regime will achieve its goal, sooner or later. I, too, want the fall of the regime," Prince Turki told a massive rally in July 2016 in Paris.⁸

Mohammed vowed in his interview that the kingdom's battle would be fought in Iran rather than in Saudi Arabia. He stopped short, however, from spelling out how he intended to take Saudi Arabia's fight to Iran. A government-backed Saudi think tank, the Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies (AGCIS), established in 2014 as the kingdom's rivalry was heating up, did that for him. AGCIS published a study in late 2016 in the first edition of its *Journal of Iranian Studies* that suggested that the battle for Iran could embroil not only China with its strategic interests in Balochistan but also India. The study described the Indian-backed Iranian port of Chabahar, a mere 70 kilometres further west from Gwadar in the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan, home to the bulk of the Islamic republic's two million Baluch with their strong ties to ethnic kin across the border in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as "a direct threat to the Arab Gulf states" that called for "immediate counter measures."⁹

Tillerson, on a visit to India in October 2017, sidestepped questions whether the Trump administration's Saudi-backed tougher approach

⁸ Reuters, Iran says Saudis back terrorism after senior prince attends rebel rally, 10 July 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-saudi-rebels-idUSKCN0ZQ0E5>

⁹ Mohammed Hassan Husseinbor, Chabahar and Gwadar Agreements and Rivalry among Competitors in Baluchistan Region, *Journal of Iranian Studies*, Vol. 1:1, pp. 82–99, <https://arabiangcis.org/english/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/05/Chabahar-and-Gwadar-Agreements-and-Rivalry-among-Competitors-in-Baluchistan-Region.pdf>

towards Iran would influence Washington's attitude towards Indian investment in the Islamic republic. "It is not our objective to harm the Iranian people or our objective to interfere in legitimate business activity that are going on with other businesses whether it maybe Europe or India or agreements that are in place that promote economic activity," Tillerson said.¹⁰

The potential rivalry between Gwadar, once a dusty town of 50,000 fishermen ringed by desert, mountains, and the Arabian Sea, and Chabahar suggested that the geopolitical fallout of the Belt and Road would not only challenge Chinese ambitions to emerge as Eurasia's dominant power but also influence the balance of power between regional rivals and prove a double-edged sword for Pakistan. Like Sharif's position as military commander, potential Chinese reliance on Iran rather than Saudi Arabia and the Gulf as key nodes in its infrastructural Eurasia-wide link-up with Europe threatened to upset Pakistan's tightrope in balancing its relations with the kingdom and the Islamic republic and securing its pivotal place in Chinese strategy.

Pakistan and China, in a bid to contain rivalry between the Pakistani and Iranian ports, have sought to strengthen energy ties between Pakistan and the Islamic republic, like Pakistan a key node in China's strategy. The Pakistani government approved in October 2016 construction of a \$2 billion natural gas pipeline that would link Gwadar to the Iranian pipeline system and help Pakistan alleviate its energy shortage that causes repeated blackouts. Approval of the project was a prerequisite for Pakistan obtaining a \$1.4 billion loan from the Export-Import Bank of China.¹¹

Gwadar, physically transformed by a container port, new hotels, and 2400 kilometres of highway and high-speed railway that connect it to China's western provinces, and Chabahar have much in common. Both were long neglected, sleepy Indian Ocean port towns that lived off minor trade and have been given a potential new lease on life as transnational chokepoints backed by regional rivals. The current Great Game has echoes of the 1970s when the Soviet Union looked at Gwadar as a possible naval base and the United States weighed similar plans for Chabahar. Instability

¹⁰ Elizabeth Roche, India, US demand dismantling of terror infrastructure in Pakistan, *livemint*, 25 October 2017, <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/fodI9SjFngz56U1Ea1Z-kqI/Rex-Tillerson-India-US-stand-shoulder-to-shoulder-in-fight.html>

¹¹ Rumour Team, Pakistan approved \$2 Billion Gwadar Project Linking its Gas Network's to Iran's, *Rumour News*, 1 October 2016, <http://www.rumournews.in/world/29951/pakistan-approves-2-billion-gwadar-project-linking-its-gas-network-to-irans/>

in Pakistan dissuaded the Soviets while the Islamic revolution in Iran thwarted US aspirations. China has a stronger stomach for volatility. It sealed its control of the port with an agreement to operate Gwadar for a period of 40 years.¹² Potentially, Gwadar could serve not only as a commercial post but also as a Chinese naval listening post, and a base from which it could monitor sea lanes as well as US maritime movements and India's naval bases of Mumbai and Gujarat. As far back as 2001, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf predicted, following a visit by Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, that India would find the Chinese navy in Gwadar if conflict were to erupt (Fig. 6.1).¹³

Gwadar, the Belt and Road's linchpin a mere 600 kilometres from the Arabian Sea and 380 kilometres from the Strait of Hormuz at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula and Oman, which governed the port until 1958, is slated to link the Gulf with China's volatile north-western province of Xinjiang. Once fully operational, Gwadar would be a key node in a land-sea energy supply line from the Gulf to China that would circumvent India as well as the South China Sea. It would shorten the roughly 12,000-kilometre sea route from the Gulf to China's eastern seaboard to a mere 2395 kilometres with a pipeline ending in Xinjiang's Kashgar, one of the busiest bazaars on the ancient Silk Road (Fig. 6.2).

Gwadar's record is, however, a testimony to China's difficulties in translating grandiose ambition into reality. Phase II of Gwadar was completed in 2008. Few ships anchor, however, in a port that is slated to serve littoral states in the Gulf and Red Sea as well as Iran, India, Central Asia, and China. It took eight years after completion of the first phase for the first containers carrying Chinese goods to depart Gwadar port.¹⁴

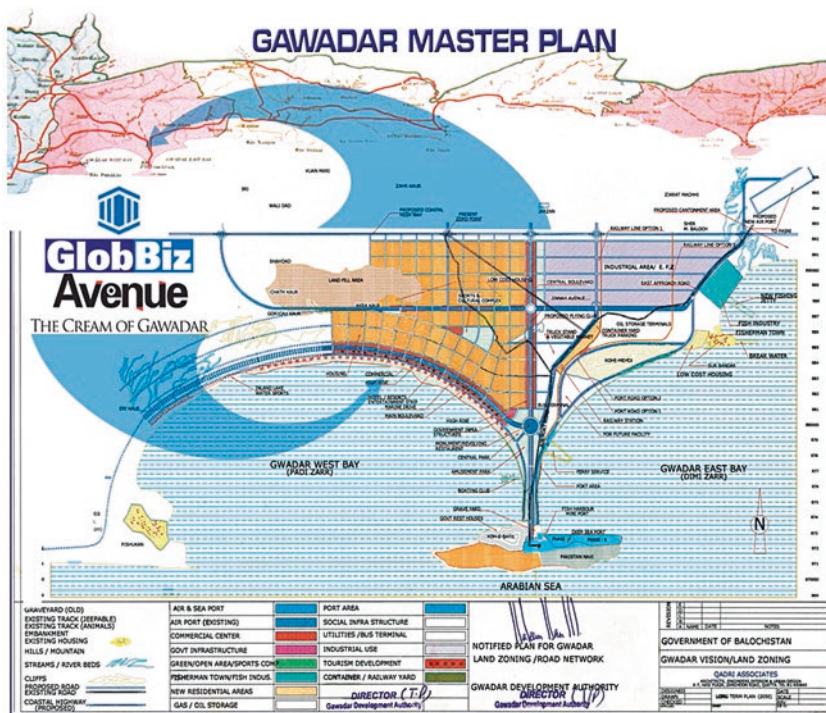
Gwadar is capable of handling freighters with a capacity of 30,000 tonnes, 25,000-tonne container vessels, and 200,000-tonne oil tankers.¹⁵ Cargo passing through the port totalled 500,000 tonnes in 2016, mostly

¹² Associated Press of Pakistan, Pakistan signs 40-year deal with China for Gwadar port operation, 21 April 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1389486/pakistan-signs-40-year-deal-china-gwadar-port-operation/>

¹³ G. Parthasarathy, Watch out for China's naval aggression, *The Hindu Business Line*, 9 March 2016, <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/columns/g-parthasarathy/watch-out-for-chinas-naval-aggression/article8332134.ece>

¹⁴ Danish Hyder and Mushtaq Khan, CPEC: The devil is not in the details, *Herald*, 11 January 2017, <http://herald.dawn.com/news/1153597/cpec-the-devil-is-not-in-the-details>

¹⁵ Frederic Grare, Pakistan: The Resurgence of Baluch Nationalism, *Carnegie Papers*, January 2006, <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP65.Grare.FINAL.pdf>



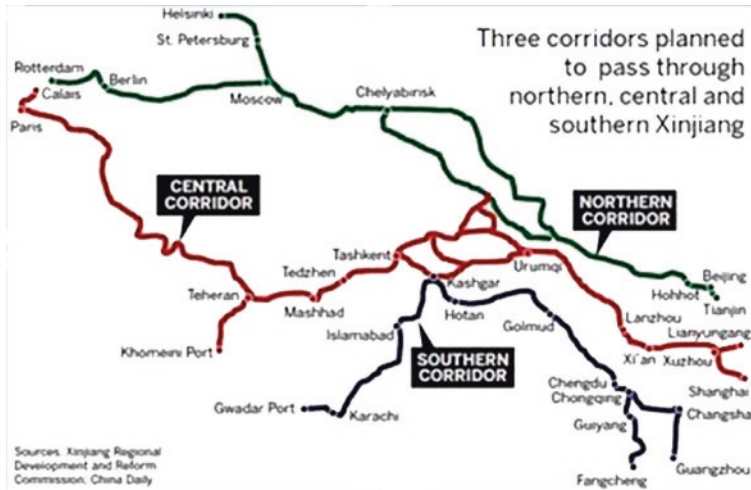


Fig. 6.2 Three corridors planned to pass through northern, central, and southern Xinjiang. (The Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI))

Improving those numbers could prove to be an uphill battle with instability proving to be Gwadar's Achilles heel in its competition with Chabahar even if, at first glance, the cards were stacked in the Pakistani port's favour. Indian investment dwarfed that of China while China's engagement with Gulf states outstripped that of India. For geopolitical as well as commercial reasons, potential Gulf investment in refineries and pipelines was likely to target Gwadar, Asia's deepest natural harbour, rather than Chabahar. Pakistan leveraged its advantage in multiple deals with Gulf countries, including in 2016 granting a licence to the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) to build a refinery near Gwadar¹⁸ and agreeing months later that Kuwait would construct a petroleum products pipeline from Karachi to north of the country.¹⁹

¹⁸Zafar Bhutta, Kuwait wins approval for setting up oil refinery in Balochistan, Dawn, 10 September 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1179648/kuwait-wins-approval-setting-oil-refinery-balochistan/>

¹⁹Zafar Bhutta, Kuwait agrees to build oil pipeline in Pakistan, Dawn, 10 March 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1351241/kuwait-agrees-build-oil-pipeline-pakistan/>

The problem was that mega projects in Balochistan, one of Pakistan's least developed and most troubled regions, have a history of provoking local resistance. The region has witnessed five rebellions in the last 70 years, all fuelled by Baloch claims that the federal government in Islamabad had exploited the province's extensive gas and mineral riches that include gold, silver, copper, and coal for the benefit of the country's ruling establishment in Punjab. Casting a shadow over China's economic win-win strategy, proposals by the Shah's Iran, and later the Islamic republic to fund economic development in the region failed to quell Balochistan's permanently simmering unrest.

The fate of China's US\$50 billion plus investment in Pakistan, a massive project dubbed the CPEC, the flagship of the Belt and Road initiative, may be no different. For almost a decade, Chinese efforts to get the Pakistani port of Gwadar up and running have been stymied by jihadists and Baloch nationalists. Baluch insurgents have in recent years repeatedly targeted gas pipelines, fuel tankers, trains, and Chinese personnel.²⁰ Militants bombed in November 2016 a Sufi shrine in Balochistan's Khuzdar district, killing at least 52 people and injuring 102 others at the very moment that three convoys of trucks were making their way through the province en route to Gwadar.²¹

Chinese workers seven months later escaped injury or death by a roadside bomb that was exploded minutes after they passed it by the Pakistani military that has deployed 15,000 troops in Balochistan to protect CPEC. The unit created especially to secure CPEC projects is made up of nine army battalions and six civil armed forces wings.²² In Gwadar, the provincial government launched the Gwadar Safe City project involving 800 retired army and police personnel hired to provide security to Chinese companies intending to invest in the city's export processing zones and to safeguard the technical, technological, and other infrastructure that they will require.²³

²⁰ Agence France-Presse, Baloch ire prompts security fears for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, 21 April 2015, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/873432/baloch-ireprompts-security-fears-for-china-pakistan-economiccorridor/>

²¹ Sudha Ramachandran, CPEC takes a step forward as violence surges in Balochistan, Asia Times, 16 November 2016, <http://www.atimes.com/cpec-takes-step-forward-violence-surges-balochistan/?platform=hootsuite>

²² Baqir Sajjad Syed, COAS vows to meet CPEC projects' security challenges, Dawn, 12 March 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1319964/coas-vows-to-meet-cpec-projects-security-challenges>

²³ Maqbool Ahmed, Worrying development: Field notes on war and peace in Balochistan, Herald, 13 May, 2016, <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1153381/worrying-development-field-notes-on-war-and-peace-in-balochistan>

Investors and Chinese officials travel in Balochistan accompanied by Pakistani military vehicles on roads populated by mini trucks manufactured in the 1970s that are picketed by policemen at 50-metre intervals and cleared of all traffic. Roadside petrol stations are more often closed than open because of power outages. Operators pump fuel when electricity is available and store it in jerry cans to service customers.

An estimated 46 workers building a road between Gwadar and the Baloch capital of Quetta have been killed in recent years.²⁴ Chinese hopes suffered a further setback with the expansion of the Islamic State's theatre of operations into Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Baloch capital of Quetta was repeatedly rocked in 2017 by bombings that killed scores of police cadets and judicial personnel.²⁵ All in all, Balochistan government officials said the number of attacks on security forces in the region rose dramatically in 2016, 48 compared to approximately 20 in 2015.²⁶

Author Robert Kaplan, on a visit to Gwadar in 2008, "was struck not only by how isolated it was, between pounding sea and bleak desert, but how unstable was the region of Baluchistan, which lies immediately beyond the port in all landward directions. Ethnic Baluchi rebel leaders told me that they would never permit roads and pipelines to be built there, until their grievances with the Pakistani government in faraway Islamabad were settled. The security situation is indeed fraught with peril." Kaplan concluded that with "political stabilization of Pakistan and Afghanistan Gwadar, while a potentially useful coaling station for a budding Chinese navy, constitutes, in essence, a road to nowhere" (Fig. 6.3).²⁷

Locals in Gwadar agreed with Kaplan. With economic opportunity shrinking rather than increasing, Balochistan boasts Pakistan's highest enrolment in madrassahs as well as a rapid growth over the years in the number of religious seminaries.²⁸ "The Pakistani state's ambitious plans to

²⁴ Saeed Shah, Chinese-Pakistani Project Tries to Overcome Jihadists, Droughts and Doubts, *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 April 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/big-chinese-pakistani-project-tries-to-overcome-jihadists-droughts-and-doubts-1460274228>

²⁵ James M. Dorsey, Fighting Militants in Pakistan: Who Is In Charge?, RSIS Commentary, 2 November 2016, <https://mideastsoocer.blogspot.co.uk/search?q=Quetta>

²⁶ Interview with the author, 2 February 2017

²⁷ Robert D. Kaplan, China's Port in Pakistan? *Foreign Policy*, 27 May 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/05/27/chinas-port-in-pakistan/>

²⁸ C. Christine Fair, Does Pakistan Have a Madrasah Problem? Insights from New Data, SSRN, 20 July 2015, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2468620>

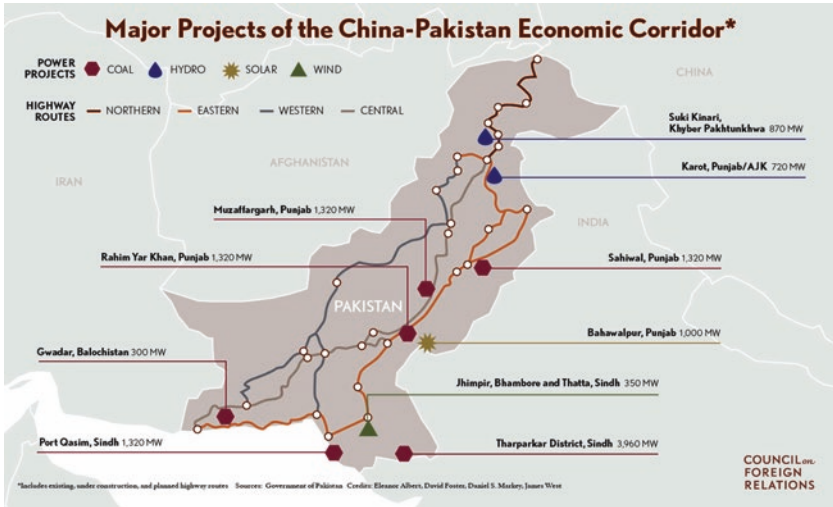


Fig. 6.3 Major projects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. (Copyright 2016 by the Council on Foreign Relations. Reprinted with permission)

turn Gwadar with Chinese backing into a Dubai-like megacity” rub against the local fishermen, Baloch political activists, and ordinary residents’ claims of rights in and sovereignty over land and fishing waters. ... The illegal/informal activities of local land records officials, landowners, and real estate agents tend to interrupt, stall, and divert the implementation of official development plans or visions in significant ways by blurring the distinction between public interest and private gain,” noted social development scholar Hafeez Jamali.²⁹

Many local Baloch dismissed Chinese assertions that the town would replicate the success of the Chinese port of Shenzhen. Shenzhen transitioned in a matter of decades from a fishing village into an industrial urban centre. Shenzhen, unlike Gwadar which is 650 kilometres from Karachi, the nearest city, was able to piggyback on Hong Kong located just next door with a GDP multiple times larger than that of all of Pakistan. “The local population have been made prisoners in their own town,” said a

²⁹ Hafeez Jamali, States of dispossession: plot, parchi and the politics of place in Gwadar, Pakistan, Lecture, Habib University, 18 March 2017

frequent traveller to Gwadar.³⁰ Hostility has been further fuelled by hard-handed military tactics to squash the growing insurgency.

No Balochistan representative was present when former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf signed the Gwadar agreement with Chinese Vice Premier Wu Bangguo in 2002.³¹ Recommendations by the Pakistani Senate to reduce tensions in Balochistan made more than a decade ago have gone unheeded. The Senate suggested that at least half of the seats on the board of the company managing Gwadar be allocated to representatives of Balochistan and that 7% of the port's proceeds be allocated for development of the province.³²

Pakistan's national security advisor retired Lieutenant-General Nasser Khan Janjua, applying the Roman principle of bread and games as appeasement, told a gathering in Karachi in 2017 that the government had quelled discontent and nationalist fervour "through events like horse and cattle shows and games, tournaments with a result that there was a thaw in the bickerings harboured by the people. Over due course of time the situation transited from flag burning to flag raising," Janjua said. To illustrate his points, Janjua showed slides of games and sports, including a performance of dancing horses and camels. "We took it upon ourselves to mitigate the prevailing sense of deprivation there," he said.

The government's Roman approach changed little on the ground. In a column entitled "CPEC promises the moon but Gwadar just wants water" published in *The Express Tribune* two days before Janjua's speech, columnist Shehad Baloch noted that the port city has lacked clean water for decades.³³ *Dawn*, Pakistan's leading English-language daily newspaper, reported months later in response to two incidents in the province in November 2017 in which a young police officer and his family was killed and separately 15 young men were shot dead on the border with Iran that "the disconnect between the state's assessment of the situation in Balochistan ... and the reality in the province could not be more stark. ... The security-centric approach pushed by the military leadership and meekly accepted by the Balochistan and federal governments is not working."³⁴

³⁰ Interview with the author, 10 January 2017

³¹ *Ibid.* Grare

³² Senate of Pakistan, Report of the Parliamentary Committee on Balochistan, November 2005, <http://www.senatedefencecommittee.com.pk/publication-detail.php?pageid=publication&rid=MTE=>

³³ Shehzad Baloch, CPEC promises the moon but Gwadar just wants water, *The Express Tribune*, 13 April 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1381944/cpec-promises-moon-gwadar-just-wants-water/>

³⁴ *Dawn*, Balochistan killings, 17 November 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1371063>

To turn Gwadar into a success story, both Pakistan and China would have to radically change their approaches that favour the Pakistani elite as well as the Chinese as was evident in the Chinese acquisition of rights to various development projects, including exploration of the Saindak gold and copper mine. The agreements allocated 2% of the proceeds to the Baloch provincial government with the remaining 98% divided up between China and Pakistan. Allocation of Gwadar's proceeds matched that of Saindak. Interest on Chinese loans would, moreover, be charged at above market rate.³⁵

Few Baloch, who often lack training, benefited from employment opportunities created by Chinese investment. Chinese rather than Pakistani engineers helped build Gwadar.³⁶ Of the 600 Pakistani workers building the port in 2006 only 100 day workers were Baloch.³⁷ In the old city of Gwadar, where electricity is available six hours a day and tap water two hours a week, workers from faraway Karachi with no protective helmets and no supervisors put pipes together for a new sewerage system using elementary materials.

The import of workers from outside the province was part of a plan for a more fundamental demographic shift that with the development of the port would see the influx of two million non-Baloch into Gwadar, a city of 70,000 predominantly Baloch residents.³⁸ Despite Pakistani government's denials, China Pak Investment Corporation in cooperation with Heritage Resources Ltd., a Chinese boutique investment firm that works closely with state-owned financial institutions, announced in October 2017 that it had to together with China's state-owned Top International Engineering Corporation (TIEC) obtained a no objection certificate from Gwadar authorities to build a luxury housing project that would accommodate

³⁵ Syed Irfan Raza, Senate panel wants Pakistan's interests fully protected under CPEC, Dawn, 1 March 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1317736/senate-panel-wants-pakistans-interests-fully-protected-under-cpec>

³⁶ International Crisis Group, Pakistan: The Worsening Conflict in Balochistan, 14 September 2006, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/119-pakistan-the-worsening-conflict-in-balochistan.pdf>

³⁷ Ray Fulcher, Balochistan: Pakistan's internal war, Green Left Weekly, 23 November 2006, <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/balochistan-pakistans-internal-war>

³⁸ C. Christine Fair and Ali Hamza, Rethinking Baloch Secularism: What the Data Say, Academia, 30 January 2017, https://www.academia.edu/31544654/Rethinking_Baloch_Secularism_What_the_Data_Say_1?campaign=upload_email

500,000 Chinese nationals.³⁹ The project would convert the Baloch fishing town into a Chinese city, prompting protests from the local population. Fears of a Chinese takeover have turned Chinese nationals into moving targets. They already populate a parallel town, Gwadar Smart Port City, with a five-star hotel atop a hill overlooking the port and Gwadar's slums that was protected by paramilitaries who barred access to ordinary locals. The new city boasts an elite housing enclave and a high-class coastal resort as well as a naval base in the vicinity.⁴⁰

The Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI) predicted in a report that at the current rate of influx of Chinese nationals into Balochistan, Pakistan's least populated region, Chinese would outnumber the indigenous population of the province by 2048. "This trend has sparked fear of marginalisation among the Baloch citizens, who are unsure of how will the unskilled people of the province maintain their lives without land ownership which is their only asset," the report warned (Fig. 6.4).⁴¹

The report warned that demographic concern "establishes a complementary hypothesis (apprehension) that native residents of Balochistan will not get their due share in the development of Balochistan." Listing vast areas of Balochistan that would benefit little or not from CPEC, it warned that the "inflow of Chinese investment and business enterprises will adversely impact the interests of business community in Pakistan" (Fig. 6.5).

Bent on foiling the Pakistani government and Chinese plans, Gwadar's estimated 7000 fishermen vowed not to leave the port and move 20 kilometres east to Sur Bandar where the government was building a jetty for them. "The security agencies ordered us several times to leave the port and fish at Sur. We can fish all year round in Gwadar because it is protected from high waves. In Sur, the waves prevent us from going out to sea in the summer months," said one fisherman.⁴²

The fisherman was part of a group that walked out of a meeting with a Chinese delegation convinced that CPEC would dislocate Balochistan's local population. "The Chinese smiled, shook our hands and asked us how

³⁹ Ahmar Mustikhan, Half million Chinese to take Gwadar by 2023: Report, The Times of India Blogs, 30 October 2017, <https://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/balochistan-insight/half-million-chinese-to-take-gwadar-by-2023-report/>

⁴⁰ The Herald, The Great Land Robbery, June 2008

⁴¹ Ibid. The Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry

⁴² Interview with the author, 10 January 2017

Changing in Population Dynamics after CPEC
(Projections based on existing rate of population growth and outflow migration)

Year	Chinese Origin	Pakistani Origin	Difference
2016	10.18	0.61	9.57
2017	10.42	1.22	9.20
2018	10.66	1.83	8.83
2019	10.91	2.45	8.47
2020	11.17	3.06	8.11
2021	11.44	3.69	7.75
2022	11.71	4.31	7.40
2023	11.98	4.93	7.05
2024	12.26	5.56	6.70
2025	12.55	6.19	6.36
2026	12.85	6.83	6.02
2027	13.15	7.47	5.69
2028	13.46	8.11	5.36
2029	13.78	8.75	5.03
2030	14.11	9.39	4.71
2031	14.44	10.04	4.40
2032	14.78	10.69	4.09
2033	15.13	11.35	3.78
2034	15.49	12.00	3.48
2035	15.85	12.66	3.19
2036	16.23	13.32	2.90
2037	16.61	13.99	2.62
2038	17.00	14.66	2.34
2039	17.40	15.33	2.08
2040	17.81	16.00	1.81
2041	18.23	16.68	1.56
2042	18.66	17.36	1.31
2043	19.10	18.04	1.07
2044	19.55	18.72	0.83
2045	20.02	19.41	0.60
2046	20.49	20.10	0.39
2047	20.97	20.80	0.18
2048	21.47	21.49	-0.03
2049	21.97	22.19	-0.22
2050	22.49	22.90	-0.40

Fig. 6.4 Changing in population dynamics after CPEC. (The Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry)

Deprived Districts	Proximity of CPEC Route	Location of CPEC Route	Remarks
DEPRIVED DISTRICTS OF BALOCHISTAN			
Jaffarabad	Long Term Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Kharan	Western Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Awaran	Makran Coastal Highway	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Barkhan	Long Term Alignment	25-50 Km	Moderate Positive Impact
Bolan	Western Alignment	25-50 Km	Moderate Positive Impact
Khuzdar	Eastern Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Qila Abdullah	Western Alignment	25-50 Km	Moderate Positive Impact
Qila Saifullah	Western Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
JhalMagsi	Long Term Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most significant positive impact
JhalMagsi	Eastern Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Lasbela	Makran Coastal Highway	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Loralai	Western Alignment	25-50 Km	Moderate Positive Impact

Fig. 6.5 Deprived districts of Balochistan. (The Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI))

they can help us since we were their guests. With other words, I am being designated a foreigner in my own country, my own town and on my own land,” the fisherman said. The haughtiness of Chinese officials was prevalent across Pakistan. In another instance, China’s ambassador to Pakistan, Zhao Lijian, denounced critics of CPEC as being “out of mind” in a Twitter spat with a prominent journalist who questioned whether Pakistanis were benefiting from Chinese investment.⁴³

⁴³Zhao Lijian, Twitter, 20 December 2016, <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/810942127077257216>

Mushkhal	Western Alignment	1-25 Km	Significant Positive Impact
Naseerabad	Long Term Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Kalat	Western Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Gwadar	Western Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Gwadar	Coastal Highway	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Kech	Western Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Nushki	Western Alignment	50-200 Km	Less Impact
Mustung	Western Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
DeraBughti	Long Term Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Sibbi	Western Alignment	50-200 Km	Less Impact
Ziarat	Western Alignment	1-25 Km	Significant Positive Impact
Pishin	Western Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Panjgur	Western Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Zhob	Western Alignment	0 Km	Passing Through the District, Most Significant Positive Impact
Chagai	Western Alignment	50-200 Km	Less Impact
Kohlu	Long Term Alignment	50-200 Km	Less Impact

Fig. 6.5 (continued)

The attitude of Pakistani security forces towards Gwadar’s fishermen was no different. “They suspect us by definition. We are forced to always have our identity cards, fishing license and a picture of our boat with us. We have been fishing here for centuries. We are being humiliated to please some Chinese,” the fisherman said as he recounted being beaten by security forces for having inadvertently sailed into a security zone inside Gwadar port.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Interview with the author, 8 May, 2017

Relations with the region's insurgents are no better. The insurgents regularly warned local residents not to cooperate with authorities or participate in elections. As a result, only 4% of eligible voters in Balochistan turned out for a by-election in December 2015 after rebels threatened violence and attacked candidates.⁴⁵ The sense of incarceration and alienation is likely to increase with the building of a security fence around Gwadar and entry points that will grant access only to those in possession of a residency pass.⁴⁶

It is reinforced by the debilitating impact of corruption. A proposal to turn Gwadar into a fishing industry hub by introducing game-changing technology to aquaculture was dropped when local authorities demanded a kickback. The technology would have created employment opportunities in hatcheries, grain-processing plants, silos, fish-processing factories, engineering, and technical support for offshore operations, warehouses, and shipping docks. Western companies were happy to engage in Balochistan despite the violence because they would not have been restricted by environmental regulation. Corruption was where they drew the line.⁴⁷

China and Pakistan have yet to demonstrate their ability to manoeuvre nimbly to avoid the pitfalls of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran as it plays out in the Indian Ocean, builds on decades of Saudi and Gulf funding and support for Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatives in South Asia, and exploits grievances in Balochistan. Iran, in a bid to counter potentially subversive Saudi moves, has a vested interest in connecting Chabahar and Gwadar and has found an ally in the foreign affairs committee of the Pakistani Senate. The foreign affairs committees of the Pakistani and Iranian parliaments agreed that they would ensure that that the two ports would complement rather than compete with one another.⁴⁸

Pakistan and China's recognition of Iran as a key player in their strategy coupled with Pakistani resistance to Saudi efforts to force it to choose sides in the kingdom's rivalry with the Islamic republic has fuelled Saudi concern that Pakistan could tilt away from the kingdom. Saudi Arabia, in a bid to counter closer Pakistani cooperation with Iran, instructed its

⁴⁵ Balochwama News, Balochistan: Pakistani military operation continue ahead of by-elections in Kech, 20 December 2015, <http://balochwama.com/2015/12/30/balochistan-pakistani-military-operation-continue-ahead-of-by-elections-in-kech/>

⁴⁶ Ibid. Shah

⁴⁷ Interview with businessman involved in the Gwadar project, 27 February 2017

⁴⁸ Dawn, Pakistan, Iran on verge of establishing strong economic ties, 9 March 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1319360/pakistan-iran-on-verge-of-establishing-strong-economic-ties>

diplomats to exploit Saudi influence in Pakistani institutions of higher education to prevent Iranians from gaining access to the country's universities.⁴⁹ In doing so, the kingdom hoped to leverage decades of massive Saudi funding of Pakistan's religious education system, including the International Islamic University of Islamabad (IIUI), as well as militant anti-Shiite groups responsible for the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands, of Shiites. Up to a quarter of Pakistan's population are Shiites, the world's largest minority Shia community. Saudi Arabia, beyond funding institutions, also invested US\$55 million in repairing earthquake damage at Azad Jammu and Kashmir University in Muzaffarabad, including the construction of a King Abdullah Campus, named after the late Saudi ruler.⁵⁰

Driving Saudi concerns home, Mohammed Hassan Husseinbor, a Washington-based Iranian lawyer and activist of Baloch origin, argued in his AGCIS study that Chabahar would enable Iran to step up oil exports to India at the expense of Saudi Arabia, raise foreign investment in the Islamic republic, increase government revenues, and allow Iran to project power in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Husseinbor suggested Saudi support for a low-level Baloch insurgency that would exploit discontent and repression of Baluch culture in Iran could serve as a countermeasure. "Saudis could persuade Pakistan to soften its opposition to any potential Saudi support for the Iranian Baluch. ... The Arab-Baluch alliance is deeply rooted in the history of the Gulf region and their opposition to Persian domination," Husseinbor said.

Noting the vast expanses of Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan Province, Husseinbor went on to say that "it would be a formidable challenge, if not impossible, for the Iranian government to protect such long distances and secure Chabahar in the face of widespread Baluch opposition, particularly if this opposition is supported by Iran's regional adversaries and world powers."

Husseinbor's Saudi-backed thinking was echoed in Washington during a seminar⁵¹ organized by the Hudson Institute with its close ties to the Trump administration days before Trump visited Saudi Arabia on his first

⁴⁹ Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's Evolving Alliance, *The National Interest*, 19 November 2015 <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/saudi-arabia-pakistans-evolving-alliance-14391?page=show>

⁵⁰ Author's interview with Masoom Yasinzai, rector of the International Islamic University of Islamabad, 28 July 2016

⁵¹ Hudson Institute, *The Iranian Mosaic: The Struggle of Minorities for Pluralism and Federalism in Iran*, 16 May 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/events/1426-the-iranian-mosaic-the-struggle-of-minorities-for-pluralism-and-federalism-in-iran52017>

overseas trip as US president to express unqualified support for the kingdom in its battle with Iran.⁵² Saudi Arabia, by the time Trump descended in Riyadh from Air Force One, had already put the building blocks in place for a proxy war in Balochistan.

Saudi-funded ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim madrassahs operated by anti-Shiite militants dominated Balochistan's educational landscape. "A majority of Baloch schoolchildren go to madrassahs (religious seminaries). They are in better condition than other schools in Balochistan. Most madrassahs are operated by Deobandis and Ahl-i-Hadith," said one of the founders of Sipah-i-Sahaba, a banned virulent anti-Shiite group that is believed to enjoy Saudi and Pakistani support.⁵³

Although officially renamed Ahle Sunnah Wa Al Jamaat (ASWJ) after Sipah was banned in Pakistan, the group is still often referred to by its original name. The co-founder, who has since left the group but maintains close ties to it, was referring to the Deobandi sect of Islam, a Saudi-backed ultra-conservative, anti-Shiite movement originally established in India in the nineteenth century to counter British colonial rule, and Ahl-i-Hadith, the religious-political group in Pakistan with the longest ties to the kingdom. The co-founder said the mosques funnelled Saudi funds to the militants.

The co-founder said the leaders in Balochistan of Sipah and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), a Sipah offshoot, Maulana Ramzan Mengal and Maulana Wali Farooqi, enjoyed government and military protection because their anti-Shiite sentiments made them targets for Iran. He said the two men, who maintained close ties to Saudi Arabia, travelled in Balochistan in convoys of up to ten vehicles that included Pakistan military guards. "Policemen stand guard outside Mengal's madrassa," the co-founder said. ASWJ's popular base was evident on Facebook where the group maintains 348 Facebook pages, 200 as ASWJ and 148 as Sipah-i-Sahaba.⁵⁴

"Ramzan gets whatever he needs from the Saudis," the co-founder said. Close relations between Sipah and LeJ, on the one hand, and pro-government tribesmen in Balochistan complicated intermittent

⁵² James M. Dorsey, Two conferences spotlight Muslim world's struggle to counter militancy, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, 23 May 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.co.uk/2017/05/two-conferences-spotlight-muslim-worlds.html>

⁵³ Interview with the author, 14 May 2017

⁵⁴ Jahanzaib Haque and Omer Bashir, Banned outfits in Pakistan operate openly on Facebook, *Dawn*, 30 May 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1335561/banned-outfits-in-pakistan-operate-openly-on-facebook>

government efforts to reign in the militants. So does the militants' involvement in drugs smuggling that gives them an independent source of funding.

Balochistan government officials insisted that sectarian violence in the province had nosedived in recent years. A spokesman, Anwar-ul Haq Kakar, noted that sectarian killings had dropped from 239 in 2013 to only 60 in 2016. Kakar credited the killing of several LeJ commanders by security forces for the drop in violence. "That's why there have been no attacks on the Shiite community since 2014," Kakar said. The spokesman argued that the militants' targeting of alleged government informers had backfired and turned public sentiment against them.⁵⁵

Yet, the world of Balochistan militancy, much like elsewhere in Pakistan, is a murky one. Critics of the Pakistani military suggested that it was trying to play both ends against the middle.

The military has been Islamicizing Balochistan. The youth south of the Quetta Valley are infested with Sunni ultra-conservatism. They are attacking Hazara Shiites with the backing of the state. The military has used religion against ethnic identity since the 1970s. Balochistan is now getting sucked into the West Asian (Saudi-Iranian) political and military conflict. That will create hell. Injecting Sunni extremism with Arab money can be tempting but disastrous, opening the floodgates for the internationalisation of the Baloch problem,

warned Afrasiab Khattak, a former Pakistani senator with close ties to Balochistan.⁵⁶

Supporting anti-Iranian elements in Balochistan has enmeshed China, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan in a world in which the lines between various groups are fluid and the battles in Pakistan and Afghanistan and potentially Iran are inter-linked. It has prompted the Trump administration to gradually adopt a tougher attitude towards Pakistani military links to militants and raised questions of how long China could afford to look the other way and remain on the side lines of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

Just how fluid the dividing lines are was highlighted days before Trump's visit to the kingdom.⁵⁷ The US Treasury, as Trump prepared for his trip, declared Ali Muhammad Abu Turab, a prominent Pakistani Islamic scholar who serves on a government-appointed religious board,

⁵⁵ Interview with the author, 16 May 2017

⁵⁶ Interview with the author, 10 June 2017

⁵⁷ Fahim Hamed, A three-way summit in Riyadh (قمة الرياض ثلاثية الأبعاد.. عزل إيران عالميا), Okaz, 9 May, 2017, <http://okaz.com.sa/article/1545466>

maintains close ties to Saudi Arabia, runs a string of madrassahs along Balochistan's with Afghanistan, and is a major fundraiser, a specially designated terrorist.⁵⁸

In a twist of irony, the Treasury announced Abu Turab's designation as he was visiting Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the latest of numerous fundraising trips to the Gulf.⁵⁹ The Treasury described Abu Turab, who serves on Pakistan's Council of Islamic Ideology established to assist the government in bringing laws in line with the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet Mohammed, as a "facilitator" who "helped ... raise money in the Gulf and supported the movement of tens of thousands of dollars from the Gulf to Pakistan."⁶⁰ The Treasury said funds raised by Abu Turab financed operations of various groups, including Pakistan's Jama'at ul Dawa al-Qur'an (JDQ); Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Pakistani intelligence-backed group that at times has enjoyed support from Saudi Arabia; the Taliban; and the Islamic State's South Asian wing.

At a jihadi-operated blood bank in Quetta, the talk in the spring of 2017 was about jihad, not rosy economic prospects as a result of Chinese investment. "You must read these regularly if you want to be good Muslims. It will also help you live your lives according to the sunnah," an Jamat-ud-Dawa (JuD) activist admonished visitors as he handed out JuD literature at the group's facility.⁶¹ The distribution of the materials was but one example of a proliferation of jihadi and ultra-conservative Sunni literature in bookshops in the Baloch capital. Abdullah Khan, a former spokesman for the group that is widely seen as a front for LeT, an internationally proscribed organization that targets Kashmir and India and was founded by Pakistani intelligence with the support of Saudi Arabia and Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian mentor of Bin Laden's who joined the Afghan jihad in the 1980s, noted that "JuD would always support the Saudi regime because they share the Salafi school of thought."⁶²

Baloch intellectuals argued that Baloch identity politics underlay ideological trends in the region. "Three schools of thought are discussed in

⁵⁸ US Department of the Treasury, Treasury Targets Pakistan-Based Terrorist Leaders and Facilitators, 11 May 2017, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0080.aspx>

⁵⁹ Interview with Pakistani militant, 13 May 2017

⁶⁰ Ibid. US Department of the Treasury

⁶¹ Muhammad Akbar Notezai, Balochistan's Battle for Ideas, Dawn, 21 April, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1327327/balochistans-battle-for-ideas>

⁶² Interview with Abdullah Khan, 9 January 2016

Quetta: nationalism, Marxism and obscurantism. The dominant discussion in Quetta is nationalism,” said Shah Mohammad Marri, a Baloch academic.⁶³ Government opposition to Baloch nationalism was one reason why the Pakistani military and intelligence backed by the Saudis had supported Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism and militancy in the region. Pakistani journalist Muhammad Akbar Notezai recalled raids on book fairs and bookshops in which authorities confiscated texts written by Karl Marx and Bertrand Russell; biographies of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Nelson Mandela, and Che Guevara; Baloch literary magazines; and Baloch history books because they were subversive and “anti-Pakistan.”⁶⁴

Government backing of ultra-conservatism and jihadism benefited from the fact that Balochis began studying in Deobandi seminaries even before Pakistani independence. “In undivided India, more than 100 people from our northern belt went to Deoband to study religion. When one of them would return, he’d erect a madrassah and get his disciples. In this way, religious thought expanded slowly and gradually. ... Religious education was already present (in the region) but it was not as institutionalised in the beginning as it is today” as a result of government backing and Saudi funding, said Barkat Shah Kakar, a lecturer at the University of Balochistan.⁶⁵

Saudi backing for the militants in Balochistan posed a problem for China on multiple levels. Obviously, taking the kingdom’s proxy war with Iran to Balochistan threatened aggravating the already troubled security situation in CPEC’s crown jewel. Equally strategic, however, was the fact that the kingdom was signalling that despite China’s economic significance, it was placing its political bets with Washington rather than with Beijing. It also suggested that the kingdom was willing to jeopardize China’s economic and geopolitical interests for gains in the kingdom’s battle with Iran and raised the question whether China would ultimately succeed in balancing its relations with the kingdom and Iran without being sucked into their feud.

Chinese concerns that CPEC could be jeopardized by a renewed US-Saudi effort to destabilize Iran using Balochistan as a launching pad were supported by long-standing Iranian assertions that US, Saudi, and Pakistani intelligence had in the past supported anti-Iranian militants in the province, including Jundallah (Soldiers of God), another offshoot of Sipah. Jundallah, founded by Abdolmalek Rigi, a charismatic, daredevil

⁶³ Ibid. Notezai

⁶⁴ Ibid. Notezai

⁶⁵ Ibid. Notezai

member of a powerful Baloch tribe known for its left-wing politics who was believed to have had ties to Saudi Arabia as well as the United States,⁶⁶ was one of the several anti-Iranian groups that enjoyed US and Saudi support as part of US President George W. Bush's effort to undermine the government in Tehran.⁶⁷ Bush had asked the Congress for \$400 million to fund covert operations that included support of Iranian opposition groups.⁶⁸ Jundullah's history provides insight into what a renewed US-Saudi campaign could look like and could mean for CPEC.

Using violent hit-and-run tactics, Jundullah wracked havoc in Sistan and Baluchistan in the first years of the twenty-first century. Its operations put Iran's Revolutionary Guards, responsible for protecting the Islamic republic's borders, on the spot. Rigi taunted the Iranians by publishing his often brutal exploits and killings of Iranian military personnel on the Internet, including in 2005 the beheading of an officer, Shahab Mansuri. A videotaping of the beheading was also sent to the Saudi-owned pan-Arab TV station Al Arabiya.⁶⁹

Rigi was ultimately captured when a flight he took from the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek to Dubai was diverted at Iran's request to Sharjah in 2010.⁷⁰ He was extradited to Iran and executed in a demonstration of on-off Pakistani-Iranian cooperation. Iranian intelligence reported that "Rigi who was protected by (Pakistan's) ISI lobbies and supported politically and financially by America and Saudi Arabia never for a second thought he would be captured by Iran's intelligence service."⁷¹

Pakistan appeared willing to help the Iranians out whenever it served its purpose of fighting Pakistani Baloch nationalists like in the case of Rigi and his brother, Abdolhamid Rigi, who was also hanged in Iran. At the same time, Pakistan often with Saudi support used militant Islamist anti-Shiite and anti-Iranian groups to counter the nationalists. Pakistani

⁶⁶ Ibid. Shuster

⁶⁷ Seymour M. Hersh, Preparing the Battlefield, *The New Yorker*, 27 July 2008, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/07/07/preparing-the-battlefield>

⁶⁸ Ibid. Hersh

⁶⁹ Reuters, Who are Iran's Jundollah Rebels, 23 February 2010, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/factbox-who-are-irans-jundollah-rebels>

⁷⁰ Ian Black, Iran captures Sunni insurgent leader Abdolmalek Rigi, *The Guardian*, 23 February 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/23/iran-abdolmalek-rigi-arrest>

⁷¹ Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan, Security, Diplomacy, and American Influence*, London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015, p. 236

authorities repeatedly told the Iranians that they were overwhelmed by internal security problems and could not always prioritize securing the border with the Islamic republic. Suggesting by implication that Pakistani and Chinese interests may not always coincide, Khalid Ahmad, a prominent Pakistani author and journalist who focuses on militants and sectarianism, asserted that “Pakistani policy has been consistently anti-Iran.”⁷²

Jundallah’s US contact in the early 2000s was reported to be Thomas McHale, a 56-year-old hard-charging, brusque, and opinionated Port Authority of New York and New Jersey detective and former ironworker, who had travelled to Pakistan and Afghanistan as part of his work for a Joint Terrorism Task Force in Newark, New Jersey. Known for his disdain for bureaucratic restrictions, McHale maintained contact with Jundallah and members of the Rigi tribe in an off-the-books operation.⁷³ A survivor of the 1993 attack on New York’s World Trade Towers, McHale had made a name for himself by rescuing survivors of the 9/11 attack. He played himself in Oliver Stone’s movie, *World Trade Center*, in which Nicolas Cage starred as a Port Authority police officer.

Jundallah ambushed a motorcade of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad when he visited Sistan and Baluchistan in 2005 but failed to kill him. Rigi’s boyish, grinning face became the defining image of Baluch jihad in Iran because of the ambush. A suicide bomber killed months later the Revolutionary Guard commander tasked with crushing Jundallah and returning peace to the province and bombed a Guards’ bus. Jundallah and associated groups such as Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice), another Sipah offshoot, have since targeted Iranian border posts, Revolutionary Guards, police officers, convoys, and Shiite mosques.⁷⁴ The group killed 14 border guards in 2013 in a raid on the town of Saravan in Sistan and Baluchistan in what was believed to have been a Saudi-backed operation. In a further indication of Saudi influence, Jundallah typically issued its statements in Arabic rather than Farsi. “The Saudis want to increase their leverage against Iran and just like Syria, they are unlikely to think twice before

⁷²Interview with the author, 15 May 2017

⁷³James Risen and Matt Apuzzo, Getting Close to Terror, but Not to Stop It, The New York Times, 8 November 2014, https://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/world/despise-cia-fears-thomas-mchale-port-authority-officer-kept-sources-with-ties-to-iran-attacks.html?_r=1&referrer

⁷⁴Thomas Erdbrink, Insurgents in Pakistan Stepping Up Iran Strikes, The New York Times, 9 October 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/10/world/asia/pakistan-sunni-insurgents-step-up-attacks-in-iran.html>

supporting Salafist organizations to attack Iran or its allies repeatedly, and in as many places as possible,” said Israeli-Iranian analyst Meir Javedanfar.⁷⁵ Moreover, while US officials insisted that government agencies had not directed or approved Jundallah operations, designation by the US Treasury of the group as a terrorist organization⁷⁶ did not put an end to McHale’s operation.⁷⁷

In response, Iran attacked the militants and raided villages in Balochistan. Arif Saleem, a 42-year-old villager, recalled being woken in the wee morning hours in November 2013 when bombs dropped just outside the mud walls that surrounded his family compound in Kulauhi, 67 kilometres from the Pakistani border with Iran. Located in a district that is the epicentre of a low-level proxy war with Iran, Kulauhi’s residents survive on subsistence farming and smuggling.⁷⁸

“Some buildings collapsed. Luckily, none of the kids were inside those. The blast was so strong, we thought the world was ending,” said Saleem, convinced that Iranian planes from an airbase on the Iranian side of the border carried out the bombing. He believed Mullah Omar, an ethnic Baluch from Iran who heads Jaish al-Adel, was the target. Omar was not in the area when the bombs dropped.

In what threatens to repeat itself if Saudi-backed groups step up their anti-Iranian operations, Iran raided villages in Pakistani Balochistan and used helicopters and road vehicles to chase militants deep into Pakistan on an almost weekly basis. At times, the incursions sparked firefights with Pakistani troops. Speaking in hushed tones, one man in the administrative centre of Turbat recalled how four plain-clothes soldiers in two Iranian trucks posed as diesel merchants and lured his son, Tanveer, into one of their vehicles. “When Tanveer realized what was happening, he jumped out of the truck, but the Iranians shot him,” he said. “We got the body two weeks later. They said they had the wrong Tanveer.”⁷⁹

The standing of Sharif, the Pakistani commander of the Saudi-led military alliance, and that of Pakistan were further tarnished when Pakistani

⁷⁵ Meir Javedanfar, *Saudi-Backed Salafists Returning to Iran’s Border?* *Al Monitor*, 30 October 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/sp-iran-saudi-salafists-javedanfar.html>

⁷⁶ US Department of State, *Foreign Terrorist Organizations*, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/266649.htm>

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Risen and Apuzzo

⁷⁸ Umar Farooq, *The Dangerous Drug-Funded Secret War Between Iran and Pakistan*, *The Daily Beast*, 29 December 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/12/29/the-dangerous-drug-funded-secret-war-between-iran-and-pakistan.html>

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Farooq

promises to China that it had the security situation in Balochistan under control were punctured by the killing by Jaish al-Adel in April 2017 of ten Iranian border guards.⁸⁰ Saudi Arabia's state-owned Al Ekhbariya TV described the attack as a "heroic" operation executed by "resistance forces trying to liberate Sistan and Baluchestan."⁸¹ The attack was followed by the killing of ten workers involved in CPEC-related projects and the kidnapping of two Chinese missionary teachers who were subsequently executed.⁸²

The attacks came after a visit to China by Saudi King Salman during which he rebuffed a Chinese offer to mediate between the kingdom and Iran.⁸³ They also suggested that Chinese efforts to reassure Saudi Arabia, the People Republic's foremost Arab trading partner, with stepped-up military cooperation; a joint counterterrorism exercise, the first ever between the Chinese military and an Arab armed force; and infrastructure development that would help the Saudi regime pre-empt popular discontent failed to blunt the kingdom's determination to confront the Islamic republic.⁸⁴

In a bid to address widespread frustration in the Saudi port of Jeddah with repeated flooding because of lack of infrastructure, China's state-owned Chinese Communication Construction Group (CCCC) was tasked in 2017 with building a 37-kilometre-long channel to catch rain and flood water. The project was implemented after the kingdom had unilaterally rewritten its social contract that promised cradle-to-grave welfare in exchange for political subservience and acceptance of an ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim social and moral code as part of ambitious reforms aimed at rationalizing and diversifying the economy.

Protests had erupted in Jeddah in 2009 and again in November 2011, a month before popular Arab uprisings swept the Middle East in North

⁸⁰ Reuters, Militants kill 10 Iranian border guards in attack on frontier with Pakistan, 26 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/26/militants-kill-ten-iranian-border-guards-in-attack-on-frontier-with-pakistan>

⁸¹ Iran Front Page, Saudi State TV Defends Terrorists, Calls Iran "Occupying Regime," 14 May 2017, <http://ifpnews.com/exclusive/saudi-call-iran-occupy-regime/#.WRGicKzSeV4.twitter>

⁸² James M. Dorsey, The US-Saudi Plot For Iran that Spells Trouble for China's Silk Road, South China Morning Post, 27 May 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.co.uk/2017/05/the-us-saudi-plot-for-iran-that-spells.html>

⁸³ James M. Dorsey, Walking a tightrope: China maneuvers between Saudi Arabia and Iran, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 9 March 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.co.uk/2017/03/walking-tightrope-china-maneuverers.html>

⁸⁴ James M. Dorsey, Why Saudi Arabia, China and Islamic State are Courting the Maldives, South China Morning Post, 13 March 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.co.uk/2017/03/why-saudi-arabia-china-and-islamic.html>

Africa, when floods in the absence of a drainage system killed scores of people. “It might be an ordinary channel in another area, but it isn’t the same in Saudi Arabia and it has special importance and came after painful lessons,” said Ma Chifeng, the director of CCCG’s Jeddah City Project for Flood Drainage.⁸⁵

While Chinese interests in Balochistan were most at risk, Saudi-backed efforts in Khuzestan, Iran’s oil-rich province that is home to its ethnic Arab population, threatened to be no less destabilizing and similarly detrimental to the kind of stability required for the Belt and Road, even if they, at least initially, involved less violence. In an assertion of ethnic identity, thousands of Iranian Arabs attended in March 2017 an Asian soccer competition match between Esteghlal Ahvaz FC, the local team in the Khuzestan capital of Ahwaz, and Qatar’s Lekhwiya SC dressed in traditional Arab garb. The assertion was not pro-Saudi but served the kingdom’s purpose.

An Iranian Arab website⁸⁶ said the fans were protesting government efforts to suppress their identity. It said the fans cheered their team in Arabic rather than Farsi and chanted “Arabic is my identity and honour” and “Al Ahwaz for Ahwazis and all Gulf state residents are dearest to us.” Fans also reportedly recited poetry celebrating their region’s Arab heritage.⁸⁷

The website, Ahwaz Monitor, that published the protest speaks to the murky ponds in which the Saudis backed by the United States were fishing. While Baloch groups were largely delineated along either nationalist or Sunni Muslim ultra-conservative lines with Pakistani intelligence backing religious groups against nationalists, communities like the Iranian Arabs were deeply divided and factitious and often a cesspool of personal, political, and ideological rivalries. That however was unlikely to put Chinese concerns to rest given the potency of militancy in Balochistan and the links between the Baloch and various other ethnic minorities in Iran, including Iranian Arabs.

If anything, Iranian Arab perceptions of Saudi support for their aspirations spelled trouble for China’s Belt and Road plans. Ahwaz Monitor

⁸⁵ Gui Liping, “Belt and Road” construction projects bring benefits to Saudis, ECNS, 10 May 2017, <http://www.ecns.cn/business/2017/05-10/256838.shtml>

⁸⁶ Ahwaz Monitor, Ahwazi Arabs Support Their Football Team in Courageously National Style, 18 March 2017, <http://www.ahwazmonitor.info/new/ahwazi-arabs-support-their-football-team-in-courageously-national-style/>

⁸⁷ Email exchange with the author, 3 June 2017

founder Yasser Assadi described Saudi policy towards Khuzestan as “volatile” and geared towards “militarizing the region.”⁸⁸ An activist with close ties to Iranian Arab nationalists warned that Saudi Arabia was seeking to counter Iranian President Hassan Rouhani’s efforts to allow the region’s establishment political representatives to voice dissent.

“The more that this happens, the less the Saudi-backed separatists win. What the separatists want is the polarisation of views and to incite the regime to attack the (Iranian Arab) community, thereby securing a popular backlash. They have stepped up their campaign of murder, mostly of security personnel but also of non-security officials. They want mass arrests and public executions in order to establish themselves as the vanguard of the Ahwazi resistance,” the activist said.⁸⁹

Al Ahwaz is the Arabic name of Khuzestan that borders on Iraq and sits at the head of the Gulf. It is also the name of the province’s capital that hosts Iran’s foremost refinery. Ethnic Arabs are believed to account for at least one third of Khuzestan’s 3.7 million inhabitants. Eruptions of discontent in Khuzestan have become a fixture in a province that for decades has been an overt and covert battlefield in the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional hegemony.

China’s problem was that Iran was unlikely to stand by idly as Saudi Arabia and/or the United States attempted to foment unrest. The US-Saudi strategy risked Iran retaliating by attempting to stir trouble among Shiites in Bahrain, home to a low-level insurgency since the island’s Sunni Muslim minority regime brutally squashed a popular uprising in 2011 with the support of Saudi troops, and in Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich, predominantly Shiite Eastern province. Speaking to Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah’s Al-Manar TV, Iranian Defence Minister General Hossein Dehghan said that if Saudi Arabia engaged in “such a stupidity” nothing would be “left in Saudi Arabia except Mecca and Medina,” Islam’s two holiest cities.⁹⁰

Escalating Saudi-Iranian tensions threatened to create the one situation China was trying to avoid in the greater Middle East: conflict with the United States. It also heightened Chinese concerns, confirmed by then US national security director Daniel R. Coates in a threat assessment that “the emerging China Pakistan Economic Corridor will probably offer militants

⁸⁸ Email exchange with the author, 3 June 2017

⁸⁹ Email exchange with the author, 3 June 2017

⁹⁰ Nasser Karimi, Iran warns Saudi prince for bringing ‘battle’ to Iran remark, Agence France Press, 8 May 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iran-warns-saudi-prince-for-bringing-battle-to-iran-remark/2017/05/08/417a810e-33b6-11e7-ab03-aa29f656f13e_story.html

and terrorists additional targets.”⁹¹ Chinese, Pakistani, and Russian officials warned in December 2016 that militant groups in Afghanistan, including the Islamic State (IS), were expanding their operations. IS in cooperation with the Pakistani Taliban launched two months later a wave of attacks that has targeted government, law enforcement, the military, and minorities and killed hundreds.⁹²

Indian Prime Minister Mahindra Modi added to the tension by charging in an Independence Day speech months earlier that Pakistan would “have to answer to the world for the atrocities committed by it against people in Baluchistan.”⁹³ Modi’s remarks broke with India’s long-standing avoidance of public association with Balochistan’s troubles, prompting fears in China that its problems in Pakistan were about to multiply. Pakistani intelligence and the military said several months later that surrendering Baloch insurgents had asserted that they were funded by Indian intelligence.⁹⁴

Modi’s remarks were in part prompted by China’s refusal to seriously take Pakistan to task for its long-standing policy of supporting militant groups as proxies in Afghanistan as well as against India in Kashmir—a policy that is under increasing attack by Trump administration. On the contrary, China in fact encouraged the policy by shielding Masood Azhar from UN designation as a terrorist. China saw Azhar and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), the group he leads that has been proscribed by both the UN and Pakistan, as a useful tool to keep India off balance.⁹⁵ It also constituted a quiet Chinese admission that military and law enforcement cooperation with other governments would not neutralize threats to

⁹¹ Daniel R. Coats, Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 11 May 2017, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/os-coats-051117.pdf>

⁹² James M. Dorsey, Challenging the state-Pakistani militants form deadly alliance, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 17 February 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.co.uk/2017/02/challenging-state-pakistani-militants.html>

⁹³ FE Online, This is the speech by PM Modi on Kashmir, PoK and Balochistan that has left Pakistan fuming, 13 August 2016, <http://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/this-is-the-speech-by-pm-modi-on-kashmir-pok-and-balochistan-that-has-left-pakistan-fuming/347071/>

⁹⁴ The Tribune Express, 20 Baloch insurgents surrender, confess receiving RAW funding: ISPR, 21 March 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1361642/20-baloch-insurgents-surrender-confess-receiving-raw-funding-ispr/>

⁹⁵ James M. Dorsey, BRICS potentially strengthens Trumps hand in tackling Pakistani support of militants, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 5 September 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.sg/2017/09/brics-potentially-strengthens-trumps.html>

Chinese interests abroad or isolate Uyghur militants in Xinjiang from groups beyond the province's borders. China's embassy in Islamabad briefly took the lead by building relations with religious leaders and political parties who were close to militants,⁹⁶ allowing Pakistani scholars to teach at Islamic schools in China, and lifting a ban on Tablighi Jamaat, an apolitical Sunni Muslim group focussed on proselytization—an approach that has been discarded as Chinese authorities stepped up their crackdown in Xinjiang.⁹⁷

There was no indication that China made direct contact with Azhar, a fighter in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and an Islamic scholar who graduated from a Deobandi madrassah, Darul Uloom Islamia Binori Town in Karachi, the alma mater of numerous Pakistani militants, and was believed to have been responsible for an attack in 2016 on India's Pathankot Air Force Station. The militants, dressed in Indian military uniforms, fought a 14-hour battle against Indian security forces that only ended when the last attacker was killed. A portly bespectacled son of a Bahawalpur religious studies teacher and author of a four-volume treatise on jihad as well as books with titles like *Forty Diseases of the Jews*, Azhar was briefly detained after the attack and has since gone underground. Freed earlier from Indian prison in 1999 in exchange for the release of passengers of a hijacked Indian Airlines flight, Azhar was also believed to be responsible for an attack in 2001 on the Indian parliament in New Delhi that brought Pakistan and India to the brink of war. JeM despite being banned continued to publicly raise funds and recruit fighters in Pakistani mosques.

China, however, may be concluding that the advantages of endorsing Pakistan's selective support of militants no longer outweigh the threat it poses to the Belt and Road initiative. In a first, China in 2017 joined four other major emerging markets grouped in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa) in describing Pakistan-backed militant groups as a regional security threat.⁹⁸ "You cannot have good and bad terrorists, and it is a collective action. Members of the BRICS countries have themselves been victims of terrorism, and I would say that what has come of today acknowledges the fact that we must work collectively in handling this," Indian foreign ministry spokeswoman Preeti Saran told reporters immediately after BRICS issued its statement.

⁹⁶ Peter Lee, Taliban force a China switch, Asia Times, 6 March 2009, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KC06Ad01.html>

⁹⁷ Dawn, Jamaat to preach Islam in China, says Qazi, 4 April 2009, <https://www.dawn.com/news/971085>

⁹⁸ Xinhua, Full text of Xiamen Declaration of BRICS leaders, 5 September 2017, <http://www.chinadailyasia.com/articles/44/150/109/1504582539856.html>



Long Live the Autocrat and Neo-Colonialism

In pursuit of its goals, China seems at times to be its own worst enemy. China has frequently shot itself in its own foot with self-defeating policies like its refusal to pressure Pakistan to convincingly crack down on militant groups. Often onerous commercial and economic terms for Chinese-funded projects that constitute part of the Belt and Road initiative have fuelled anti-Chinese sentiment and protests.

Beijing's tolerance of militancy in Pakistan undermines the credibility of China's portrayal of strife in its troubled north-western province of Xinjiang as related to terrorism rather than suppression of ethnic and religious rights. Chinese indulgence of Pakistani links to militancy dates back decades. It took the 2008 attack by Pakistani militants on multiple targets in Mumbai, India, including the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, in which 164 people were killed and 308 others wounded, for China to agree to the listing by the United Nations of the perpetrators as terrorists.

A 2009 cable sent to the US embassy in Islamabad by Assistant Secretary of State Esther Brimmer noted that "prior to the attacks, our request to list JuD (Jamaat-ud-Dawa) and (JuD leader Muhammad) Saeed were placed on hold by China at the behest of Pakistan."¹ Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) is widely viewed as a fig leaf for Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Pakistani-backed militant group linked to al-Qaeda that had been banned several years earlier.

¹The Guardian, US embassy cables: Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists raise funds in Saudi Arabia, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/220186>

It was almost a decade later that Pakistan finally put Saeed, one of the world's most wanted men who has a \$10 million US bounty on his head, has been designated by the United Nations as well as the United States as a terrorist, and is better known as Hafiz Saeed, under house arrest.² The move did little to convince the Trump administration that Pakistan was cracking down on militants despite Pakistan's electoral commission's rejection in October 2017 of JuD's application for a licence to establish a political party. Saeed has denied any link between JuD and LeT.

It also illustrated the dark side of what China and Pakistan assert is an all-weather friendship. Closer to the truth is the fact that China's shielding of Pakistan in the United Nations Security Council, reluctance to pressure Islamabad to curtail its support for militants, generous military aid, and massive Belt and Road investment in the country have made Pakistan dependent on Beijing and turned it into a client state. Pakistan served as a useful vehicle to keep India off balance and reduce US influence in a key South Asian nation.

The risk in China's playing both sides against the middle, however, became evident when militants launched an early morning attack on a Chinese massage parlour and acupuncture clinic in an upscale neighbourhood of the Pakistani capital Islamabad on 23 June 2007. The attackers included ten fully covered women armed with batons who were operating out of the city's notorious Lal Masjid or Red Mosque, one of the Pakistani capital's oldest mosques, named after its red walls and interior. After overpowering three Pakistani guards, the militants first beat and then abducted seven Chinese members of the staff and two of their Pakistani clients.³ A spokesman for the militants, speaking at the Jamia Hafsa madrassah, a religious seminary adjacent to the mosque, charged that the parlour was a brothel and that five of the Chinese hostages were prostitutes. He said the militants had taken affairs into their own hands after authorities had failed to act.⁴ The Chinese embassy implicitly confirmed the militants' assertion by saying in a statement that Chinese nationals should pay respect to local Pakistani traditions and culture.⁵

² James M. Dorsey, BRICS potentially strengthens Trumps hand in tackling Pakistani support of militants, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, 5 December 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.nl/2017/09/brics-potentially-strengthens-trumps.html>

³ Howard M. French, Letter from China: Mosque siege reveals the Chinese connection, *The New York Times*, 12 July 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/12/world/asia/12iht-letter.1.6629789.html>

⁴ Syed Mohsin Naqvi, Hostages freed after raid on "brothel," 23 June 2007, CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/06/23/pakistan.raid/>

⁵ Ibid. French

The kidnappings within spitting distance of key government installations, including the presidential palace and the headquarters of Pakistan's intelligence service, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), in the capital of one of China's closest allies, embarrassingly laid bare the knots into which China had tied itself. The embarrassment was compounded by the fact that the mosque offered refuge to militant Uyghurs, from the northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang as well as radicals from the greater Middle East. Pouring oil on the fire, the militants launched their attack four months after Pakistan had inaugurated the Chinese-funded port of Gwadar, a cornerstone of China's \$50 billion plus investment in Pakistani infrastructure designed to create a key link in its Eurasian Belt and Road initiative and propel economic development in Xinjiang as part of Beijing's effort to counter Uyghur cultural and national aspirations.

The incident sparked heated debate on Chinese social media and satirical protests that put the Chinese government on the spot. "If you ask me, I'd say we stop protesting, and just go there and eliminate the problem. How about it? We have over one billion people. We needn't fear. If our country loves its people, it should stand up for them. If the Americans have a lot of excuses, we can find excuses too!" quipped one commentator. Another falsely asserted that "the last page of an American passport says, 'The U.S.A. stands behind you!' The last page of a Chinese passport says, 'When Chinese citizens encounter difficulties, please look for necessary assistance from the country or area you are in.'"⁶ To mock perceived government inability, some critics sent calcium pills to the Chinese foreign ministry.⁷

The debate and protests offered a foretaste of discussions four years later when China was forced to evacuate some 35,000 nationals from Libya after a popular uprising against the regime of Col. Moammar Qaddafi erupted. The operation, China's first major "out of area" naval endeavour⁸ and its first use of long-range military aircraft for humanitarian purposes,⁹ constituted an early indication of the mounting pressure on the Chinese government to ensure the safety and security of overseas Chinese nationals and investments.

⁶Ibid. French

⁷Khaled Ahmed, *It Made China See Red*, The Indian Express, 6 February 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/it-made-china-see-red-lal-masjid/>

⁸BBC News, "Yemen Crisis: China Evacuates Citizens and Foreigners from Aden," 3 April, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32173811>

⁹Gabe Collins and Andrew S. Erickson, "Implications of China's Military Evacuation of Citizens from Libya," *China Brief* 11: 4. 11 March 2011, <https://jamestown.org/program/implications-of-chinas-military-evacuation-of-citizens-from-libya>

Pakistan Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry almost a decade later again spotlighted the pitfalls involved in Pakistan's support for militants and China's tacit endorsement of the policy when he warned his country's military and intelligence leaders in October 2016 that Pakistan risked international isolation if it failed to crack down on militant groups, including Jaish-i-Mohammed, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and the Haqqani network. Chaudhry noted that China continued to block United Nations' sanctioning of Jaish-i-Mohammed leader Masood Azhar but was increasingly questioning the wisdom of doing so.¹⁰ Azhar, a fighter in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and an Islamic scholar who graduated from a Deobandi madrassah, Darul Uloom Islamia Binori Town in Karachi, the alma mater of numerous Pakistani militants, is believed to have been responsible for an attack last year on India's Pathankot Air Force Station. The militants dressed in Indian military uniforms fought a 14-hour battle against Indian security forces that only ended when the last attacker was killed. Azhar was briefly detained after the attack and has since gone underground. Azhar, who was freed from Indian prison in 1999 in exchange for the release of passengers of a hijacked Indian Airlines flight, is also believed to be responsible for an attack in 2001 on the Indian parliament in New Delhi that brought Pakistan and India to the brink of war.

China has appeared ambivalent in justifying its shielding of Azhar and support for other militants. On the one hand, it wanted to curry favour with Pakistan's military and intelligence. Yet, it also wanted to prevent the South Asian nation from becoming a launching pad for Uyghur attacks in Xinjiang and on Chinese targets in Pakistan. However, those concerns did not stop it from continuously vetoing bids by the United Nations Security Council to designate Azhar as a global terrorist. China has cast its veto every six months as the issue came up in the Security Council, including in late 2016 a bare three months after Jaish-i-Mohammed claimed responsibility for an attack on a police academy in the Baloch capital of Quetta that killed 59 cadets.¹¹

At the time, China, backed by Russia, was also seeking to persuade the council to delist leaders of the Taliban in what they said was an effort to

¹⁰ Cyril Almeida, Exclusive: Act against militants or face international isolation, civilians tell military, Dawn, 7 October 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1288350/exclusive-act-against-militants-or-face-international-isolation-civilians-tell-military>

¹¹ Yeni Safak, China blocks India's request for UN to blacklist militant chief, 30 December 2016, <http://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/china-blocks-indias-request-for-un-to-blacklist-militant-chief-2589170>

advance peace talks with the Afghan government.¹² Chinese Major General Zhu Zhengu, dean of China's National Defence University, further justified China's ambivalence to political violence by noting that major powers such as the United States, India, and the People's Republic had been unable to agree on a definition of terrorism. He said the disagreement complicated efforts to strengthen cooperation in countering political violence.¹³

China came to Pakistan's defence as the Trump administration stepped up its criticism of Pakistani support for militants and the fact that Saeed was under house arrest in the comfort of his home in Lahore rather than in prison. Pakistan saw the house arrest as way of avoiding being added to President Donald J. Trump's list of countries whose nationals were restricted or banned from travel to the United States.¹⁴ The house arrest was also a response to US pressure on Pakistan to respond to complaints by the Bangkok-based Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APG) that Islamabad was allowing JuD to conduct unrestricted financial transactions.¹⁵

A series of official and unofficial statements signalled that China was debating the continued value and potential risks of its hands-off approach towards Pakistan. In a blog on Chinese messaging app WeChat, China's former consul general in Kolkata, Mao Siwei, warned that Azhar had become "a major issue that impacts China-India relations, and also constitutes the major element of the decline in the China and India relations ... India, is massively dissatisfied with China's interventions," Siwei said, referring to China's blocking of the listing of Azhar by the UN.¹⁶

China appeared less than a year later to take a further step towards breaking with its backing of Pakistani support of militants when it agreed to a statement by the leaders of BRICS, a grouping of five of the world's major emerging economies—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—that for the first time identified Pakistan-backed militant groups as

¹² Interview with Russian diplomat, 22 December 2016

¹³ Zhu Zhengu, China-India-US Relations under the Trump Administration, Lecture at Lee Kwan Yew School of Public Policy, 10 March 2017

¹⁴ James M. Dorsey, Pakistani crackdown: One hand works to neutralize the other, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 31 January 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.sg/2017/01/pakistani-crackdown-one-hand-works-to.html>

¹⁵ Azaz Syed, Act against JuD or face sanctions, US tells Pakistan, The News 30 January 2017, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/182751-Act-against-JuD-or-face-sanctions-US-tells-Pakistan>

¹⁶ Mao Siwei, 毛四维:面对印巴反恐纠纷,中国须占道德高地 (The face of India and Pakistan in the fight against terrorism, China must take moral high ground), WeChat, 28 December 2016, <http://www.huanqiuzhuiyin.com/m/view.php?aid=12077>

a regional security threat. In the statement issued at the end of a summit in Xiamen, the leaders “express(ed) concern on the security situation in the region and violence caused by the Taliban, ISIL/DAISH, Al-Qaida and its affiliates including Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, TTP and Hizb ut-Tahrir.”¹⁷

China’s belief that economic development was the way to beat back militancy in Pakistan as well as Xinjiang was already on thin ground after an attack in March 2014 in which knife-wielding Uyghur militants stabbed passengers at random in Yunnan’s Kunming train station, killing more than 30 and injuring more than 140. At least one of the attackers had spent six months studying at a Saudi-inspired Sunni Muslim ultra-conservative madrassah in China. The attack cast a shadow over Chinese hopes that the Uyghurs like the Hui Muslims would adapt their faith and develop an interpretation of Islam that had Chinese characteristics, China’s euphemism for a degree of assimilation. It occurred as the Hui as a model was already being called into question by the increasing popularity of Salafism, a Saudi-backed ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim worldview, within the Hui community. The attack deepened Chinese suspicion of Saudi-inspired puritan forms of Islam and the kingdom’s efforts to globally proselytize them.

News that the attackers had spent time in the Hui city of Shadian fuelled Islamophobia and prompted large numbers of the country’s majority Han Chinese to portray the city as China’s Islamic State. The city was painted as an example of the risk of allowing too many Muslims to congregate in one place and granting them too much freedom. “Can these yellow-skinned Arabs stop disgusting us Chinese people? We know that huaxia (a Han concept of Chinese civilization) is a pile of shit in your hearts. Why are you still here?” one commenter charged. In response, the government sought to demonstrate its control by planting flags in front of mosques, painting green roofs white, and expelling from Yunnan religious students and teachers from other provinces to go home as well as hundreds of Uyghurs.¹⁸ The government effort, however, didn’t stop censors

¹⁷Xinhua, Full text of Xiamen Declaration of BRICS leaders, China Daily, 5 September 2017, <http://www.chinadailyasia.com/articles/44/150/109/1504582539856.html>

¹⁸Alice Su, Harmony and Martyrdom Among China’s Hui Muslims, The New Yorker, 6 June 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/harmony-and-martyrdom-among-chinas-hui-muslims>

from deleting accounts of Hui Muslims for Weibo, China's version of Twitter.¹⁹ It took the government three years before it cracked down on the use of Islamophobic words on the Internet. "Allegedly Islamophobic terms invented by Chinese Internet users to stigmatize Muslims have been blocked by authorities on Chinese social media amid a backlash against national policies some deem overly favourable to Muslim minorities," China's state-run Global Times reported in 2017.²⁰

Sun Degang Sun, the deputy director of Shanghai International Studies University's Middle East Institute, argued that the example of the Hui Muslims enabled China to fend off criticism in the Muslim world of its hard line towards the Uyghurs. It also allowed China to pursue its economics-driven policy towards the Middle East and much of the Muslim and insist on the principles of non-alignment and non-interference.

Using the Hui as a fig leaf for its hard line in Xinjiang, Sun said, China was able to trumpet the virtue of its national security focus on protection of its economic, trade, and energy interests²¹ as opposed to the West's more troublesome concerns with terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the possibility of non-Western powers seeking political and military dominance in the Middle East.

The different national security priorities translated into China's emphasis on tangible results in contrast to the United States, which often stressed process as a way of achieving broader policy goals, including good governance. If the US approach was rooted in the Washington Consensus, a set of value-oriented free market economic ideas, supported by international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, China's approach amounted in the words of political scientist Mojtaba Mahdavi to a non-ideological Beijing Consensus, a mercantilist policy that is "another form of neo-liberalism with Chinese characteristics"²²

¹⁹Wai Ling Yeung, Is China Moving to Restrict Religious Freedom for the Hui Muslims? China Change, 13 May 2016, <https://chinachange.org/2016/05/13/is-china-moving-to-restrict-religious-freedom-for-the-hui-muslims/>

²⁰Zhang Hui, China bans use of anti-Islam words on social media, Global Times, 21 September 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1067405.shtml>

²¹Sun Degang Sun, China's Soft Military Presence in the Middle East, Middle East Institute, 11 March 2015. <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/china%E2%80%99s-soft-military-presence-middle-east>

²²Mojtaba Mahdavi, Is China Becoming a New Hegemony in the Middle East? International Conference on China in the Middle East, Indiana University and Peking University, Beijing, 17–18 March 2015

focussed not only on securing resources and global transportation routes but also on access to consumer export markets and access to innovative technologies.

Despite different priorities and approaches, China, in practice, followed under the guise of non-interference US policy that in the final analysis viewed autocracy rather than political change as the best guarantor of security. In doing so, China maintained relations with governments and avoided reaching out to a broader range of social actors. As a result, Chinese policy often reinforced economic inefficiencies and lack of transparency rather than healthy economic growth. Studying the effect of Chinese policy in Sudan, Danish researcher Luke Patey concluded that Chinese support of the government of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir contributed to “longstanding practices of economic mismanagement, political patronage, militarisation and corruption of the Sudanese elite in Khartoum” and Chinese oil companies becoming targets for disenfranchised groups.²³ A widespread belief that the Beijing Consensus would triumph because of its willingness to ignore environmental and human rights considerations was further dented by opposition that spilled into the streets of the struggling Chinese-backed Sri Lankan port of Hambantota in early 2017 and violence in Balochistan, a crown jewel of the Belt and Road initiative.

Nonetheless, China’s economic sway and portrayal of the Hui as a model of harmonious communal relations were enough to enlist Egypt in its crackdown on the Uyghurs. Egyptian authorities detained 150 Uyghur students in 2017, many of them enrolled at Al-Azhar University, Cairo’s citadel of Islamic learning. The students had ignored a Chinese government order to return home. The order was part of a Chinese campaign across the Muslim world that sought to ensure that students abroad had not been radicalized.²⁴ Detainees reported that they were questioned by Chinese interrogators, a claim denied by the Chinese embassy in Cairo.²⁵ In some cases, students’ parents were detained to ensure the return of their offshoot. A number of returnees were held by authorities on arrival.²⁶

²³ Luke Patey, *Learning in Africa: China’s overseas oil investments in Sudan and South Sudan*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 26:107, pp. 1–13

²⁴ Emily Feng, *China targets Muslim Uighurs studying abroad*, *Financial Times*, 1 August 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/0eccc4fa-7276-11e7-aca6-c6bd07dfla3c>

²⁵ Uighur Human Rights Project, *East Turkestan: Uighur Students Detained by Egyptian Government Face Being Deported to China*, 21 July 2017, <http://uhrp.org/news/east-turkestan-Uighur-students-detained-egyptian-government-face-being-deported-china>

²⁶ *Ibid.* Feng

Students seeking to avoid detention by travelling to Turkey were arrested at Egyptian airports and scores were deported.²⁷ “Many of their families in Xinjiang were visited by Chinese authorities. ... There were pressures; barely veiled threats were made to force them to come home. And then the Egyptian police started raiding restaurants and residences of Uyghurs studying at Al-Azhar. Some have managed to escape, but we expect most to be deported,” said Ma, a 28-year-old Chinese Muslim from Linxia, in the province of Gansu.²⁸

The Chinese campaign as well as the crackdown in Xinjiang signalled in China in which power was increasingly concentrated in the hands of Xi Jinping that there was little tolerance or understanding of the notion that it was autocratic repression and failure to deliver that drove large numbers of Uyghurs, Central Asians, Caucasians from the Caucasus, and Arabs into the arms of militant groups. “Without democracy and strong civil society there will be neither stability nor development,” warned exiled Islamist Tajikistan opposition leader Muhiddin Kabiri. Kabiri cautioned that the high number of Tajiks who had joined the Islamic State reflected widespread disillusionment with the repressive regime of the Central Asian state as well as a loss of faith in concepts of democracy and peaceful political change.²⁹

In contrast to men like Kabiri and their pro-Western ideals, China maintained that the key to stability and regime security in the People’s Republic as well as in the greater Middle East was rising living standards rather than greater freedom and transparency. Describing the Belt and Road as “the most expansive Chinese initiative ever,” Wu Jianmin, a member of the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s foreign policy advisory group, senior research fellow with the State Council of China, and former ambassador to the United Nations and various European countries, argued that the initiative would prove in “the epi-centre of war and conflict (that) is the Middle East and North Africa ... that war does not solve problems.”³⁰ Wang Jian, director of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences’ (SASS)

²⁷ Jihad Abaza, Uighur students in limbo after crackdown in Egypt, *Al-Monitor*, 2 August 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/egypt-Uighur-community-crackdown-arrests.html>

²⁸ Francois Napoleon, A Stark Choice for Cairo’s Chinese Muslims, *The Diplomat*, 2 August 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/08/a-stark-choice-for-cairos-chinese-muslims/>

²⁹ Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, Exiled Tajik Opposition Leader Speaks, *The Diplomat*, 1 May 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/05/exiled-tajik-opposition-leader-speaks/>

³⁰ Wu Jianmin, One Belt and One Road, Asia’s Stability and Prosperity, RSIS Distinguished Public Lecture, 12 March 2015

West Asia and North Africa Research Centre, suggested that China would prove its point by shaping its Middle East policy through a Belt and Road prism.³¹ “The Silk Road is an important guide for China’s Middle East diplomacy,” Wang Jian said. Ye Qing, another SASS scholar, noted that the Middle East was important because “Arab countries are at the western intersection of One Road, One Belt.” Ye Qing was referring to the Belt and Road by one of its earlier names.

The initiative is rooted in some 2000 years of Chinese efforts to extend its efforts westwards. The Han dynasty first dispatched emissaries to establish economic and political relations with the Middle East in 138 B.C. The Silk Road linked China to Persia by land and to the Arab world by sea for more than a millennium. The Belt and Road follows the same logic. Traversing much of the territory covered by the ancient Silk Road, it positions China globally and counters perceived US efforts to contain the People’s Republic. It allows China to capitalize on US military struggles in the Middle East as well as the Trump administration’s refusal to assume the traditional mantle of US leadership by filling diplomatic and economic voids in Central and South Asia as well as the Middle East. International relations expert Wang Jisi argued that filling voids in Eurasia would lead to the United States needing Chinese support in stabilizing the Middle East (Fig. 7.1).³²

Filling the voids as part of China’s ambitious, transcontinental plan to link Eurasia through infrastructure, telecommunications, and special economic zones to the People’s Republic influenced the Belt and Road’s dark side. Inevitably, the initiative’s success would be linked to China’s ability to not only project economic but also military power. President Xi admitted as much after becoming in 2012 head of the Communist Party by asserting that “we must preserve the bond between a rich nation and a powerful military and strive for a consolidated national defense.”³³

Journalist Tom Miller noted that wealth and power were code words first used in the nineteenth century that were best translated as “enrich the state and strengthen its military power.” “A powerful economy will pay for the strong military required for self-defence, so that China will never be

³¹ Ibid. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Xi Jinping Attends Opening Ceremony

³² Yun Sun, *March West: China’s Response to the U.S. Rebalancing*, Brookings, 31 January 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/01/31-china-us-sun>

³³ Wang Su, Xi Jinping’s schedule in his southern tour (习近平“南方之行”日程), Caixin, 13 December 2012, <http://china.caixin.com/2012-12-13/100472144.html>



Fig. 7.1 Map of China’s Belt and Road initiative. Map of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. (Christina Lin, *The New Silk Road: China’s Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East*, Policy Focus 109, Washington DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus109.pdf>, page 2 (map))

invaded and occupied. Military strength is also required to give legitimacy to the Communist Party as China’s defender-in-chief. ... The pursuit of national glory, fuelled by (a) deep well of insecurity, is pushing China toward a more muscular foreign policy. ... The nationalist logic of the ‘Chinese Dream’ requires China to project power overseas,” Miller said.³⁴

China’s vast investments across Eurasia were rooted in a belief that geopolitics and economics ultimately mitigate in the People’s Republic’s favour. Indeed, the trade patterns of oil-rich Gulf states had shifted by 2013. China pushed the United States into second place while India moved Japan out of third place. “It’s a shift from the old industrialized

³⁴ Ibid. Miller

powers to the newly industrialized powers,” said Tim Niblock, a renowned expert on Gulf-Asian relations.³⁵

China, despite the shift, was finding it increasingly difficult to uphold its lofty principles and insistence on multi-polarity rather than US dominance in the greater Middle East. Increased anti-Chinese sentiment in places like Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Sri Lanka fed, particularly in Central Asia, into long-standing Sinophobia rooted in historical fears of Chinese domination.³⁶

Sinophobia sparked rumours that the Belt and Road would involve immigration of Chinese workers who would steal jobs, marry local women, and settle permanently in Central Asian nations. Some charged that the workers posed a security risk because many of them allegedly were convicts that China wanted to get rid of.³⁷ Others feared that the migration would lead to a Chinese land grab. A Kazakh plan to lease large tracts of land to China for agriculture sparked protests in 2010 that asserted that perceived Chinese expansionism threatened their country’s national security.³⁸ A proposed amendment to the land law six years later that would have allowed foreigners to rent agricultural land for 25 years again prompted protest.³⁹

Migration scholar Yelena Sadovskaya concluded in a study of Chinese migration to Kazakhstan in the period between 2007 and 2012 that a majority of those intending to settle hailed from ethnic Central Asian backgrounds while the bulk of Han Chinese tended to trade and work in the country before returning home.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the negative sentiments prompted some Chinese scholars to question the Belt and Road’s feasibility. China scholar Irene Chan noted that Chinese scholars were counselling prudence in pursuing the

³⁵ Tim Niblock, *The Gulf, the West and Asia: Shifts in the Gulf’s Global Relations*, Lecture at 4th International Forum on Asia and the Middle East: International Conference on Great Powers and the Middle East Political & Social Transformation, Shanghai, 10 September 2014

³⁶ Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change and the Chinese Factor*, London: Hurst, 2012

³⁷ Raffaello Pantucci and Sarah Lain, IV. Perception Problems of the Belt and Road Initiative from Central Asia, *Whitehall Papers*, Vol. 88:1

³⁸ Joanna Lillis, China looking to lease Kazakhstan land for agriculture, Framlandgrab.org, 7 February 2010, <https://www.framlandgrab.org/post/view/10963-china-looking-to-lease-kazakhstan-land-for-agriculture>

³⁹ Umida Hashimova, Why do Kazakhstanis fear China, *China in Central Asia*, 16 August 2016, <http://chinaincentralasia.com/2016/08/23/why-do-kazakhstanis-fear-china/>

⁴⁰ Yelena Sadovskaya, *The Mythology of Chinese Migration in Kazakhstan*, *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 7 January 2015, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/13112-the-mythology-of-chinese-migration-in-kazakhstan.html>

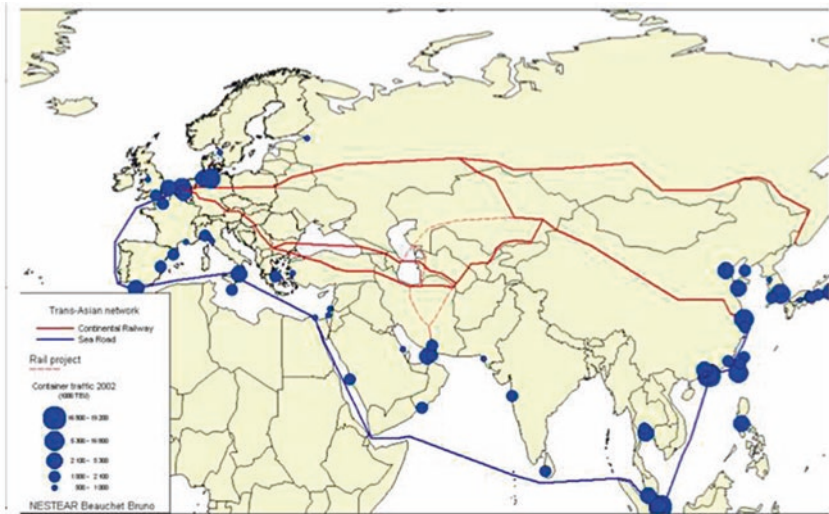


Fig. 7.2 China's envisioned Trans-Asia networks. (Source: IDC Herzliya Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs (Christina Y. Lin, *China's Strategic Shift Toward the Region of the Four Seas: The Middle Kingdom Arrives in the Middle East*, IDC Herzliya Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs, 2013, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/03/chinas-strategic-shift-toward-the-region-of-the-four-seas-the-middle-kingdom-arrives-in-the-middle-east/>))

development of infrastructure connectivity. Chan said some scholars were calling for in-depth studies on regional infrastructure development needs and political and economic risk analysis given that numerous Chinese infrastructure investments overseas were troubled and loss-making because of a lack of due diligence (Fig. 7.2).⁴¹

That was one reason Middle Eastern, North African, and Central Asian rulers relished the Belt and Road. China, unlike the United States, was all business with no troublesome political or environmental strings attached. China was not burdened by lofty ideals such as human rights or bogged down by rules of transparency, compliance, or legislative oversight. Chinese soft power was further enhanced in the region by the ability of the

⁴¹Irene Chan, *China's Maritime Silk Road: Emerging Domestic Debates*, RSIS Commentaries, No. 053/2015, 13 March 2015, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CO15053.pdf>

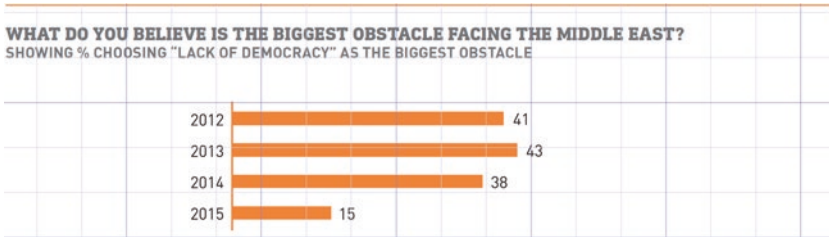


Fig. 7.3 Survey of Arab Youth (1) (Seventh Annual ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey). (Source: ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller (Ibid. ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller))

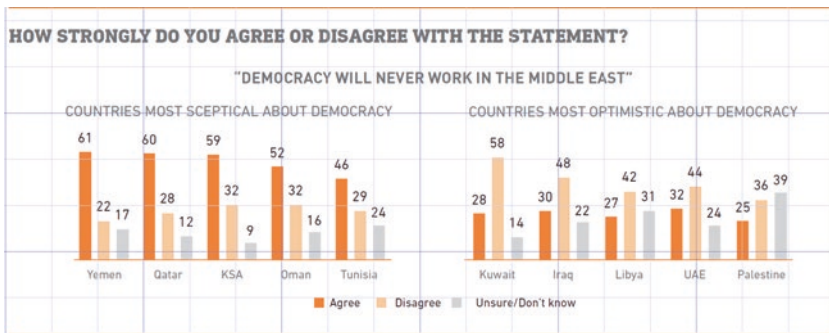


Fig. 7.4 Survey of Arab Youth (2) (Seventh Annual ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey). (Source: ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller (Ibid. ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller))

People’s Republic to achieve extraordinary economic growth while maintaining autocratic political structures. The appeal of the Chinese model was magnified by surveys that showed reduced faith in democracy among Arab youth in the wake of the largely failed Arab popular revolts of 2011 (Figs. 7.3 and 7.4).⁴²

Despite its appeal, Arab autocrats were not always able to replicate the bargain underlying the Chinese model: development and economic growth in exchange for surrender of political rights. A Chinese official, speaking after President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi’s first visit to China in 2014,

⁴²ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller, 7th Annual ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey, 2015, <http://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/>

described Egypt's adaptation of the model as "exactly the opposite" of China's approach. "Al-Sisi has so far delivered non-development, not development," the official said.⁴³

Chinese doubts about Al-Sisi's ability to deliver development did not stop it from listing Egypt as one of its top five destinations for mergers and acquisitions. Chinese companies have pledged \$20 billion in infrastructure finance, while the number of Chinese tourists visiting Egypt increased by 215% from 2015 to 2017.⁴⁴ The doubts also did not prevent China from buying into Al-Sisi's belief that huge vanity projects would revive Egypt's moribund economy. State-owned Chinese construction companies, operating on the win-win principle that often amounts to China wins twice, often underbid their Egyptian counterparts. They risked associating China with white elephants and sparking a backlash because the projects produced jobs for Chinese rather than Egyptian workers.⁴⁵

Egypt, like Sri Lanka where protests erupted against commercial terms imposed by Chinese companies and financial institutions that caught the country in a debt trap, threatens the credibility of the sustainability of the Beijing Consensus approach. Potentially, so does Pakistan, where the \$50 billion plus CPEC is funded primarily with high-interest loans rather than grants.⁴⁶ Ownership of the assets is transferred to Chinese entities if their Pakistani counterparts fail to perform on the loans. In fact, China's commercial terms are a far cry from the picture of CPEC as the magic wand that will solve Pakistan's energy problems, upgrade its crumbling infrastructure, and kick-start its economy projected by both Pakistani and Chinese officials. Egypt, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan were among 23 countries identified in a report by the Washington-based Center for Global Development as being "significantly

⁴³ Interview with author, 17 March 2015

⁴⁴ Ahmed Kamel, Chinese project to build new Egyptian capital revived, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 26 May 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Companies/Chinese-project-to-build-new-Egyptian-capital-revived>

⁴⁵ The New Arab, Chinese withdraw from Egypt's project to build new capital, 24 February 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/2/24/chinese-withdraw-from-egypts-project-to-build-new-capital>

⁴⁶ Axel Dreher, Andreas Fuchs, Bradley Parks, Austin M. Strange, and Michael J. Tierney, Aid, China, and Growth: Evidence from a New Global Development Finance Dataset, Aiddata, Working Paper 46, October 2017, http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/WPS46_Aid_China_and_Growth.pdf

or highly vulnerable to debt distress.”⁴⁷ The report warned that the three countries alongside Djibouti, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, the Maldives, Mongolia, Montenegro, and Tajikistan were most at risk. Djibouti already owes 82% of its foreign debt to China, while China is expected to account for 71% of Kyrgyz debt as Belt and Road related projects are implemented. “There is...concern that debt problems will create an unfavourable degree of dependency on China as a creditor. Increasing debt, and China’s role in managing bilateral debt problems, has already exacerbated internal and bilateral tensions in some BRI (Belt and Road initiative) countries,” the report said. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson echoed the center’s concerns on a visit to Africa in March 2018. China “encourages dependency using opaque contracts, predatory loan practices, and corrupt deals that a nations in debt and undercut their sovereignty, denying them their long-term, self-sustaining growth, Chinese investment does have the potential to address Africa’s infrastructure gap, but its approach has led to mounting debt and few, if any, jobs in most countries,” Tillerson said,⁴⁸

The CPEC funding model is repeated across the Eurasian landmass and beyond. The Bank of China, China’s flagship financial entity together with other government-owned banks, including China Development Bank, and the Export-Import Bank of China as well as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) loaned by the end of 2014 almost as much money to developing countries as the next six lenders together, including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank.⁴⁹ By mid-2017, the Bank of China had funded 470 projects along the Belt and Road to the tune of \$80 billion.⁵⁰ Chinese banks moreover

⁴⁷ John Hurley, Scott Morris, and Gailyn Portelance, *Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective*, Center for Global Development, March 2018, <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-road-initiative-policy-perspective.pdf>

⁴⁸ BBC News, *Rex Tillerson slams China’s relationship with Africa*, 6 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43307461>

⁴⁹ Kevin P. Gallagher, Rohini Kamal, Yongzhong Wang, and Yanning Chen, *Fueling Growth and Financing Risk: The benefits and risks of China’s development finance in the global energy sector*, Boston University Global Economic Governance Initiative, Working Paper 002, May 2016, https://www.bu.edu/pardeeschool/files/2016/05/Fueling-Growth.FINAL_July_.pdf

⁵⁰ Bloomberg News, *China’s Silk Road Cuts Through Some of the World’s Riskiest Countries*, 26 October 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-25/china-s-new-silk-road-runs-mostly-through-junk-rated-territory>

crowd local financial institutions out of the market. In Pakistan, banks have \$20 billion available for the funding of CPEC-related projects but with billions already invested have only been able to lend a mere \$470 million.⁵¹ Increasing China's grip, Chinese entities were granted long-term operating rights of facilities like the Gwadar port. The management contracts ensured that China has effective control of Eurasian infrastructure networks irrespective of whether they prove to be financially viable.

The arrangements secure Chinese interest but potentially constitute the Belt and Road's Achilles heel. The protests in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, including China; attacks on Chinese targets in Balochistan; and anti-Chinese sentiment in various parts of Asia are potentially the writing on the wall.

Critics resent the fact that the beneficiaries of Chinese largesse become dependent on China irrespective of whether they live up to their obligations or not. Debt traps not only in Sri Lanka but also in lesser developed Central Asian states like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have fuelled resentment. So have Chinese companies importing Chinese labour rather than employing locals. The US embassy in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe reported that China supplied 70% of the labour force employed in road and energy projects in Tajikistan.⁵² International relations scholar David Kerr dubbed Chinese relations with countries targeted by the Belt and Road initiative as "warm politics, cold public."⁵³ Confronted with protests in various Central Asian nations, Chinese companies operating in the region appear to have recognized the public relations benefits of hiring local labour that as a bonus is cheaper than workers imported from China.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Bloomberg News, China's belt and road trade plan bypasses Pakistani banks, 27 October 2017, http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2117281/chinas-belt-and-road-trade-plan-bypasses-pakistani?utm_source=Direct http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2117281/chinas-belt-and-road-trade-plan-bypasses-pakistani?utm_source=Direct

⁵² US Embassy Dushanbe, Chinese interest in Tajikistan increases, WikiLeaks, 7 August 2009, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09DUSHANBE954_a.html

⁵³ David Kerr, "Central Asian and Russian Perspectives on China's Strategic Emergence," *International Affairs*, Vol. 86:1, p. 134

⁵⁴ Dirk van der Kley, Chinese companies increasingly employ Central Asians, China in Central Asia, 16 December 2016, <http://chinaincentralasia.com/2016/12/27/chinese-companies-increasingly-employ-central-asians/>

China's experience in Eurasia matches that in Africa. A study of attitudes towards Chinese mining companies concluded that people living near a Chinese-operated mine resented being deprived of jobs even if the investment meant the building of better roads and increased access to piped water in the region.⁵⁵ A survey conducted in 15 sub-Saharan African states concluded some 61% of the respondents believed that Chinese companies engaged in corrupt practices.⁵⁶

Highlighting the potential public relations benefit, a Bloomberg survey concluded that 41 of the 68 nations listed as partners in the Belt and Road initiative were listed by international rating agencies as below investment grade or not rated at all.⁵⁷ Chinese analysts said they attributed less importance to the quality of sovereign debt than to the financial viability of a project. "Even in the poorest countries, projects like public water system, electricity grid and railway are all commercially viable as long as there is income generated from user fees," said Cao Yuanzheng, chairman of BOCI Research Limited, a Beijing-based investment research company. Analysts argued further that Chinese investment in infrastructure in some of the world's poorest countries could help them escape the poverty trap. "These countries have high growth and growth potential, and often what is holding them back from achieving that potential is a lack of infrastructure. If infrastructure investment raises productivity, they could generate the kind of economic growth that would be necessary to repay any debts," added Michael Taylor, chief Asia Pacific credit officer for rating agency Moody's Investors Service.

In effect, China was willing to tread where others dared not go, making a long-term bet that may only pay off after decades. "China understands that places change—China understands that places can be made to change—and extended periods of loss and stagnancy are nothing compared to the big future gains they're gunning for along the Belt and Road. When we look back on what's happening now along the BRI (Belt and

⁵⁵ Tim Wegenast, Georg Strüver, Juliane Giesen, and Mario Krauser, *At Africa's Expense? Disaggregating the Social Impact of Chinese Mining Operations*, GIGA German Institute for Global and Area Studies, October 2017, https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/system/files/publications/wp308_wegenast-struever-giesen-krauser.pdf

⁵⁶ Sofie Geerts, Namhla Xinwa, and Deon Rossouw, *African's Perception of Chinese Business in Africa: A Survey*, Pretoria: Ethics Institute of South Africa, 2014, p. 24, http://www.globethics.net/documents/4289936/13403252/GE_Focus_18_web_1.pdf

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* Bloomberg News, *China's Silk Road Cuts Through Some of the World's Riskiest Countries*

Road Initiative) our narrative may very well change from ‘China overpaying for junk assets’ to ‘how in the world did China get all of that so cheap,’” said journalist Wade Shepard.⁵⁸

In contrast, to Eurasia where Chinese investment is dominated by state-owned companies, Africa, where Chinese commercial investment comes predominantly from privately owned medium-sized companies that tend to hire locals rather than Chinese nationals, has seen a positive impact on economic growth. “90% of the Chinese firms operating in Africa are privately owned rather than state-owned. ... These private firms have a higher rate of local employment as well: 92% of their employees are local Africans,” said Irene Yuan Sun,⁵⁹ author of McKinsey study of Chinese investment in Africa.⁶⁰

In addition to state-owned Chinese company labour practice, cheap Chinese imports threatened to impede economic growth by making it hard for local companies to compete. Steel producers in the Gulf charged that China exploited regulations and standards to dump steel in a region that was witnessing a construction boom with marquee projects such as Dubai Expo 2020 and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. “Steel industries are suffering because of China’s trade practices,” said Rayed Al Ajaji, the head of Saudi Arabia’s Universal Metal Coating Company (Unicoi), a manufacturer of pre-painted steel and aluminium coils. Al Ajaji warned that if the GCC failed to act, companies would be forced out of business. “We’re already seeing this happen, many lines will be closed. And jobs will be lost. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are the only two countries that are really facing challenges from the Far East’s dumping behaviour. Excessive large volumes of steel are doing damage, plus they are selling at low prices, and deviating from international practices,” Al Ajaji said. He pointed to two steel production lines in the UAE and Saudi that had closed because of Chinese business practices.⁶¹

⁵⁸Wade Shephard, Why China Doesn’t Care That Most Of Its Overseas Investments Are “Junk.” *Forbes*, 26 October 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/10/26/why-china-doesnt-care-that-most-of-its-overseas-investments-are-junk/#29e7036570cf>

⁵⁹Irene Yuan Sun, African Factories, Made in China, *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 November 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/african-factories-made-in-china-1510340184>

⁶⁰Irene Yuan Sun, *The Next Factory of the World: How Chinese Investment is Reshaping Africa*, Cambridge: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017

⁶¹Ed Clowes, GCC must take protectionist stance against cheap China steel, *Gulf News*, 6 October 2017, https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/story/GCC_must_take_protectionist_stance_against_cheap_China_steel-SNG_101050704/

In Central Asia, perceptions of Chinese companies as predators seeking to deplete the region's resources at the expense of the local population have reinforced long-standing fears of Chinese expansionism. Anti-Chinese sentiment was further fuelled by the environmental damage caused by Chinese-funded projects as well as repeated incidents of corruption and numerous incidents that resulted from inadequate safety arrangements for workers.

“There is a fear lurking in the shadows of CPEC that a time will soon come when the Chinese will start dictating terms and priorities rather than negotiating them. As an increasing number of Chinese enterprises acquire stakes in Pakistan's economy, and as the government takes out more and more loans from Chinese state-owned banks for balance of payments support, the space to negotiate and protect our own interests diminishes. Perhaps we have seen a glimpse of what this entails in the recent discussions around the financing arrangements for the \$8bn project for the Peshawar-Karachi railway line, when the Chinese insisted they would not share the project with the Asian Development Bank and wanted to implement it on their own,” noted Dawn, Pakistan's premier English-language newspaper in an editorial.⁶²

Energy projects are alongside transport CPEC's key pillar. China's engagement amounts to the largest investment in Pakistan in the country's history. Economists suggest that Pakistan could boost economic growth by an additional 3% if it were able to resolve its energy supply problem that with a 7000-megawatt deficit at times of peak electricity demand means daily blackouts. Chinese investment in Pakistani energy could turn the country into a regional energy hub for the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and China. The problem is that the investment terms give China effective control. The terms include a three-month cash escrow for the electricity generated that allows China to suspend operations if payments are delayed. They exclude a provision in other Pakistani independent power plant contracts that allows Pakistani authorities to claim damages even if they close for an extended period because of non-payment.⁶³

At the bottom line, China's way of doing business may boost Chinese economic growth but often does little for the recipient in terms of growth

⁶²Dawn, Train to China, 30 April 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1330070/train-to-china>

⁶³Ibid. Kardar

and job creation.⁶⁴ On the contrary, locals in Gwadar resent the 7000 Chinese nationals who have jobs Baloch and Pakistanis would have wanted, live in separate housing, and are catered to by their own cooks. The resentment frequently spills into violence. Instead of creating jobs and economic growth, CPEC costs the government money. It funds a 15,000-strong security force established to protect Chinese nationals.

China's approach sparks opposition not only in investment target countries but also in China itself. A newly inaugurated \$4.27 billion refinery project on the outskirts of Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan, has fuelled suspicions and protests. Operated by China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), the refinery, with a capacity of 13 million tonnes of crude a year, sits at the end of a pipeline from Myanmar. Tens of thousands protested in 2013 when plans for the refinery and an associated 500,000 tonne paraxylene plant were first announced.

Paraxylene, which is used to make plastic bottles and polyester, can be dangerous if inhaled. Authorities promised the protesters at the time that the paraxylene plant would not be built if public opinion were against it. The project has since been veiled in silence and authorities have instructed civil servants, students, taxi drivers, and reporters of state-run media not to talk about it. Beyond environmental concerns, some fear that the pipeline will heat up ethnic conflict in Myanmar that has at times shut down cross-border trade and sent large numbers of refugees into China.⁶⁵

Any doubts about China's approach were buried in May 2017 when China made clear at a summit attended by 28 heads of Belt and Road partner countries that it had adopted a you-are-with-us-or-against-us approach. The approach was rooted in the conviction that the focal point of global power was shifting from the Atlantic to the Eurasian landmass, and it was just a matter of time before resource-rich Central Asia became the crossroads of the world. China, abetted by Trump's isolationist America First policy, was, moreover, in the words of former Morgan Stanley chief economist Stephen S. Roach "changing from an adapter to a driver of globalization."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid. Dreher et al.

⁶⁵ He Hui Feng, The "Belt and Road" projects China doesn't want anyone talking about, South China Morning Post, 8 August 2017, http://www.scmp.com/news/china/economy/article/2099973/belt-and-road-projects-china-doesnt-want-anyone-talking-about?utm_source=Direct

⁶⁶ Stephen S. Roach, Rethinking the Next China, Project Syndicate, 25 May 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/global-china-risks-and-opportunities-by-stephen-s-roach-2017-05>

A draft long-term plan for CPEC leaked to Dawn, the Pakistani newspaper, highlighted the Belt and Road's potential of sparking protest against onerous commercial and economic terms. The plan projected the corridor as a ploy for economic domination, the creation of a surveillance state, and a vehicle for China to shape Pakistan's media landscape.⁶⁷ The plan detailed the benefits China would derive from investment in Pakistan as well as the way the country would be turned even more than it already is into a surveillance state in which freedoms of expression and media were manipulated. The plan also suggested the degree to which the Belt and Road was designed to establish China as Eurasia's dominant power based on economics as well as adoption of measures that undermine democracy or inhibit political transition in autocracies.

That impression was reinforced in late 2017 when China decided to redevelop criteria for the funding of infrastructure projects⁶⁸ that were part of CPEC in an apparent effort to enhance the Pakistani military's stake in the country's economy at a time that the armed forces were flexing their political muscle. The Chinese decision involved funding for three major road projects valued at a total of \$850 million—the upgrading of the Dera Ismail Khan-Zhob motorway and the Karakoram Highway as well as construction of a 110-kilometre road linking Khuzdar and Basima.⁶⁹ The suspension of funding coincided with apparent efforts by the military to increase its political sway by supporting militant and hard-line Sunni Muslim groups opposed to the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (N) headed by disgraced former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.⁷⁰

Criteria for the funding of the road projects, once redrafted, were expected to benefit the military's engineering and construction company, Frontier Works Organization. The suspension was projected as an effort to avoid corruption in CPEC in the wake of Sharif's ousting as prime minister after documents leaked from a Panama law firm linked his children to off-

⁶⁷ Khurram Hussain, Exclusive: CPEC master plan revealed, Dawn, 18 May 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1333101>

⁶⁸ European Foundation for South Asian Studies (EFSAS), Cracks appear in CPEC as China “temporarily” halts funding, December 2017, <https://www.efsas.org/commentaries/cracks-appear-in-cpec-as-china-temporarily-halts-funding/>

⁶⁹ Syed Irfan Raza, China to finance three more road projects under CPEC, Dawn 27 December 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1304619>

⁷⁰ James M. Dorsey, Tackling Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism: A Pakistani-US collision in the making, The Turbulent World, 8 December 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.sg/2017/12/tackling-sunni-muslim-ultra.html>

shore companies and assets.⁷¹ Long viewed as a nemesis of the military, Sharif demise served the interests of the armed forces.

The suggestion failed to stand up to scrutiny given that some Chinese companies have been granted CPEC contracts despite allegations of corruption. In one instance, the China Gezhouba Group Corporation (CGGC) was awarded the development of Pakistan's \$4.5 billion, 969 MW Neelum-Jhelum Hydropower Project,⁷² despite having been blacklisted by the World Bank.⁷³

Chinese backing for a more prominent role of the military in economic and political life came amid increased Pakistani scrutiny of CPEC. In a rare challenging of Chinese commercial terms, Pakistan withdrew in November 2017 from a Chinese-funded dam-building project.⁷⁴ Pakistani Water and Power Development Authority Chairman Muzammil Hussain charged that "Chinese conditions for financing the Diamer-Bhasha Dam were not doable and against our interests."⁷⁵ China and Pakistan were also at odds over ownership of the \$14 billion, 4500 megawatts (MW)-hydropower project on the Indus River in the country's problematic region of Gilgit-Baltistan near disputed Kashmir.

Earlier, a State Bank of Pakistan study concluded that exports of marble to China, Pakistan's foremost rough-hewn, freshly excavated marble export market, and the re-export to Pakistan of Pakistani semi-processed marble was "hurting Pakistan's marble industry to a significant extent."⁷⁶ A report by the Pakistani Senate, which has repeatedly criticized CPEC's lack of transparency and Chinese commercial policies, concluded that

⁷¹ BBC News, Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif resigns after Panama Papers verdict, 28 July 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40750671>

⁷² Xinhua, 1st TBM tunnel breaks through in N. Pakistan by CGGC, 24 October 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-10/24/c_135775444.htm

⁷³ The World Bank, World Bank Announces New Settlement with Gezhouba Group Co. Ltd., 29 May 2015, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/05/29/world-bank-new-settlement-gezhouba-group>

⁷⁴ Kamran Bokhari, China's One Belt, One Road Faces Pushback, Geopolitical Futures, 21 November 2017, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/chinas-one-belt-one-road-faces-pushback/>

⁷⁵ Shahbaz Rana, Pakistan stops bid to include Diamer-Bhasha Dam in CPEC, The Express Tribune, 15 November 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1558475/2-pakistan-stops-bid-include-diamer-bhasha-dam-cpec/>

⁷⁶ State Bank of Pakistan, Marble and Marble Products, 2017, <http://www.sbp.org.pk/departments/ihfd/Sub-Segment%20Booklets/Marble%20and%20Marble%20Products.pdf>

China would for the next four decades get 91% of the revenues generated by the port of Gwadar.⁷⁷

“Beijing is keen to give the Pakistani Army the lead role in the CPEC projects as Pakistani ministries charged with carrying out the projects have incurred delays because of infighting. Concerns that the project bypasses Pakistan’s poorer regions and will mainly benefit the financially-strong province of Punjab has made politicians argue with regards to the benefits of CPEC. ... The Chinese are not used to such harsh disagreements,” the European Foundation for South Asian Studies (EFSAS) said in a commentary.⁷⁸

“We have all been led to believe that CPEC is about connectivity, roads and power plants. In reality, it is about much more than that. It is about preparing the country to receive massive amounts of Chinese investments, personnel and culture,” added Pakistani investigative journalist Khurram Husain. Among many examples, Husain cited a Chinese company’s memorandum of understanding with the city of Karachi to build an elevated road that was less designed to ease traffic in the congested metropole and primarily intended to ferry Chinese nationals to a yet to be built beach resort, “possibly one of the first of the many tourist resorts to be built along the coastal strip from (the Sindh city of) Badin to (the Baloch port of) Gwadar.”⁷⁹

The CPEC plan echoed an effort by Pakistan’s Planning Commission tasked with overseeing CPEC, to dampen expectations that Chinese projects would foster employment and investment. The overseers told the Pakistani Senate that only Chinese investors would be allowed to invest in nine proposed special economic zones across Pakistan and that it was uncertain whether Pakistan labour would be engaged. The zones would be open exclusively to Chinese companies. The overseers said Pakistan may not see a revenue windfall from the massive Chinese engagement.⁸⁰ Moreover, CPEC would in part be funded by electricity users forced to

⁷⁷ China Pakistan Economic Corridor, Govt asked to review accord with China on Gwadar, 11 December 2017, <http://www.cpecinfo.com/cpec-news-detail?id=NDQ0MQ>

⁷⁸ Ibid. European Foundation for South Asian Studies (EFSAS)

⁷⁹ Khurram Husain, CPEC Long Term Plan, Dawn, 2 November 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1367767>

⁸⁰ Dawn, CPEC claims and doubts, 2 March 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1317784/cpec-claims-and-doubts>

pay a surcharge to cover the costs of securing Chinese investments.⁸¹ While CPEC projects would significantly enhance energy-starved Pakistan's generation capacity, China has so far refrained from pressuring Pakistan to address the fundamental drivers of its energy crisis that include debt, corruption, lack of a clear and coordinated energy policy, and transmission and distribution losses of up to 20%.⁸²

For their part, Pakistani cement and steel factories expanded capacity in the hope that they would fulfil CPEC-related contracts. Cable producers complained that China was importing Chinese product tax free for multiple energy projects. Kamal Amjad Mian, whose family owns Fast Cables in Lahore, invested \$30 million in anticipation of increased demand for Chinese-funded projects. Mian's phone never rang. "The government, instead of giving us a level playing field, gave them an advantage," he said. Mian and other Pakistani cable producer fear that without Chinese contracts their industry could die in a slow death.⁸³ Former Pakistan central bank Governor Shahid Kardar thundered that "not only do they bring their own cement and steel but also their own labour (even of the unskilled variety on the plea that they speak Chinese); even paint produced by a multinational based in Pakistan is bought from the office of the same company in China."⁸⁴

If implemented, the plan would reduce Pakistan to a raw materials supplier rather than an added-value producer. Chinese state-owned companies would lease thousands of hectares of agricultural land to set up "demonstration projects" in areas ranging from seed varieties to irrigation technology. Chinese agricultural companies would be offered "free capital and loans" from various Chinese ministries as well as the China Development Bank. The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps would introduce mechanization as well as new technologies in Pakistani livestock breeding, development of hybrid varieties, and precision irrigation. Raw materials

⁸¹ Shahbaz Rana, Power consumers to pay for CPEC, *The Express Tribune*, 24 September 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1187386/ecc-meeting-power-consumers-pay-cpec-security/>

⁸² Michael Kugelman, Pakistan's Energy Crisis: From Conundrum to Catastrophe, National Bureau of Asian Research, 13 March 2013, http://www.nbr.org/downloads/pdfs/eta/Kugelman_commentary_03132013.pdf

⁸³ Interview with the author, 7 April 2017

⁸⁴ Shahid Kardar, Understanding CPEC, *Dawn*, 17 July 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1345741/understanding-cpec>

would be processed in Xinjiang as part of China's bid to squash ethnic and religious militancy through economic development and job creation.⁸⁵

The agricultural aspects of the draft CPEC plan reflected a pattern adopted generally by China in its overseas investments in agriculture and land "China's land lease or purchase ... in the past few years has already been labelled as land grabbing or neo-colonialism," noted a group of Boston University scholars. In a study, the scholars asserted that Chinese agricultural investment exacerbated food insecurity, sparked "huge international criticism and incited local resentment of China's overseas agricultural investment projects."⁸⁶

The draft CPEC plan further defined the Pakistani textile sector as a supplier of materials such as yarn and coarse cloth to textile manufacturers in Xinjiang. "China can make the most of the Pakistani market in cheap raw materials to develop the textiles & garments industry and help soak up surplus labour forces in (Xinjiang's) Kashgar," the plan said. Chinese companies would be offered preferential treatment with regard to "land, tax, logistics and services" as well as "enterprise income tax, tariff reduction and exemption and sales tax rate" incentives.

Pakistani textile producers further feared that new roads and railways will allow producers in Xinjiang to dump their goods in the Pakistani market. Pakistani textile exports dropped by 40% in 2016⁸⁷ as a result of billions of dollars invested and incentives provided by China to the Xinjiang textile industry.⁸⁸ "There is absolutely nothing in the CPEC for the local trade and industry," said Muhammad Ishaq, an industrialist and a director of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Board of Investment & Trade.⁸⁹

Chinese companies would be able to exploit their presence in sectors such as household appliances, telecommunications, and mining, to expand market share, according to the plan. Construction of infrastructure and creation of a conducive policy environment would facilitate the entry of Chinese companies into the textile, cement, building materials, fertilizer, and agricul-

⁸⁵ Ibid. Hussain, Exclusive: CPEC master plan revealed

⁸⁶ Ibid. Gallagher et al.

⁸⁷ Dawn, Non-textile exports go down by 40pc, 30 March 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1323631>

⁸⁸ Reuters, Some Pakistani power firms stuck in slow lane on China's Silk Road, 30 March 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1345741/understanding-cpec> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1323767/some-pakistani-power-firms-stuck-in-slow-lane-on-chinas-silk-road>

⁸⁹ Interview with author, 7 May 2017

tural technology industries. Construction contracts not awarded to Chinese companies would be given to the Pakistani military's engineering arm.⁹⁰

Pakistani scholar Salman Rafi Sheikh warned that China's plan for the development of the textile industry in Xinjiang could destroy Pakistan's textile sector. Sheikh warned that China's approach towards Pakistan would amount to "soft colonialism." Sheikh charged that CPEC would create unemployment rather than employment, in part because there was no transfer of skills.

The textile sector feared "the stiff competition that is likely to come its way after the introduction of a 10-year textile development plan by China in its Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. According to this plan, by 2023, Xinjiang will build China's largest textile production base and the largest garment-export's processing base. Based on the latest machinery, by 2023, Xinjiang will simply become the largest cotton textile industrial base of China and the most significant clothing export base in Western China. These exports are to be routed through the economic corridor, meaning Pakistan will be facilitating Chinese exports only to find out that its own exports have shrunk and gradually died out," Sheikh argued.⁹¹

The draft CPEC plan envisioned the creation of a system of comprehensive monitoring and surveillance in Pakistani cities as part of law enforcement. The system would involve deployment of explosive detectors and scanners to "cover major roads, case-prone areas and crowded places ... in urban areas to conduct real-time monitoring and 24-hour video recording." Cameras would turn the troubled port city of Gwadar into one of the world's most surveyed cities. Following the example of China's surveillance of Xinjiang, closed-circuit televisions in Gwadar and other Pakistani cities would use radio-frequency identification to scan the licence plates of all cars that enter and exit the area.

Internet traffic would flow through a national fibre optic backbone as well as the terrestrial distribution of broadcast media. Pakistani media would cooperate with their Chinese counterparts in the "dissemination of Chinese culture." The plan described the backbone as a "cultural

⁹⁰ Saeed Shah, China Pushes U.S. Aside in Pakistan, *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 June 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-pushes-u-s-aside-in-pakistan-1497783600>

⁹¹ Salman Rafi Sheikh, Asia Sentinel: Pakistan's Costly Plunge Into China Debt, *Yale Global Online*, 4 October 2017, http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/asia-sentinel-pakistan-costly-plunge-china-debt?utm_source=YaleGlobal+Newsletter&utm_campaign=dd811c99a1-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_01_30&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2c91bd5e92-dd811c99a1-181655437

transmission carrier” that would serve to “further enhance mutual understanding between the two peoples and the traditional friendship between the two countries.”

The Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication (BIGC) announced weeks after the plan was leaked that it was setting up a Chinese Language and Culture Centre in Gwadar in cooperation with the Islamabad-based Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU).⁹² The Sindh government earlier concluded an agreement with China to teach Mandarin and Chinese culture in public schools.

In line with China’s preference for authoritarian rule and dim view of Western policy, the plan identified as risks to CPEC “Pakistani politics, such as competing parties, religion, tribes, terrorists, and Western intervention” as well as security. “The security situation is the worst in recent years,” the plan said. Its solution was stepped-up surveillance rather than policies targeting root causes and appeared to question the vibrancy of a system in which competition between parties and interest groups was the name of the game.

The leaking of the plan demonstrated that the terms of Chinese investment ultimately cannot be kept from the public. Lack of transparency has fuelled suspicions and energized opposition. “Here’s the danger: the banks are Chinese. The money is Chinese. The expertise is Chinese. The management is Chinese. The profits are for China. The labour is Chinese,” said Tahir Mashhadi, a Pakistani opposition politician, comparing China to the East India Company, the British company that initially colonized India.

Plans for CPEC, moreover, failed to consider the project’s environmental impact with some 60% of investment earmarked for coal-fired power generation, raising questions about Pakistan’s ability to comply with the reduction of carbon emissions under the Paris Climate Agreement. Ironically, while tackling its own air pollution problems at home, there is a risk China “may be simultaneously exporting its carbon emissions to the rest of Asia through investment in coal-fired power generation,” quipped Mikkal E. Herberg, the National Bureau of Asian Research’s top energy expert.⁹³

⁹² Raoul Basharat, AIOU plans to set up Chinese language centre in Gwadar, *The Nation*, 5 June 2017, <http://nation.com.pk/islamabad/05-Jun-2017/aiou-plans-to-set-up-chinese-language-centre-in-gwadar>

⁹³ Erica Downs, Mikkal E. Herberg, Michael Kugelman, Christopher Len, and Kaho Yu, *Asia’s Energy Security and China’s Belt and Road Initiative*, National Bureau of Asian Research, November 2017, p. 10, http://nbr.org/publications/specialreport/pdf/free/010218/SR68_Aσίας_Energy_Security_November2017.pdf

Perceptions of Chinese and Pakistani insensitivity to local concerns were reinforced by the debilitating effect of corruption. A survey of 22 Asian countries by Transparency International concluded that “the law and order institutions in Pakistan were the most likely of any country that we surveyed to accept bribes—around seven in 10 people who came into contact with either the police or the courts had to pay a bribe (75 per cent and 68 per cent respectively).” China fared no better in the report. “In China, where the question asked about change in the level of corruption over the last three years, nearly three quarters of people said that they thought the level of corruption had worsened (73 per cent). This was the highest of any country surveyed,” report said.⁹⁴

The Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI) said in a separate study that “lack of farsightedness and prudence in the statesmen and the element of corrupt practices support foreign dominance and hegemony. Unfortunately, such apprehensions exist in Pakistan, where the lack of trust in politicians and policy makers, favouritism in decision making and briberies, and unlawful payments have been observed. ... The construction of China Pakistan Economic Corridor cannot be exempted from this perception. Despite the extreme importance of CPEC, there are several questions in public minds and investors regarding the transparency in the contracts of this gigantic plan.”⁹⁵

The federation’s concerns were echoed by other Pakistani business organizations, including the Pakistan Business Council (PBC) that groups the country’s largest corporations. “We are being told by the government that the CPEC is a ‘gift horse’ from China. But who knows? It could turn out to be a Trojan horse for us. Unless the government ensures transparency in the deals it has made with the Chinese, the concerns will continue to rise,” said PBC Chief Executive Officer Ehsan Malik.⁹⁶

China’s approach towards CPEC-related energy projects appeared to bear out concerns. China demanded in 2014 that mega power projects, including the Bhasha Dam, the Gadani and Lakhra coal plants, the Tarbela Extension project, and multiple transmission lines awarded to Chinese

⁹⁴ Coralie Pring, *People and Corruption: Asia Pacific*, Transparency International, 2017, https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/people_and_corruption_asia_pacific_global_corruption_barometer

⁹⁵ The Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry, *FPCCI’s Stance on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)*, 2016

⁹⁶ Nasir Jamal, *The cost of CPEC*, Dawn, 12 March 2017, <http://linkis.com/www.dawn.com/news/kkGun>

IS THE GOVERNMENT DOING WELL
OR BADLY IN FIGHTING CORRUPTION?
– RESULTS BY COUNTRY

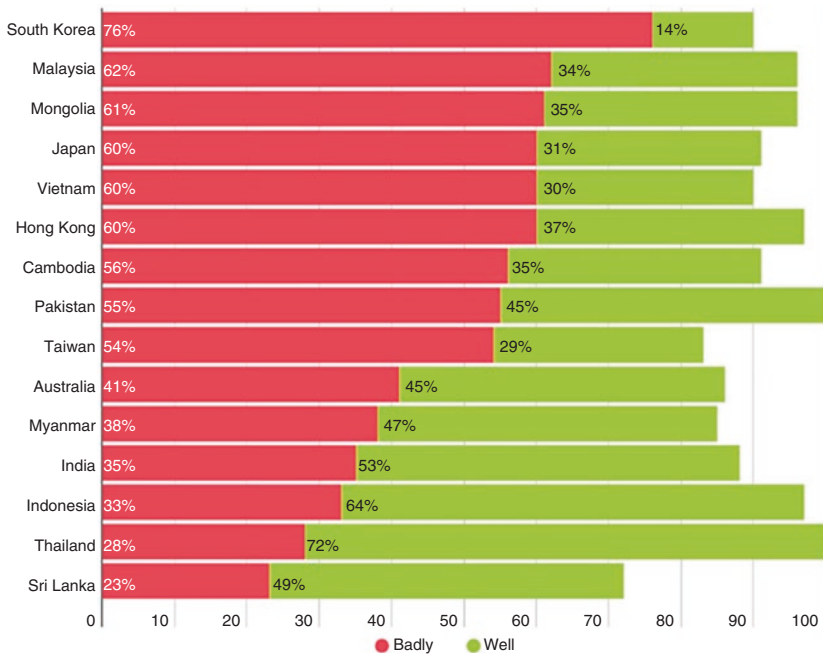


Fig. 7.5 Is the government doing well or badly in fighting corruption—results by country. (People and Corruption: Asia Pacific—Global Corruption Barometer (2017) by Transparency International is licenced under CC-BY-ND 4.0 https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/people_and_corruption_asia_pacific_global_corruption_barometer)

companies without an international bidding process. In exchange, China would invest US \$22 billion.

The side lining of competition meant that Pakistan risked not getting the infrastructure it needed. Pakistan media reported that pilot projects for an automatic metering system showed that the Chinese system might not work because of faulty specifications that among other things did not take Pakistan weather into account.⁹⁷ “State-owned Chinese com-

⁹⁷ Ibid. Sheikh

panies are not interested in fare competition or cooperation with the Pakistani private sector. The private sector has also shied away from involvement in CPEC infrastructure projects because of China's bureaucratic bottlenecks," said a Pakistani government official.⁹⁸ "Initially, CPEC generated euphoria among Pakistani businessmen. That has evaporated four years later because of Chinese demands and terms," added a Pakistani businessman (Fig. 7.5).⁹⁹

A report by a Pakistani financial brokerage concluded that interest on China's more than \$50 billion investment and CPEC-related loans would result in Pakistan paying the People's Republic \$90 billion for principal, interest on foreign currency debt, and repayment of profits and dividend on equity investment over a 30-year period. The brokerage, Topline Securities, calculated that China was getting a 40% return on investment.¹⁰⁰ Topline's \$90 billion figure did not include the cost of significant tax incentives or costs that are passed on to consumers such as higher utility prices imposed by Chinese-funded energy projects.

"The average annual repayment of CPEC will be US\$3.7 billion," said Saad Hashemy, a Topline analyst.¹⁰¹ Nadeem Javaid, the Pakistani planning ministry's chief economist, put annual repayment even higher, at \$5 billion, but argued that increased exports, lower energy prices, and revenues generated from trade would facilitate servicing of the debt. "The concerns are blown out of proportion," Javaid said. Javaid estimated that up to 4% of global trade would flow through CPEC from Gwadar to Xinjiang by 2020. "The kind of toll tax, rental fees that the Pakistani system will gain is roughly \$6–\$8 billion a year," Javaid said.¹⁰² In a story headlined "China has Pakistan over a barrel on 'One Belt One Road'," Pakistani journalist F. M. Shakil asserted that CPEC was "beginning to look like a disaster for its host nation" and had already saddled Pakistan with debt even before there was something to show for it.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Interview with the author, 17 April 2017

⁹⁹ Interview with the author, 18 April 2017

¹⁰⁰ Saad Hashemy, Pakistan's External Account Concerns and CPEC Repayment, Topline Securities, 10 March 2017

¹⁰¹ Interview with the author, 7 May 2017

¹⁰² Drazen Jorgic, Pakistan's "Silk Road" repayments to peak at around \$5 billion a year: chief economist, Reuters, 10 May 2017, <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/idUSKBN1861GH>

¹⁰³ F. M. Shakil, China has Pakistan over a barrel on "One Belt One Road," Asia Times, 28 April 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/article/china-pakistan-barrel-one-belt-one-road/>

Nor did calculations include military acquisitions with Pakistan becoming the biggest importer of Chinese military hardware. Some of the cost was being offset by agreements to produce hardware in Pakistan. Acquisitions included the FC-1 Xiaolong jet renamed the JF-17 Thunder for Pakistani purposes, the LY-80 surface-to-air missile system, and eight submarines, half of which would be built in Karachi. The two countries were also discussing the manufacturing of Chinese ballistic, cruise, anti-aircraft, and anti-ship missiles as well as main battle tanks in Pakistan.¹⁰⁴ The terms of these contracts were not disclosed, making it impossible for Pakistanis to determine whether they were getting value for money. Analysts estimated that the submarine deal may be worth between \$4 and 5 billion.¹⁰⁵ “China has a massive investment commitment to Pakistan. This helps us strengthen stability. Close military cooperation ensures China’s stake in the security of Pakistan,” said a former Pakistani military commander.¹⁰⁶

The writing was however already on the wall. Pakistan’s trade deficit with China has doubled in recent years, exacerbating declines in its foreign currency reserves. This has forced the country to seek emergency loans from outside sources—including China—to maintain payments on older loans made in foreign currencies.

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¹⁰⁴ NDTV, China, Pak To Boost Military Cooperation; Produce Missiles, Aircraft Together, 17 March 2017, <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/china-to-boost-military-cooperation-with-all-weather-friend-pakistan-report-1670608>

¹⁰⁵ Interviews with the author, April 2017

¹⁰⁶ Interview with the author, 18 April 2017



The Middle East: Testing the Boundaries of Non-interference

The extent of China's policy debate as it relates to the Middle East and North Africa is evident in the way Chinese officials, policy analysts, and former ambassadors to the Middle East conceptualize China's approach in discussions with their scholarly Western and Arab colleagues. The debate is coloured by what at times appear to be generational differences. Often older current and former Chinese officials seem to attribute greater importance to the formal aspects of political processes rather than political realities on the ground. One expression of that view is their emphasis on the outcomes of elections irrespective of whether they were free and fair and represent a voluntary expression of popular will. A case in point were Chinese official statements supporting the re-election in June 2014 of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad even though the vote lacked legitimacy or credibility in a country in which the government no longer was in control of all its territory and had demonstrated a willingness to retain power irrespective of cost.

This approach camouflaged Chinese support for autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa and put it behind a veil of declared non-interference in a country's domestic affairs and recognition of a government legitimately constituted at best in nominal terms. It was, despite Chinese denials, a policy akin to the US emphasis on stability in the region rather than adherence to liberal American values. It was a policy for which the United States, Europe, and the international community paid dearly given that it enabled the violent and often brutal undercurrents of

change that were sweeping the Middle East and North Africa as well as the emergence of jihadism, forces that increasingly also threatened Chinese interests.

Underlying the Chinese policy was a stark difference in the way China and the United States approached the Middle East and North Africa. China's approach focussed on the state, while the United States sought to also forge relations with various segments of society. Chinese business often involved major state-owned enterprises frequently dealing, particularly in sectors such as energy and infrastructure, with their counterparts in public sectors in the Middle East and North Africa or private conglomerates with close ties to their rulers. China, unlike the United States, which reached out to societal groups ranging from business to political opposition, largely restricted itself to dealing with Middle Eastern and North African governments. The popular Arab revolts of 2011 and the subsequent fracturing of Middle Eastern and North African states such as Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria put China in a quandary. On the one hand, they reinforced Chinese support for the region's autocrats, and on the other, the revolts forced China to ensure that it did not completely shut the door to rebel and opposition forces that could be future rulers.

China's problem was that its growing footprint and policies threatened to spark pushback across the greater Middle East. Chinese suppression of the Uyghurs brought thousands of Turks into the streets in 2015.¹ Kazakhstan was wracked a year later by protests over fears that the government would open the country up to large-scale Chinese purchases of land.² In neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, mounting public pressure caused the government to abandon plans to offer mining concessions to Chinese firms in lieu of paying back \$1 billion in loans.³

Anti-Chinese sentiment was an expression of a far greater malaise in the Stans, the five Central Asian nations—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan—that emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union and occupy a swath of land that links the eastern and

¹ Al Jazeera, Beijing warns citizens in Turkey of anti-China protests, 6 July 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/beijing-warns-citizens-turkey-anti-china-protests-150705172423183.html>

² Al Jazeera, Dozens detained in Kazakhstan over land reform protests, 21 May 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/dozens-detained-kazakhstan-land-reform-protests-160521132802863.html>

³ Chris Rickleton, Are Chinese Investors Ditching Kyrgyzstan for Tajikistan?, Eurasianet, 20 January 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71696>

western halves of China's Belt and Road. Kleptocratic regimes led by former Soviet Communist Party bosses that took control of their newly independent states had failed to deliver. Standards of living declined for the bulk of the population and severe repression positioned Islam, including its more militant expressions, as the only channel for the expression of pent-up frustration and anger. Adding to the malaise was a huge dent in remittances sparked by Russia's economic crisis and the dramatic drop in energy prices.

Current and former Chinese officials often framed the policy debate by emphasizing external rather than domestic drivers of crisis in the Middle East and potential volatility in Central Asia. To be sure, Chinese policy-makers and politicians did not have to take into account powerful ethnic and national lobbies like the Israeli, Gulf, Turkish, Armenian, and Greek groupings that play an important role in the formulation of policy in the United States.

Yet, in the spirit of all foreign policy being a function of domestic policy, China was not void of domestic drivers that played an increasingly important role in its foreign policymaking. Those drivers stemmed from evolving definitions of national interest and the increased number of players in China's foreign policy debates as China's global economic footprint expanded.⁴ These players included major state-owned enterprises such as national oil companies whose interests in the Middle East and North Africa had mushroomed.

Their influence was enhanced by mergers of competing entities in a bid to reduce overcapacity and eliminate inefficiencies. This created commercial giants like the CRRC Corporation, a fusion of railroad equipment makers that became the world's second-biggest industrial company; COSCO, cobbled together from state-owned shipping firms that emerged as the world's fourth-largest shipping company; and China National Chemical Corporation, a giant in chemicals of all kinds, industrial equipment, and petrochemical processing. Their sheer size and exposure to the Middle East and North Africa meant that they needed to ensure that Chinese policies took their interests into account.

The oil companies, for instance, argued that China's lack of engagement and insistence on non-intervention deprived the People's Republic

⁴Linda Jakobsen and Dean Knox, *New Foreign Policy Actors in China*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2010, <http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRI26.pdf>

of leverage required to negotiate pricing and supply in energy contracts in a market that was virtually inelastic.⁵ China's ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Li Chengwen, highlighted the scale of China's stake in the Middle East and North Africa when he noted in 2013 that 140 Chinese companies were involved in contracts worth \$18 billion in Saudi Arabia's construction, telecommunications, infrastructure, and petrochemical sectors (Table 8.1).⁶

The domestic drivers of Chinese foreign policy further involved popular insistence that the government ensures the safety and security of the growing number of Chinese nationals and jobs in the region. Of the Chinese companies active in Saudi Arabia, 70 employed a total of 16,000 Chinese workers.⁷ Dubai boasted the Middle East's largest Chinese expatriate community with 200,000 nationals and an estimated 3000 companies.⁸ Some 230 Chinese companies had set up shop in Dubai's Jebel Ali Free Zone.⁹ COSCO was investing \$400 million in a new container terminal in Abu Dhabi¹⁰ and an additional investment by Jiangsu province of \$300 million in 2.2 million square metres of manufacturing space. Some 60% of Chinese exports to the Middle East worth an estimated \$70 billion a year flow through the UAE.¹¹

⁵ Chaoling Feng, *Embracing Interdependence: The Dynamics of China and the Middle East*, Brookings Doha Center, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/04/28-middle-east-china-feng/en-embracing-interdependence-pdf.pdf>

⁶ Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat, Saudi-Chinese trade increases by 14 percent, 20 November 2013, <http://english.aawsat.com/2013/11/article55323012/saudi-chinese-trade-increases-by-14-percent>

⁷ Naser M. Al-Tamimi, *China-Saudi Arabia Relations, 1990–2012: Marriage of Convenience or Strategic Alliance?* London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 126–143.

⁸ Dania Thafer, *After the Financial Crisis: China-Dubai Economic Relations*, Middle East-Asia Project (MAP), 15 September 2013, <http://www.mei.edu/content/after-financial-crisis-dubai-china-economic-relations>

⁹ Danielle Greene, *More than 230 Chinese businesses have chosen Jafza as their home*, Vision, October 2016, <http://vision.ae/business/more-than-230-chinese-businesses-have-chosen-jafza-as-their-home>

¹⁰ Stanley Carvalho and Maha El Dahan, *China's Cosco to invest \$400 million in new Abu Dhabi container terminal*, Reuters, 26 September 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cosco-shipping-emirates/chinas-cosco-to-invest-400-million-in-new-abu-dhabi-container-terminal-idUSKCN11Y1N1>

¹¹ Wade Shephard, *Next Up On China's Maritime Silk Road: Abu Dhabi*, Forbes, 2 August 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/08/02/next-up-abu-dhabi-chinas-maritime-silk-road-breaks-into-the-middle-east/#260f601a9bbe>

Table 8.1 Chinese investments of more than \$10 billion in the Middle East

<i>Year of first investment</i>	<i>Investor</i>	<i>Investment in million \$</i>	<i>Partner/target</i>	<i>Sector</i>	<i>Subsector</i>	<i>Country</i>
2006	CITC and Chinalco	940		Metals	Aluminium	Egypt
2007	China Ocean Shipping	150		Transport	Shipping	Egypt
2007	Xhinalco	1,200	Bin Laden, MMC	Metals	Aluminium	Saudi Arabia
2007	Sinopec	2,010	National Iranian Oil Company	Energy	Oil	Iran
2008	Sinochem	470	SOCO	Energy	Oil	Yemen
2008	CNPC	3,020		Energy	Oil	Iraq
2009	CNPC	1,760	National Iranian Oil Company	Energy	Oil	Iran
2009	Tianjin development	280		Real Estate	Property	Egypt
2009	CNOC	100	Qatar Petroleum	Energy	Gas	Qatar
2009	CNPC	2,250	National Iranian Oil Company	Energy	Oil	Iran
2009	CNPC	240	State Oil Marketing Organization and South Oil Company	Energy	Oil	Iraq
2010	Sinochem	1,440	Makhteshim-Agan	Agriculture	Agriculture	Israel
2011	Sinopec	3,300	SABC	Energy	Oil	Saudi Arabia
2012	Jushi Group	230		Technology	Medical	Egypt
2013	FostumiPharma	240	Alma Lasers	Technology	Medical	Israel

Source: China the “Next U.S.” in the Middle East? MEI NUS, mei.nus.edu.sg (Stig Stenslie and Wang Luyao, China the “Next U.S.” in the Middle East? Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, 2014, https://mei.nus.edu.sg/index.php/web/publications_TEMPL/VOLUME-7-1-China-the-Next-U.S.-in-the-Middle-East)

All told, Chinese firms signed an estimated \$30 billion worth of construction and infrastructure projects with GCC states between 2005 and 2014, accounting for 8% of their total portfolio. Projects include a \$1.8 billion railway that the China Railway Construction Corporation built to transport pilgrims performing the hajj in Saudi Arabia and a pipeline linking the UAE's Habshan oil field to its Indian Ocean port in Fujairah, allowing the Gulf state to bypass the Hormuz Straits in getting its oil to the market.

China has framed its need to protect its expatriate nationals as humanitarian aid but used it to project itself as a global power¹² and justify its mushrooming military budget.¹³ The need to protect was bolstered by mounting concern that jihadist groups like the Islamic State (IS) were fuelling unrest among the Uyghurs.¹⁴ Yet, that was only part of the story.

Chinese authorities came under criticism in 2011 in the country's social media for the government's inability to protect workers abroad after 29 Chinese nationals were kidnapped by rebels in Sudan's volatile South Kordofan province, and an additional 25 were abducted by restive Bedouin tribesmen in Egypt's Sinai desert. The critics charged that as a superpower, China needed to project its economic, as well as its military muscle to stand up for those who put their lives at risk for the national good—much like the United States sent Navy Seals to rescue two hostages in Somalia.

Censors were quick to remove the critical messages from social media because they touched a raw nerve. A policy of winning friends economically rather than make enemies by flexing military muscle had become increasingly inconsistent with China's dislike of appearing weak and vulnerable. National pride was at stake. The dilemma sparked public debate, with official media saying China needed time to build the necessary military capability to intervene when its nationals are in jeopardy, while others argued that China's inaction may encourage further attacks.

Domestic drivers and the growing realization that China would at the very least have to be opportunistic about adherence to its policy principles helped narrow the gap between hardliners and moderates. Hardliners

¹²Chengqiu Wu, Sovereignty, Human Rights, and Responsibility: Changes in China's Response to International Humanitarian Crises, *Journal of Chinese Political Science/Association of Chinese Political Studies* Vol. 15:1, pp. 71–97

¹³Ministry of National Defense Chinese Ambassador to India: New security concepts should be nurtured, 24 April 2009, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Opinion/2015-04/24/content_4581804.htm

¹⁴Enrico Fardella, China's Debate on the Middle East and North Africa: A Critical Review, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 26:1, pp. 5–25

favoured a more assertive policy already visible since 2009 in China's soft military approach to the Middle East and North Africa as opposed to proponents of a more conservative policy that harked back to former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's maxim of keeping a low profile that would allow China to avoid challenging US regional hegemony and benefit from conflicts sapping US strength.¹⁵ The gap was narrowed by the fact that China had de facto already let go of Deng Xiaoping's maxim.

Chinese scholar Sun Degang acknowledged this by arguing that "the further expansion of China's soft military presence overseas is necessary to protect its growing foreign commercial investments and other interests, not to mention the safety of Chinese expatriate workers." An estimated five million Chinese nationals were believed to live abroad, 10% of which in the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁶ A Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) report warned that "protection of nationals abroad is much more likely to lead ... toward greater intervention than the protection of energy interests."¹⁷

Sun was referring to China's evacuation in 2011 of 35,000 workers from Libya with the help of Chinese naval vessels and Air Force aircraft diverted from anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa¹⁸ as Col. Moammar Qaddafi's efforts to repress mass anti-government protests turned violent. Sun Degang was also referring to the subsequent kidnappings in Sudan and Egypt's Sinai desert. The Libyan evacuation prompted President Hu Jintao in 2012 to identify the protection of nationals overseas as one of three new diplomatic priorities in his work report to the 18th Party Congress.¹⁹ "You need to protect your overseas interests. We will do that in a cooperative way. ... It is not a zero-sum game," added Wu Jianmin, the foreign ministry advisor.²⁰

¹⁵ [Globalsecurity.org. *Deng Xiaoping's 24-Character Strategy*, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/24-character.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/24-character.htm)

¹⁶ Ibid. Niu

¹⁷ Mathieu Duchatel, Oliver Braunel, and Zhou Hang, *Protecting China's Overseas Interest: The Slow Shift Away from Non-interference*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 2014, <http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRIPP41.pdf>

¹⁸ Shaio H. Zerba, *China's Libya Evacuation Operation: A New Diplomatic Imperative: Overseas Citizen Protection*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 23:90, 2014, pp. 1093–1112

¹⁹ Xinhua. 2012. Full text of Hu Jintao's report at 18th Party Congress, November 17, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c_131981259.htm

²⁰ Ibid. Wu Jianmin

Beyond Libya, China was forced to remove in 2011 Chinese students from war-torn Syria, in 2014 some 20,000 people from northern Iraq after the Islamic State conquered significant chunks of the region,²¹ and a large number in 2015 from Yemen where a Chinese warship docked while special forces protected the boarding of Chinese and other foreign nationals (Table 8.2).

The evacuations from Libya, Syria, and Iraq failed to help China realize that populating its investments in the region with Chinese workers rather

Table 8.2 Chinese non-combatant evacuations across the globe, 2006–2014

<i>Country</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>No. of evacuees</i>	<i>Method</i>
Solomon Islands	Apr. 2006	Anti-Chinese riots	310	Charter flights
Timor-Leste	Apr. 2006	Violent riots	243	Charter flights
Lebanon	July 2006	War with Israel	167	Road
Tonga	Nov. 2006	Riots in the capital, Nuku'Alofa	193	Charter flights
Chad	Jan. 2008	Civil war	411	Road
Thailand	Nov. 2008	Closure of airport, riots in Bangkok	3346	Charter flights
Haiti	Jan. 2010	Earthquake	48	Charter flights
Kyrgyzstan	June 2010	Ethnic fighting in the Osh region	1321	Charter flights
Egypt	Jan. 2011	Arab Spring	1800	Charter flights
Libya	Mar. 2011	Riots and civil war	35,860	Air, land and sea flights
Japan	Mar. 2011	Great East Japan Earthquake	9300	Flights
CAR	Dec. 2012	Civil war	>300	Flights
Syria	Sep. 2011/Sep. 2013	Civil war	2000	Road, flights
Vietnam	May 2014	Anti-Chinese riots	3553	Flights, ferries

Source: Duchâtel, M. Bräuner, O., and Zhou, H., Protectign China's Oversees Interests: The Slow Shift Away from Non-interference, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 41 (SIPRI: Stockholm, June 2014) (Ibid. Duchatel, Braunel, and Hang)

²¹ Ibid. Pan Guang

than helping to create jobs by employing local labour was fuelling resentment. Admonitions from prominent scholars like Pan Guang, a prominent scholar at the Shanghai Center for International Studies and Institute of European & Asian Studies of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, fell on deaf ears. Pan Guang attempted to put a positive spin on things saying that “if one makes money in a country, one has to give some of it back. We learnt that in Libya. ... German companies only had a German head. There were more jobs for locals. We paid attention and are doing better,” Pan Guang said.²²

Fact of the matter was, however, that the employ of Chinese labour and/or experts and the emergence of Chinese enclaves in host countries and efforts to remain on the side lines of regional rivalries continued to fuel anti-Chinese sentiment. The Chinese often appeared oblivious. Zhang Yan Xu and his wife, cooks at the Hong Du Ramen restaurant in Islamabad, one of numerous eateries, grocery stores, and guesthouses in the city and across Eurasia that cater exclusively to Chinese, lives in a world of his own. “No English, no Urdu,” he said as his wife prepared fresh dumplings. Except for cooking oil that the restaurant sources locally, all ingredients for dishes on its menu are imported from China. That includes pork that slips by custom officials in a country that bans it because they are unable to decipher the Chinese labels and look the other way. Increasingly, the Chinese in Pakistan were building a parallel society with its own trappings, including a Chinese-language courier service, and a smartphone app that will allow Chinese speakers to order food from Pakistani restaurants.²³

Turmoil in the Middle East persuaded China at least in the case of the Suez Canal to ensure that it had robust alternatives because of the region’s increased economic and security importance. An estimated 60% of Chinese exports travelled through the Suez Canal. As a result, China invested heavily in the channel’s ports. Investments included a \$186 million joint venture to operate a container terminal in Port Said, a \$219 million expansion of the port’s quay, and the construction of a \$1 billion quay and \$416 container terminal in Al-Adabiyya.²⁴

²² Ibid. Pan Guang

²³ Asad Hashim, Pakistan: A slice of China in Islamabad, Al Jazeera, 3 September 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/pakistan-slice-china-islamabad-170830081303813.html>

²⁴ Emma Scott, China’s Silk Road: A Foothold in the Suez Canal, but Looking to Israel, China Brief 14, no. 19, 2014, http://www.ccs.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/CCS_Commentary_Suez_and_China_ES_2014.pdf

Yet, at the same time, China also moved to ensure robustness by investing in a rail line that linked the Israeli Red Sea port of Eilat with the Mediterranean Sea and would enable Chinese exports to circumvent the canal²⁵ as well as in Israeli ports. Shanghai International Port Group won in 2015 a tender for the management of Haifa Port,²⁶ while China Harbour Engineering Co was building Israel's first private port in Ashdod at a cost of \$876 million.²⁷ An unwritten agreement that Chinese workers would not be employed in Israeli settlements on the occupied West Bank removed a major political hurdle to China's massive investment in the Jewish state.²⁸

The need for robustness symbolized by the Israeli backup to the Suez Canal as well as a railway linking China with Iran was driven home when Suez Canal ports experienced backlogs and closures in the wake of the 2011 popular revolt that toppled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and again in 2013 when a vessel in the canal belonging to China Ocean Shipping Group Company was hit by rocket-propelled grenades. The al-Furqan Brigades, an Egyptian jihadist group, said in its claim of responsibility that it carried out the attack because the Suez Canal "has become a safe passageway for the Crusader aircraft carriers to strike the Muslims, and it is the artery of the commerce of the nations of disbelief and tyranny."²⁹ Israeli economic reporter Dubi Ben-Gedalyahu argued that the risks involved in the Suez Canal explained why "the Chinese are entering Israel today via the roads, tunnels, ports, and train tracks that are under construction" and China's intention to "build and manage transport projects totalling tens of billions of (Israeli) shekels."³⁰

²⁵ Ibid. Scott

²⁶ Avi Bar-Eli, Chinese company to run new Haifa port, Haaretz, 24 March 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/business/.premium-1.648483>

²⁷ Rami Amichai and Ari Rabinovitch, Chinese firm starts work on new Ashdod port, as Haifa workers strike, 28 October 2014, Haaretz, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/1.623216>

²⁸ Barak Ravid and Yotam Berger, Israel Accepts Chinese Demand Not to Employ Chinese Laborers in Settlements, Haaretz, 23 April 2017, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.785055>; read more: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.785055> read more: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.785055>

²⁹ David Barnett (7 September 2013). *Al Furqan Brigades claim 2 attacks on ships in Suez Canal, threaten more*, The Long War journal, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/al_furqan_brigades_claim_two_a.php

³⁰ Dubi Ben-Gedalyahu (29 April 2015). *China to be Israel's biggest infrastructure partner*, Globes, <http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-china-becoming-israels-biggest-infrastructure-partner-1001031690>

In addition to geography, Israel unlike other Middle Eastern and North African countries, offered China access to some of the world's most cutting-edge technology industries, often developed by former operatives of the Israeli military's Intelligence Corps Unit 8200, Israel's equivalent of the National Security Agency (NSA) in the United States, that is responsible for collecting signal intelligence and decrypting code. Former members of the unit were among Israel's foremost technology entrepreneurs and developers.

In recognition of Israel's technological prowess, China's leading Singapore-based high-tech business developer TechCode opened in March 2016 a hub in Tel Aviv similar to the company's start-up incubators in Silicon Valley, Seoul, Berlin, and various Chinese cities. The hub began operations days after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Chinese Vice Premier Liu Yandong began talks on a bilateral free trade agreement.³¹ Tel Aviv-based multi-fund firm Catalyst Private Equity and China Everbright Limited (CEL) of Hong Kong established a \$200 million technology fund a month earlier.³² A second fund, the China-Israel Innovation and Development Fund, said it was investing in the Beijing Zhongguancun Software Park to promote development of China's hi-tech sector.³³

The Middle East and North Africa's violent convolutions persuaded some Chinese analysts that the region had become a testing ground for an inevitable adjustment of Chinese policy principles, including the notion of non-intervention. Their views were rooted in realities on the ground as well as Mao Zedong's belief that the Middle East and North Africa was a key arena for the struggle against the hegemony of superpowers.³⁴ Mao's assessment like Chinese approaches to the region today was driven by China's definition of its national security interests rather than a desire to resolve the greater Middle East and North Africa's seemingly intractable problems.

³¹ Gwenn Ackerman, First Chinese Tech Incubator Opens in Tel Aviv Amid Trade Thrust, Bloomberg, 31 March 2016, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-06/for-island-of-500-000-companies-panama-leaks-unleash-storm>

³² Abigail Klein Leichman, New Israel-China equity fund to support innovation, Israel 21c, 11 February 2016, <http://www.israel21c.org/year-of-the-monkey-rings-in-first-israel-china-equity-fund/>

³³ Zhang Xiaomi, China, Israel to fund high-tech future, China Daily, 2 June 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/tech/2016-06/02/content_25596084.htm

³⁴ Yitzhak Shichor, *The Middle East in China's Foreign Policy, 1949–1977*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977 pp. 160–161

As a result, these scholars warned that China cannot afford to further avoid factoring into its policies profound processes that are shaking the fundamentals of the Middle East and North Africa's nation state structure, post-colonial borders, and security architecture. Scholars like Israel expert Yiyi Chen noted that protection of Chinese economic interests had already forced Beijing to become more flexible in its adherence to the notions of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence that were adopted in 1954 in a joint statement on peaceful cooperation by the leaders of China, India, and Burma.³⁵ Chen cited as an example Chinese shuttle diplomacy between Sudan and South Sudan on the back of Chinese investments in Sudanese oil fields and South Sudanese infrastructure.³⁶ Similarly, Chen argued that it was not a question of if but when China would seek to mediate in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.³⁷ China has also sought to arbitrate in Afghanistan and Syria.

China's greater flexibility was evident in both its attempts to mediate and in instances in which China felt forced to breach its non-interventionism by establishing ties to opposition forces in countries wracked by internal violence and conflict like Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan in a bid to hedge its bets in situations of potential political change. Libya served as a first indicator of the possible cost attached to remaining aloof despite maintaining contacts with anti-Qaddafi rebels. Qaddafi's immediate successors threatened in 2011 to disadvantage China in the reconstruction of the country because it maintained its ties with the ancient regime to the bitter end.³⁸ Libya has since asked Chinese businessmen to return to Libya, according to Pan. "We told our businessmen that it is not yet time. Libya has yet to pay for previous work," Pan said.³⁹ Chinese analysts estimated that China suffered \$18.8 billion in losses because of the Libyan crisis.⁴⁰

³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, China's Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18053.shtml

³⁶ Yiyi Chen, Will China Interfere in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict? Middle East Institute, 6 May 2015, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/will-china-interfere-israeli-palestinian-conflict>

³⁷ Ibid. Chen

³⁸ James M. Dorsey, China Needs to Change Mideast Foreign Policy, Bloomberg Business, 7 February 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-02-07/china-needs-to-change-mideast-foreign-policy-commentary-by-james-dorsey>

³⁹ Ibid. Pan Guang

⁴⁰ Ibid. Fardella

Potential friction as well as China's experience in Libya coupled with the kidnappings in Sudan⁴¹ and Egypt prompted a number of articles, including in the Communist Party's *Global Times*, that called for a loosening of the principle of non-intervention and greater Chinese assertiveness.⁴²

The Chinese government was not only familiar with but also fond of developing relations, including economic relations, with ruling parties, but somehow neglected to foster ties with the opposition forces or rebel groups in countries with civil conflict. Accordingly, once an opposition force or rebel group in an African country decided to put pressure on the ruling authority by kidnapping foreigners, unarmed Chinese people can fall easy prey. On the other hand, where China also fails to develop strong relations with civil society in an African country this often leads to some misunderstanding. Potential conflict is easily made use of by rebels as an excuse to kidnap Chinese as hostage. As a result, Chinese workers in Africa are also victim to civil conflicts in Africa or less sophisticated relations between China and African countries. ... The increase in the number of cases of threats either to Chinese workers or projects being forced into suspension implies that the Chinese government has yet to enhance efforts to protect its overseas interests,

noted Fudan University political scientist Jian Junbo.⁴³

Changing patterns in China's foreign policy driven by events in the Middle East and North Africa were also evident in recent years in the constructive role China played in UN deliberations that led to the adoption of the principle of the right to protect provided the use of force had been endorsed by the Security Council⁴⁴ and in the evolution of Chinese defence policy. A Chinese defence white paper identified in 2013 the protection of overseas energy resources and Chinese nationals abroad as a major security concern to be shouldered by the Chinese military.⁴⁵ The shift in Chinese policy was facilitated by the fact that China had never clearly defined what would constitute intervention in the domestic affairs

⁴¹ Jian Junbo, *Beijing's New Overseas Imperative*, *Asia Times Online*, 17 February 2012, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/NB17Ad01.html>

⁴² Aron Shai, "Detachment No Longer Serves Chinese Interests in Middle East," *Global Times*, 2 August 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/724885.shtml>

⁴³ *Ibid.* Jian Junbo

⁴⁴ Gareth Evans, *Responding to atrocities: the new geopolitics of intervention*, SIPRI Yearbook, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 30.

⁴⁵ Chinese State Council, *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, Defence White Paper, Beijing, April 2013, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/>

of another country,⁴⁶ a vagueness that allowed China in the 1950s and 1960s to support revolutionary movements in Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia.⁴⁷

Building on the evolution of China's positions, Middle East scholar Liu Zhongmin warned that "the deep political changes in the Middle East, the restructuring of the regional system and the strategy adjustment of the US, Europe and other Great Powers ... suggests that it is urgent for China to work out a mid-term and long-term diplomatic strategy toward the Middle East and corresponding mechanism and measures."⁴⁸ This, Liu argued, would have to involve adhering to the principle of non-intervention "with an innovative mind" that would "enrich the connotation of the principle from time to time."

Liu suggested China could increase its influence in the region through increased aid, investment, and efforts to mediate in disputes. China should "dare to propose to the related states more practical and specific resolutions in line with international morality" and expand its contact with opposition groups in the region, Liu argued. In line with the near consensus among Chinese scholars and officials that put the Middle East in the context of China's relations with the United States as a determinant of the international posture, China should adopt, Liu maintained that China for a considerable time to come would have to compensate for structural limitations of its power and political disadvantages. These limitations included the lack of the kind of soft and hard power available to the United States and persistent tension with the Uyghurs.

Zhu Weilie, another Middle East scholar, proposed adding religious diplomacy to China's diplomatic toolkit. Religious diplomacy, Zhu reasoned, could be based on Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's call in 2009 for respect for the diversity of civilizations and on the fact that former Prime Minister Zhou Enlai included an imam in his delegation to the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, a gesture that deeply impressed then Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid. Duchatel, Braunel, and Zhou

⁴⁷ Mikhail Barabanov, Vasily Kashin, and Konstantin Makienko, *Shooting Star, China's Military Machine in the 21st Century*, Minneapolis: East View Press, 2012, section 3.1

⁴⁸ Liu Zhongmin, Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Response in Sun Degang and Yahia H. Zoubir (eds), *Building a New Silk Road: China and the Middle East in the 21st Century*, Shanghai: World Affairs Press, 2014, pp. 106–125

⁴⁹ Zhou Weilie, On the Strategic Relationship between China and the Middle East Islamic Countries, in in Sun Sun Degang and Yahia H. Zoubir (eds), *Building a New Silk Road:*

China's limitations notwithstanding, some analysts suggested that China had no choice but to position itself as a global power sooner rather than later. Renmin University international relations professor Pang Zhongying, one of China's most outspoken scholars on the issue, argued that "China should declare clearly that China intervenes globally, regionally, and multilaterally, but conditionally" adding that "a global China ... has to intervene."⁵⁰

In a variation on the theme, Peking University international relations scholar Wang Yizhou speaking to the Beijing Review sought to address the issues posed by non-interventionism by developing the concept of "creative involvement" that would allow it to participate in efforts to resolve conflicts with "cautious, creative and constructive mediation," create institutions, and provide global public goods, "imprinting the future world with (China's) contributions." Wang argued that "creative involvement is a concept that focuses on diplomatic, commercial and military fields and stresses improving flexibility and skills of foreign affairs-related departments. It can be considered as a new direction for China's diplomacy. It will be a new option for China's diplomacy based on its new position and strength as well as its culture and traditions. It will bring a Chinese style to the world stage during the process of the peaceful development of the country."⁵¹

Christina Y. Lin, a former US government official and China expert, noted that China's commercial and financial muscle gave it a leg up on the United States. China was not only armed it with a larger war chest but also able to neutralize market forces by skipping over tenders and ignoring the rules of level-playing field competition. "In addition to bilateral agreements, China ... provides competitive package deals that may include military aid in addition to concessional loans," Lin said.⁵²

Doubts about US reliability in the Middle East that were initially bolstered by the Obama administration's declared pivot towards Asia and then by Donald J. Trump's America First approach reinforced Chinese concerns that differences with Washington over disputes in the South and

China and the Middle East in the 21st Century, Shanghai: World Affairs Press, 2014, pp. 147–177

⁵⁰ Pang Zhongying, Through Chinese eyes: Pang Zhongying (part 1), The Interpreter, 22 December 2012, [http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/12/22/Through-Chinese-eyes-Pang-Zhongying-\(part-1\).aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/12/22/Through-Chinese-eyes-Pang-Zhongying-(part-1).aspx)

⁵¹ Beijing Review, New Direction for China's Diplomacy, 8 March 2012, http://www.bjreview.com.cn/world/txt/2012-03/05/content_439626.htm#

⁵² Ibid. Lin, China's Strategic Shift

East China Seas or Taiwan could prompt a US naval blockade of the Malacca Straits through which much of China's energy imports flow. These concerns constituted a basis for China's gradually more assertive military policy in the region, massive investment in naval modernization, its creation of a string of ports that link China to commercial and refueling facilities in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf, and a network of railways that could play a key military transport and logistics role once China decides to project power across Eurasia,⁵³ and pipelines connecting it to Central Asia and the Middle East.⁵⁴

Chinese warships have participated since 2009 in the international anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden in what some dubbed China's "biggest naval expedition since the 15th century,"⁵⁵ and have paid fleets visits to the Mediterranean. China claimed in August 2014 that its naval vessels had escorted some 5670 ships in the region and come to the aid of 60 others.⁵⁶ China used that deployment, according to Sun Degang, as a platform for military diplomacy.⁵⁷ China has since held joint anti-piracy and counterterrorism exercises; paid naval visits to neighbouring countries and regions; made interim technical service stops in Djibouti, Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan for ship fuel and material resupply; and agreed on short-term arrangements for reconnaissance aircraft. China reportedly also deployed troops to Kashmir to protect construction projects.⁵⁸

Similarly, the PLAN stepped up its presence in the Indian Ocean even if it had yet to match that of the United States and India in the region. China projected presence in the first months of 2017 with PLAN vessels

⁵³ Pakistan Defence, China's Military Railway Transport, 24 June 2010, <http://defence.pk/threads/china%C2%92s-military-railway-transport.62935/>

⁵⁴ John McLaughlin, *The Great Powers in the New Middle East* in John B. Alterman (ed), *Rocky Harbours: Taking Stock of the Middle East in 2015*, Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2015

⁵⁵ Kadira Pethiyagoda, Western dominance on the global stage is coming to an end—we are now entering the era of Chinese influence, *The Independent*, 29 January 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voiceschina-middle-east-conflict-russia-donald-trump-populism-intervention-a7551791.html>

⁵⁶ Xinhua, China Sends 18th Escort to Somali Waters, *People's Daily*, 1 August 2014, <http://english.people.com.cn/n/2014/0801/c90786-8764152.html>

⁵⁷ Sun Degang Sun, China's Soft Military Presence in the Middle East, Middle East Institute, 11 March 2015, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/china%E2%80%99s-soft-military-presence-middle-east>

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Lin, *The New Silk Road*

cooperating in April with the Indian and Pakistani navies in retaking the Tuvalu-flagged OS 35 bulk carrier from pirates in the Gulf of Aden.⁵⁹ A PLAN task force returned a month earlier to its home port in Qingdao after paying calls on four ports in the Gulf.⁶⁰ China's increased presence had Indian and US military strategists assessing what the People's Republic's ultimate naval strategy was. Earlier, China deployed its first submarine with the anti-piracy task force and subsequently a nuclear-powered submarine to the Gulf of Aden operation.⁶¹

"In the decade ahead, China will likely develop an increased military presence primarily along the Indian Ocean portions of the Maritime Silk Road," said Morgan Clemens, a China military expert.⁶² Indian naval commander Abhijit Singh warned that "Chinese investments in commercial port facilities might allow commercial ports to be transformed into fully-fledged Chinese military bases at some point in the future. There are already signs that Sri Lanka may join Pakistan as a potential provider of functional military support to China. Reportedly, plans are afoot for the construction of a Chinese-run aircraft maintenance facility near Hambantota, which India suspects will be used to service PLA-Air Force (PLA-AF) assets based in Sri Lanka."⁶³

Seeking to address Indian and US concerns prior to China's construction of its first military facility in Djibouti, Zhou Bo, a fellow at the PLA Academy of Military Science, noted that China "has only two purposes in the Indian Ocean: economic gains and the security of Sea lines of Communication (SLOC)." Zhou argued that unlike the Pacific where the potential of confrontation looms large, the Indian Ocean offered opportunity for cooperation. "The unchartered waters of the Indian Ocean could be friendlier than the disputed waters in the Pacific. In the Pacific Ocean, China has territorial disputes with a number of countries, but this

⁵⁹ Rahul Singh, Indian, Chinese, Pak warships rescue bulk carrier from pirates in Gulf of Aden, *The Hindu*, 11 April 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indian-chinese-pakistani-warships-rescue-bulk-carrier-from-pirates-in-gulf-of-aden/story-TY5z-chokfLQOwBRtCJJ9LJ.html>

⁶⁰ Yao Jianing, 24th Chinese naval escort taskforce returns home, *Chinese Military* 9 March 2017, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-03/09/content_7521060.htm

⁶¹ PK Ghosh, Chinese Nuclear Subs in the Indian Ocean, *The Diplomat*, 12 April 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/chinese-nuclear-subs-in-the-indian-ocean/>

⁶² Morgan Clemens, *The Maritime Silk Road and the PLA, CAN*, 28 July 2015, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/maritime-silk-road.pdf

⁶³ Abhijit Singh, *China's 'Maritime Bases' in the IOR: A Chronicle of Dominance Foretold*, *Strategic Analysis* Vol: 39:3, pp. 296–297.

is not the case in the Indian Ocean. The security of SLOCs is thus in the interests of all other nations,” Zhou said.⁶⁴

Researchers at the US National Defense University appeared to agree with Zhou’s assessment. They argued in a study that China was adopting a “Dual-use Logistics Facility” approach, involving ports like Djibouti and possibly the Pakistani port of Gwadar that would ostensibly serve both commercial and logistics purposes rather than full-scale military operations. Each employing at most 200 people, Indian Ocean port facilities would provide “medical facilities, refrigerated storage space for fresh vegetables and fruit, rest and recreation sites, a communications station, and ship repair facilities to perform minor to intermediate repair and maintenance,” the US researchers said.⁶⁵

Similarly, some analysts interpreted the brief presence in 2014 of Chinese naval vessels in the Mediterranean as partly designed to caution Western powers against intervening in Syria’s civil war. A year later, Chinese and Russian naval vessels practised “joint action in distant seas,” in the Mediterranean with live ammunition.⁶⁶ “One thing is certain: the transit of PLAN and Russian vessels in the area is not coincidental—it is clearly meant as a deterrent against intervention by Western powers in the Syrian crisis,” said China scholar and former Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) analyst J. Michael Cole.⁶⁷ Noting Chinese support for the Assad regime, Cole argued that Chinese policy towards Syria was at the time designed to maintain the Assad regime as a buffer against a US and/or Israeli attack on Iran in the absence of a nuclear agreement that could prompt a closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the disruption of the flow of oil to China. China, Cole said, also hoped that the survival of the Assad regime would weaken US regional hegemony, counter perceived US support of Southeast Asian

⁶⁴Zhou Bo, *The String of Pearls and the Maritime Silk Road*, China US Focus, 11 February 2014, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/the-string-of-pearls-and-the-maritime-silk-road/>

⁶⁵Christopher D. Yung, Ross Rustici, Scott Devary, and Jenny Lin, “Not an Idea We Have to Shun”: Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century, Washington: National Defense University Press, November 2014, <http://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-7.pdf>

⁶⁶Frank Sieren, *Sieren’s China: Military exercises in the Mediterranean*, Deutsche Welle, 4 May 2015, <http://www.dw.de/sierens-china-military-exercises-in-the-mediterranean/a-18427931>

⁶⁷J. Michael Cole, *China’s Navy in the Mediterranean? The Diplomat*, 30 July 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/2012/07/whys-chinas-navy-in-the-mediterranean/>

nations that threatens Chinese interests, and enlist Russian support in responding to a US pivot towards Asia.⁶⁸

Like the Middle East's multiple conflicts and geostrategic relevance, China's gradual emergence as a global naval power threatened the integrity of its principle of non-interventionism. A report by the SIPRI concluded that

as long as China continues to deepen its engagement with the global economy, tensions are bound to grow between traditional interpretations of non-interference, China's increasing economic role and the diplomatic leverage of that role in other countries to project power. ... The ongoing domestic debate on non-interference in China indicates that the understanding of non-interference in China's foreign policy community is not static but in flux, and this reflects the diverse and sometimes conflicting self-identities that underlie China's world views and mind-sets. Since non-interference remains crucial for Chinese 'core interests'—and especially for regime survival and territorial integrity—China will not easily relax its vigilance and drop this principle in the foreseeable future. ... China has engaged in a policy of pragmatic adaptation and shown growing flexibilities in its practice of non-interference. ... China has increasingly engaged in a diversification of its diplomatic outreach beyond contacts with 'legitimate governments' and local elites, and has attempted mediation between conflict parties,

the report said.⁶⁹

A new Chinese defence white paper published in 2015 outlined significant changes in the role assigned to the military that was expanded among others to include protection of Chinese interests abroad.⁷⁰ Military analysts suggested that it was at best a matter of time until China would have the capability to act in line with the paper once it had completed the training of troops tasked with protecting overseas investments and Chinese nationals and put in place the necessary transportation and logistics infrastructure. Meanwhile, China in situations of emergency would likely limit itself to smaller-scale hostage rescue missions.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Mohammad El-Sayed Selim, *China's Emerging Role in the Arab World* in Sun Sun Degang and Yahia H. Zoubir (eds), *Building a New Silk Road: China and the Middle East in the 21st Century*, Shanghai: World Affairs Press, 2014, pp. 126–143

⁶⁹ Ibid. Duchatel, Braunel, and Hang

⁷⁰ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, May 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.htm

⁷¹ John Calabrese, *Fate of the Dragon in the Year of the Red Fire Monkey: China and the Middle East 2016*, Middle East Institute, 3 February 2016, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/fate-dragon-year-monkey-china-and-middle-east-2016>

The change in China's defence and foreign policy posture was likely to be further fuelled by its future acquisition of additional aircraft carriers that in turn would heighten the need for overseas bases. US Naval War College scholar Nan Li cautioned that China's newly adopted expansionary approach could "contradict China's desire to project the image to the world that, unlike the rise of other great powers, China's rise will be peaceful."⁷²

Chinese media reported that China would need six aircraft carriers, an enlarged marine corps, and ten foreign naval bases. The *Global Times* quoted Xu Guangyu, a senior advisor to the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association as saying that "in the long run, China needs to develop its own aircraft carrier battle teams, with at least six aircraft carriers, maritime forces led by guided missile destroyers, as well as attack submarines. ... China will build about 10 more bases for the six aircraft carriers," Xu said, suggesting that Pakistan was among the countries in which China would want to establish a base. Xu was likely referring to the troubled port of Gwadar. "Hopefully, China could have bases in every continent, but that depends on countries which would like to cooperate with China," Xu added.⁷³ An earlier op-ed in the *Global Times* suggested that while the West should become accustomed to a Chinese presence in the Mediterranean that includes the Middle East, China was seeking to smooth the process without ruffling feathers.⁷⁴

The Chinese approach to the Mediterranean was informed by Sun Degang's argument that China's initial military approach was designed to balance its security interests with its reliance on the United States by adopting a soft military policy. It also stroked with the notion put forward by Niu Xinchun, director of the Middle East Programme at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, that the creation of Chinese naval footholds in the Middle East would foster military cooperation with Europe, the United States, and the other regional actors on counterterrorism, counter-piracy, humanitarian aid, and disaster relief.⁷⁵

⁷² Ibid. Nan Li

⁷³ Liu Xin and Liu Caiyu, China eyes building more aircraft carriers, *Global Times*, 20 April 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1043455.shtml>

⁷⁴ Jonathan Holslag, Naval visits accustom Mediterranean to new role, *Global Times*, 1 August 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/724645.shtml>

⁷⁵ Ibid. Fardella

Sun Degang suggested that China's shifting approach could involve temporary deployment of armed forces for overseas military exercises as well as the deployment of military patrols, peacekeeping forces, military trainers, consultants, the building of overseas munitions warehouses, joint intelligence facilities, aerospace tracking facilities, earthquake monitoring stations, technical service, military replenishment stops, maintenance bases, and military teaching institutions.⁷⁶

China has contributed in recent years peacekeeping forces and military observers to the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan, the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur, and the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.⁷⁷

The Chinese navy's port visits laid bare the initial limitations of a Chinese military policy towards the Middle East and North Africa given that they were in part driven by supply difficulties encountered by the Chinese anti-piracy task force. The supply problems fuelled domestic debate about the eventual need for foreign military bases.⁷⁸

The evolution of the debate since then was evident in China's contradictory responses to invitations to establish foreign naval facilities. The Chinese defence ministry in 2011 declined an invitation to establish an anti-piracy base in the Seychelles. The ministry said it would "consider" replenishment or port calls in the Seychelles and other countries.⁷⁹ Three years later, China's changed perception of its limitations and its flexibility in applying its principles of non-intervention and no foreign military bases became clear with the disclosure by Djibouti President Ismail Omar Guelleh that China had negotiated the establishment of a naval base in the African state's northern port of Obock. An estimated 30% of all shipping in the world, including 15% of all oil and petroleum products transported by sea, passes Djibouti on the northeast edge of Africa, where the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait narrows to a few kilometres opposite Yemen.⁸⁰ Much like

⁷⁶ Ibid. Sun Degang Sun

⁷⁷ United Nations Peacekeeping (2015). *Troop and police contributors*, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/contributors.shtml>

⁷⁸ Ibid. Duchatel, Braunel, and Hang

⁷⁹ Ibid. Zhou Bo

⁸⁰ United States Energy Information Agency, World Oil Transport Chokepoints, 10 November 2014, <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/regions-topics.cfm?RegionTopicID=WOTC>

the French did during their colonial rule of Djibouti, Chinese forces will be monitoring their country's merchant vessels passing the waterway en route to and from the Suez Canal.

But in contrast to others using Djibouti as a military base, China was linking its new presence to both strategic and economic objectives. If successful, Djibouti, unlike various China's Belt and Road infrastructure projects, could emerge as a bright light in its often flawed win-win approach. China Merchants Group, the Hong Kong-based conglomerate that holds a two thirds stake in the Doraleh Container Terminal which is co-owned with Dubai ports,⁸¹ hoped to turn its free zone into a trade, export processing, logistic, and financial services hub like it did in China with Shenzhen's Shekou Industrial Zone.⁸²

Sun Jianguo, deputy chief of the joint staff department, said Djibouti was the beginning of "steadily advancing overseas base construction," which he described as one of President Xi Jinping's foreign policy priorities.⁸³ US Defence Department officials predicted that China would next establish similar bases in Gwadar, Karachi, and the Seychelles.⁸⁴ Xi's strategy broke with earlier Chinese plans to piggyback on commercial ports built and/or operated by Chinese companies in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The new strategy catered to demands of more hard-line factions in the Chinese military that had long favoured China becoming a global maritime power. A 2013 book published by the People's Liberation Army Academy of Military Science called for China to establish "necessary overseas supply points and a limited force presence" to protect the country's communications and "exert political and military influence in relevant regions."

The Djibouti announcement signalled the end of Chinese resistance to emulating US projection of global power through building overseas military installations in line with China's latest defence white paper.⁸⁵ China nonetheless sought to maintain a façade by describing the facility located some

⁸¹ Private communication from an informed source, 26 May 2015

⁸² Deng Yanzi, CMG wants to make African port of Djibouti "new Shekou," China Daily, 7 March 2017, http://m.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2017-03/07/content_28455386.htm

⁸³ Jeremy Page, China Builds First Overseas Military Outpost, The Wall Street Journal, 19 August 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-builds-first-overseas-military-outpost-1471622690>

⁸⁴ Interviews with the author, 22 August 2016

⁸⁵ Ibid. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, China's Military Strategy

6200 kilometres away as a resupply station for Chinese naval vessels participating in United Nations anti-piracy missions rather than a naval base.⁸⁶ “The base is far less than a military base in its scale and function,” said Zhang Junshe, a researcher at the PLA Naval Military Studies Research Institute.⁸⁷ Speaking to more than 200 senior Chinese military officers, Xi said the base was part of a plan to “build a robust national defense and a strong military that corresponds to our country’s international stature, and is adapted to our national security and developmental interests.”⁸⁸ The base is expected to be home to up to 10,000 Chinese troops. Under the base agreement, China would like the United States and France to have the right to operate drones, Djibouti’s foreign minister Mahmoud Ali Youssouf said.⁸⁹

“The United States has been expanding its business all around the world and sending its military away to protect those interests for 150 years. Now, what the United States has done in the past, China will do again. ... We need to safeguard our own navigational freedom. If whoever—pirates, ISIS or the U.S.—wants to shut down the passage, we need to be able to reopen it,” said Shen Dingli, a professor of international relations at Fudan University in Shanghai, a long-time proponent of China developing overseas bases commensurate with its growing military power. Dingli was referring to Red Sea access to the Suez Canal.⁹⁰

The base, leased for a period of ten years, was an outcome of a military agreement concluded in 2014 between China and Djibouti that at the time was criticized by the United States.⁹¹ In preparation for a deal, Djibouti sold to China Merchants Group its two thirds stake in the Doraleh Container Terminal that it co-owned with Dubai ports.⁹² Michael Singh, managing director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) and a former US National Security Council Middle East expert,

⁸⁶ Huang Jingjing, China’s logistic hub in Djibouti to stabilize region, protect interests, *Global Times*, 15 March 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/973900.shtml>

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* Jingjing

⁸⁸ Jane Perlez and Chris Buckley, China Retools Its Military With a First Overseas Outpost in Djibouti, *The New York Times*, 26 November 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/27/world/asia/china-military-presence-djibouti-africa.html>

⁸⁹ Katrina Manson, Jostling for Djibouti, *Financial Times*, 1 April 2016, <https://next.ft.com/content/8c33eefc-f6c1-11e5-803c-d27c7117d132>

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* Perlez and Buckley

⁹¹ Al Jazeera, China “negotiates military base” in Djibouti, 9 May 2015 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2015/05/150509084913175.html>

⁹² Private communication from an informed source, 26 May 2015

warned that the negotiations with Djibouti were “sure to heighten concerns in Washington about Beijing’s geopolitical aspirations.”⁹³ The Chinese base is in close proximity to the United States’ only permanent military facility in Africa, Djibouti’s Camp Lemonnier, a rundown French Legionnaires’ base near the country’s airport that is used for covert, anti-terrorism, and other operations in Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere in Africa.

With China acting to enforce its territorial claims in the South China Sea, US officials worried that the proximity would provide the Chinese military a front-row seat on what is a staging ground for American counterterrorism operations in the Gulf and Africa. “It’s like having a rival football team using an adjacent practice field. They can scope out some of your plays. On the other hand, the scouting opportunity goes both ways,” said China military expert Gabriel Collins.⁹⁴ Given China’s massive investment in Djibouti that accounts for 60% of the country’s gross domestic product, US officials also worried that China at some point in the future may leverage that to pressure the Djibouti government to end the US lease.

China, following a model it has employed throughout Africa, has since invested heavily in Djibouti’s infrastructure. Included in the estimated \$12.4 billion investment was a \$3 billion railroad extending from Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, to Djibouti, Ethiopia’s only outlet to the sea; \$400 million to upgrade the port; and funding for a new international airport and a water pipeline. The Chinese base itself was part of an expansion of the Doraleh Terminal that China State Construction Engineering Corp. was constructing. The port, a 20-minute drive from Djibouti City, the capital, covers an area of 2.27 million square metres and 1.3 kilometres of coastline. It will have six berths after completion, one of which would be used by Chinese military vessels.⁹⁵ Huge 2500-tonne concrete cubes were submerged by crane in the Red Sea as part of the construction of the port. The Chinese investment constituted a multi-fold of the annual

⁹³Michael Singh, Risks for China, and U.S., in Beijing’s Growing Involvement in Middle East, *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 May 2015, http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/05/20/risks-for-china-and-u-s-in-beijings-growing-involvement-in-middle-east/?mod=WSJ_Politics%20and%20Policy

⁹⁴Andrew Jacobs and Jane Perlez, U.S. Wary of Its New Neighbor in Djibouti: A Chinese Naval Base, *The New York Times*, 25 February 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/25/world/africa/us-djibouti-chinese-naval-base.html/>

⁹⁵Ibid. Jingjing

\$63 million fee that the United States pays for the lease of Camp Lemonnier⁹⁶ as well as a naval pier it built in 2009 and a more recent \$1 billion investment in the expansion of Camp Lemonnier. While China has invested far more, it pays only a third in rent for its military base compared to the United States.

While Chinese investment was expected to boost Djibouti's economic growth, it was unlikely to help some of the two thirds of country's population out of poverty. More than half of the labour force needed for the infrastructure projects were being flown in from China because of Djibouti's lack of skilled workers. Chinese loans totalling \$814 million accounted for more than half of Djibouti's gross domestic product in 2015, prompting the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to warn of "elevated solvency risks."⁹⁷

The change in China's approach was also evident elsewhere in the greater Middle East. Determined to prevent either Syria or Afghanistan from becoming an operational base for Uyghur militants, China began training Afghan security forces, dispatched advisors to help the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, became one of Syria's main weapons suppliers, and shared intelligence with Syria.⁹⁸ China's interest in bolstering the Assad regime was strengthened by fear that Western supporters of the Syrian rebels had allowed sophisticated weapons including US-made TOW anti-tank missiles to fall into the hands of Uyghur militants in the war-torn country. The rise of Trump as president of the United States heightened Chinese concern that the United States could use Uyghurs as proxies in disputes with China.⁹⁹

The change in Chinese policy became formal with the 2015 defence white paper that emphasized China's intention to improve and project its

⁹⁶ Thomas Mountain, US vs China in Djibouti, Counterpunch, 17 August 2015, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/08/17/us-vs-china-in-djibouti/>

⁹⁷ International Monetary Fund, Djibouti 2014 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; Staff Report and Statement by the Executive Director for Djibouti, December 2015, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2015/cr15338.pdf>

⁹⁸ Joshua Landis, China's Interests in Syria and the Middle East—by Dr. Christina Lin, Syria Comment, 13 November 2016, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/chinas-interests-syria-middle-east-dr-christina-lin/>

⁹⁹ Caleb Weiss, Turkistan Islamic Party claims using US-made anti-tank missile in north-west Syria, The Long War Journal, 2 December 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/turkistan-islamic-party-claims-using-us-made-anti-tank-missile-in-northwest-syria.php>

naval capabilities far beyond its coastline.¹⁰⁰ The International Business Herald, a paper published by the Xinhua News Agency, reported that China was likely to establish over the next decade three strings of “overseas strategic support bases” totalling 18 facilities: a North Indian Ocean supply line with bases in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar; a Western Indian Ocean supply line with bases in Djibouti, Yemen, Oman, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique; and a central-south Indian Ocean supply with bases in the Seychelles and Madagascar.¹⁰¹

China’s changing approach traced its roots to late Chinese Admiral Liu Huaqing who played a key role in conceptualizing the modernization of the Chinese navy. Liu’s strategic doctrine envisioned already in the 1980s that economic growth with the vast majority of Chinese imports being transported by sea and technological advance would force China to become over time a global naval power in what Chinese officials termed far-sea operations.¹⁰² Nan Li, the US Naval War College scholar, quoted Chinese naval researchers as concluding that “far-seas capabilities make it possible to carry out offensive operations and ambush and sabotage operations in the far and vast naval battle-space beyond the first island chain, and would have the effect of shock and awe on the enemy.” Nan Li viewed forward operations and offence as central to naval combat because oceans have few invulnerable physical objects to base their defence on, and naval platforms are difficult to repair once crippled. He argued that China’s emphasis on offence would help it optimize its naval force structure and ensure that it is more cost-effective. Nan Li envisioned an incremental increase of Chinese naval capabilities that would allow it to become a global sea power by 2020.¹⁰³

In addition to its naval strategy, China has sought to forge broader military relations with various nations that make up the greater Middle East. The Chinese and Turkish air forces conducted a joint exercise in 2010 at a time that Turkish-US relations were already strained. To reach Turkey, Chinese Su-27 and Mig-29 fighter aircraft flew across Pakistan and

¹⁰⁰Xinhua, Full Text: China’s Military Strategy, 26 May 2015, <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0526/c90785-8897779-7.html>

¹⁰¹China Defense Mashup, Chinese paper advises PLA Navy to build overseas military bases, 8 January 2013, <http://www.china-defense-mashup.com/chinese-paper-advises-pla-navy-to-build-overseas-military-bases.html>

¹⁰²Nan Li, The Evolution of China’s Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From “Near Coast” and “Near Seas” to “Far Seas,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 5:2, pp. 144–169

¹⁰³Ibid. Nan Li

refuelled in Iran.¹⁰⁴ Five years later, Turkey considered purchasing a long-range Chinese surface-to-air missile system that could have proven difficult to integrate with its NATO allies¹⁰⁵ and then backed out of the deal. The far-reaching negotiations followed China's upgrading of relations with Turkey to the level of strategic cooperation during a visit to Ankara in 2010 by then Prime Minister Jiabao after Turkey opted to drop its support of Uyghur separatist groups but maintain its support for the minority's economic and cultural rights.¹⁰⁶ The upgrade was a far cry from the days between 1949 and 1971 when Turkey recognized Taiwan rather than the People's Republic.

Turkey had hoped that Turkish investment in Xinjiang as part of the strategic relationship would increase its ability to help Uyghurs achieve their rights, while China was offering investment incentives in the expectation that heightened Turkish influence would help dampen nationalist sentiment.¹⁰⁷ The hopes were symbolized by the launch in 2011 of direct flights linking Istanbul to the Xinjiang capital of Urumqi that were operated by China Southern and Hainan Airlines. Economic relations expanded also in other sectors with the takeover in 2015 of Turkey's Tekstilbank by Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and the entry of Bank of China into the Turkish market.¹⁰⁸ Turkish hopes of mediating a resolution of the tensions in Xinjiang were stillborn with ever more repressive Chinese measures to repress Uyghur religious and ethnic expressions. Nonetheless, China signalled increased confidence in Turkey with its decision to send religious students to Turkey, including those wanting to become imams.¹⁰⁹

Turkey's decision not to follow through on the missile deal constituted a setback for China. If concluded, the deal would have pushed the boundaries of China's arms sales to the Middle East and North Africa given that

¹⁰⁴ Burak Ege Bekdil and Umit Enginsoy, Turkey, China in Exercises, Defense News, 17 October 2010, <http://archive.defensenews.com/article/20101017/DEFBEAT04/10170302/Turkey-China-Exercises>

¹⁰⁵ BGNNews, China declares it won missile defense tender in Turkey, 15 March 2015, <http://national.bgnnews.com/chinese-representative-announces-winning-missile-defense-tender-in-turkey-haber/4414>

¹⁰⁶ Altay Atli, A View from Ankara's Turkey's Relations with China in a Changing Middle East, *Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 26:1, pp. 117–136

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. Atli

¹⁰⁸ Yeni Safak, China's banking giant to enter Turkish market, 8 April 2016, <http://www.yenisafak.com/en/economy/chinas-banking-giant-to-enter-turkish-market-2448229>

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Atli

Beijing continuously looks over its shoulder at the United States in sensitive dealings with the Middle East. Moreover, it would have taken on added significance given the fact that China and the Gulf states needed to balance their military involvement with China, with which they had differences over Iran and Syria, two regimes that are backed by Beijing but bitterly opposed by major Gulf states, with their improved ties to the United States under Trump.

The impact of the differences over Syria and Iraq was on display when Chinese flags were burnt in various Arab capitals in protest against Chinese vetoes in the United Nations Security Council resolutions that favoured the Assad regime.¹¹⁰ The protests signalled public ambivalence towards China that potentially could expand to anger about Chinese support for autocratic regimes and/or Chinese suppression of the Uyghurs. That's what happened in Iran in 2009 when anti-government demonstration coincided with riots in Xinjiang. The Iranian protesters accused China of helping keep the Iranian regime in power by selling it in violation of international sanctions anti-riot gear and tracking technology.¹¹¹ The protesters responded to "Death to America" chants by pro-regime demonstrators by shouting "Death to China." Criticism of China was not restricted to the protesters. Conservative and liberal Iranian clergy took China to task for its simultaneous crackdown on the Muslim demonstrators in Xinjiang.¹¹²

The protests defied warnings by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who on his website cautioned Iranians against criticizing China because it would endanger Iranian relations with the People's Republic.¹¹³ The warnings constituted a break with the guidelines of the Islamic republic's founding revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who viewed the United States as Great Satan, but classified China and Russia alongside Britain as Little Satans. Khomeini admonished his followers months before the fall of the Shah that "our youth must know that China and Russia, like the US and Britain, feed on the blood of our people. ...

¹¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgR4VVgfRBc>

¹¹¹ Foundation for Defence of Democracies. Iranian Tools of Oppression and the Companies that Provide Them, July 2011. http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Tools_of_Oppression_Memorandum_-_7.7.2011.pdf

¹¹² Tehran Times, Clerics stand up for rights of Uighur Muslims, 14 July 2009. http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=198757

¹¹³ Office of the Supreme Leader, Untitled, 2007, <http://porseman.org/q/show.aspx?id=141572>

Do not be deceived by international plunderers.”¹¹⁴ Khomeini accused China as well as the other powers of having supported the Shah, destroyed Iran’s economy, contaminated its culture, and made it militarily dependent.¹¹⁵ “China like the others supported the crimes of the corrupt Shah,” Khomeini said. “Death to China” (Mag bar Chin) slogans painted on walls in Iranian cities during and immediately after the revolution sat alongside the better known “Mag bar Amrika” (Death to America) ones.¹¹⁶

Khamenei’s departure was rooted in a recognition that despite Chinese arms sales to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and stark ideological differences, China shared with Iran the trauma of foreign domination and a desire to forge a non-Western path towards development. For China, however, developing relations with Iran quickly proved to be a conundrum. The November 1979 occupation of the US embassy in Tehran forced China to tiptoe between developing relations with Iran, a problematic nation despite some communalities, and ensuring that it did not provoke the ire of the United States. China and Iran, moreover, were moving in opposite directions. China was focussing on economic development, while Iran in the immediate years after the toppling of Shah was driven by its revolutionary zeal. As the war with Iraq progressed, however, Iran’s revolutionary fervour dampened given that the Islamic republic needed all the help it could get, making it easier for Beijing to do business with Tehran.

Ultimately, China emerged as the Islamic republic’s main military hardware supplier during the war.¹¹⁷ Those supplies inevitably caused tension with the United States when in 1987 Iran fired Chinese-made Silkworm missiles at Kuwaiti vessels in the Gulf.¹¹⁸ Forced to halt the supply of sophisticated weaponry, China helped Iran kick-start the development of an indigenous military-industrial sector with know-how and technology that remains evident in the design and technology of Iranian-made missiles.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Speech of 26 October 1978 in Ayatollah Khomeini on Issues related to the Struggle of the Muslim People of Iran, January 1978–January 1980, San Francisco: Consulate General of the Islamic Republic of Iran, undated

¹¹⁵ Interview with the author, 12 November 1978

¹¹⁶ Author’s observations 1978/1979

¹¹⁷ Reuters, China aims to boost military relations with Iran, 5 May 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/05/05/uk-china-iran-idUKKBN0DL0DU20140505>

¹¹⁸ Mark Thompson and James M. Dorsey, Pentagon Pool report, US Department of Defence, 23 July 1987

¹¹⁹ Jane’s Strategic Weapons Systems, Surrey: Jane’s Information Service, Volume 100–101, 1990

Much of China's military assistance in the 1990s was in support of Iranian efforts to develop with the help of North Korea ballistic missiles and to enhance its ability to fend off littoral attacks with the sale of C-801 and C-802 anti-ship missiles that were modelled on France's Exocet, and Hudong missile-armed fast attack boats.¹²⁰ At times, Chinese support would wane to avoid friction with the United States only to pick up again a bit later.¹²¹ Nonetheless, China emerged by 2008 as Iran's foremost arms supplier.¹²² In 2010, China inaugurated a missile plant in Iran that produced the Nasr anti-ship missile which was identical to China's C-704.¹²³ To hide the supply line, China at times filed off the serial numbers of weapons to hide their origin.¹²⁴ China also forged bilateral maritime security cooperation with Iran.¹²⁵

Building on a history of military ties, Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan said during a visit to Beijing by his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Dehqan in 2014, that he hoped to deepen military ties.¹²⁶ Chinese Admiral Sun Jianguo, in anticipation of the lifting of the sanctions, visited Iran in October 2015. Sun, who is widely seen as the PLAN next naval commander, produced a draft memorandum of understanding for closer cooperation in counterterrorism, cyberwarfare, and intelligence sharing. Sun's visit followed joint Chinese-Iranian search-and-rescue naval exercises and training exercises in 2014 in the Gulf. The exercises, involving two Chinese warships, were held close to the base of

¹²⁰ John W. Garver, *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006, pp. 182–189

¹²¹ John Garver, *China–Iran Relations: Cautious Friendship with America's Nemesis*, China Report, Vol 49:1, pp. 69–88

¹²² Robert F. Worth and C. J. Chivers, *Seized Chinese Weapons Raise Concerns on Iran*, *The New York Times*, 2 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/world/middleeast/seized-arms-off-yemen-raise-alarm-over-iran.html>

¹²³ United Press International, *China opens missile plant in Iran*, 23 April 2010, http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2010/04/23/China-opens-missile-plant-in-Iran/82791272037022/

¹²⁴ Michael Mazza, *China-Iran Ties: Assessment and Implications for U.S. Policy*, American Enterprise Institute, 21 April 2011, <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/michael-mazza-china-iran-ties-assessment-and-implications-us-policy-april-21-2011>

¹²⁵ Zachary Keck, *China Calls Iran a "Strategic Partner,"* *The Diplomat*, 6 May 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/china-calls-iran-a-strategic-partner/>

¹²⁶ Scott Harold and Alireza Nader, *China and Iran, Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, RAND Corporation, 2012, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP351.pdf

the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain at a time of tension between the United States and Iran over the Islamic republic's nuclear programme.¹²⁷

The lifting of sanctions as part of the 2015 international agreement designed to curb Iran's nuclear program did nothing to halt US efforts to complicate Chinese contributions to Iranian military development, particularly regarding missiles. The US Treasury in January 2016 imposed sanctions on Mingfu Chen, a Chinese national and owner of Hong Kong-headquartered Anhui Land Group Co, as well as China and UAE-based Mabrooka Trading Co LLC on charges that they had "obfuscated the end user of sensitive goods for missile proliferation by using front companies in third countries to deceive foreign suppliers."¹²⁸ US pressure increased once Trump withdrew the United States from the 2015 agreement and re-imposed sanctions against Iran.

¹²⁷ Ben Blanchard, Chinese admiral visits Iran, wants closer defense cooperation, Reuters, 14 October 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-iran-idUSKCN0S907Q20151015>

¹²⁸ US Department of the Treasury, Treasury Sanctions Those Involved in Ballistic Missile Procurement for Iran, 17 January 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0322.aspx/> US Department of the Treasury, Non-proliferation Designations, 17 January 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20160117.aspx>



Epilogue

It was never clear what 24-year-old Lee Zing Yang and her two-year older colleague Meng Li Si were doing in Balochistan when they were kidnapped and murdered in 2017 by Pakistanis flying the flag of the Islamic State. They were first identified as Chinese-language teachers and later described as Christian missionaries. People close to the Chinese security services suggested that their activities may have been more nefarious.

Whoever they were, their abduction and murder put a spotlight on the pitfalls China has to manoeuvre to ensure the success of its Belt and Road initiative and the expanding minefield of political violence, regional rivalry, widespread public discontentment, nation-state fragility, sectarianism, aspirations of ethnic and ethno-religious groups, and potential regime-threatening social, economic, and political protest engulfing the greater Middle East that threatens the People's Republic grandiose endeavour.

The greater Middle East remains in transition, albeit one that is brutal, bloody, and increasingly spreading its tentacles beyond the region. It progressively is challenging long-standing principles of Chinese foreign and defence policy, including notions of non-interference, win-win economically driven policies, and a rejection of the development of a foreign military presence. The challenge in the framework of China's rising global posture as a superpower is forcing the People's Republic in deed rather than word to gradually compromise if not abandon its lofty principles in a bid to secure its increasingly massive investments in the Middle East and North Africa and ensure the safety of rapidly growing Chinese expatriate communities.

The greater Middle East's volatile and convoluted process of transition lays bare a disconnect between China's promises of development and improved standards of living as a way of solving deep-seated conflicts, catering to local aspirations, and narrowing the gap between often mutually exclusive worldviews and realities on the ground. It also suggests that China despite all its denials is falling into the same trap that has thwarted the United States: the contradiction between professed values and goals and the demands of national and economic security that are defined in ways that render those values as little more than empty words.

Transition in the greater Middle East, despite the violence and radicalism, cannot be divorced from a wave of dissent and defiance that is sweeping the globe to which China seems oblivious, at least in the way it seeks to achieve its goals. China's insistence on dealing with authorities and weak engagement with other segments of society ignores the fact that the wave that has upset political apple carts across the globe is fuelled by a lack of confidence in institutions; a perception of political, economic, and social leadership that fails to listen and is held to different standards of accountability for wrong decisions, misguided policies, and mis- or improper management; a perception of failure to root out corruption at all levels of political, economic, and social leadership; and a perception that economic progress has failed to ensure that infrastructure and health and education facilities do not trail the lifting of huge numbers out of poverty. This has resulted in a mismatch of expectation and reality and a demand for social justice, dignity, and inclusiveness.

The Belt and Road's vulnerability is enhanced by the intrinsic fragility of the greater Middle East's autocratic regimes that are either legacies of nationalist military coups or the ascent of tribal domination. Their fragility is buffeted by a lack of a pluralistic past that can serve as a reference point for transition and a convoluted history of experimenting with different ideologies whose legacy is nothing but a bitter aftertaste.

China's own assumption that its model of economic openness and tight political control offers a panacea for autocrats in the greater Middle East adds to the Belt and Road's vulnerability. Autocrats have bought into China's notion, but with few exceptions, there is little indication that they can make it work in their own countries.

The long and short of this is that for China to succeed, it will have to not only engage with local populations but also become a player rather

than position itself as an economic sugar daddy that hides behind the principle of non-interference and a flawed economic win-win proposition. The Belt and Road's vulnerabilities create ample opportunity for its competitors in the greater Middle East to ensure that China is one of several regional powers rather than the sole dominant power.

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