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**NO. 296**

**CHINA AND THE MIDDLE EAST:  
VENTURING INTO THE MAELSTROM**

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**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES  
SINGAPORE**

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## Abstract

China's increasingly significant economic and security interests in the Middle East have several impacts. It affects not only its energy security but also its regional posture, relations with regional powers as well as the United States, and efforts to pacify nationalist and Islamist Uighurs in its north-western province of Xinjiang. Those interests are considerably enhanced by China's One Belt, One Road initiative that seeks to patch together a Eurasian land mass through inter-linked infrastructure, investment and expanded trade relations. Protecting its mushrooming interests is forcing China to realign its policies and relationships in the region.

As it takes stock of the Middle East and North Africa's volatility and tumultuous, often violent political transitions, China feels the pressure to acknowledge that it no longer can remain aloof to the Middle East and North Africa's multiple conflicts. China's long-standing insistence on non-interference in the domestic affairs of others, refusal to envision a foreign military presence and its perseverance that its primary focus is the development of mutually beneficial economic and commercial relations, increasingly falls short of what it needs to do to safeguard its vital interests. Increasingly, China will have to become a regional player in competitive cooperation with the United States, the dominant external actor in the region for the foreseeable future.

The pressure to revisit long-standing foreign and defence policy principles is also driven by the fact that China's key interests in the Middle East and North Africa have expanded significantly beyond the narrow focus of energy despite its dependence on the region for half of its oil imports.<sup>1</sup> Besides the need to protect its investments and nationals, China has a strategic stake in the stability of countries across the Eurasian landmass as a result of its One Belt, One Road initiative and the threat of blowback in Xinjiang of unrest in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia.

China has signalled its gradual recognition of these new realities with the publication in January 2016 of an Arab Policy Paper, the country's first articulation of a policy towards 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, counter-terrorism, security, technical cooperation and its One Belt, One Road initiative. Ultimately however, China will have to develop a strategic vision that outlines foreign and defence policies it needs to put in place to protect its expanding strategic,

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<sup>1</sup> United States Energy Information Agency (EIA), China, 14 May 2015, [http://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis\\_includes/countries\\_long/China/china.pdf](http://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/countries_long/China/china.pdf)

geopolitical, economic, and commercial interests in the Middle East and North Africa; its role and place in the region as a rising superpower in the region; and its relationship and cooperation with the United States in managing, if not resolving conflict.

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## The U.S. and China: Seeking Complimentary Approaches

Formulation of China's emerging Middle East and North Africa strategy is shaped as much by contemporary U.S. predicaments in the region as it is by the fact that post-Cold War differences between major powers are about power, influence, geopolitics, and economic interests rather than a global ideological divide. China's formulation of a policy towards the region is complicated by the fact that it occurs at a time that the United States and China are adjusting to one another in a world in which China is on the rise.

"U.S.-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 "U.S.-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 U.S. nor 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 U.S. mistakes. While there appears to be broad consensus in China on this approach, China's policy community is divided on a host of questions related to the complicated process of marrying their country's foreign policy principles with a comprehensive policy 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 as a whole, its major powers and numerous conflicts, and the protection of Chinese interests. They range from the sustainability of the region's autocracy to the rise of Islam as a political force, the emergence of violent strands of the faith, and the continued viability of the existing borders of the Middle East and North Africa's 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 policy.

At the crux of the debate is ironically the same dilemma that stymies U.S. 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 and offering economic incentives.

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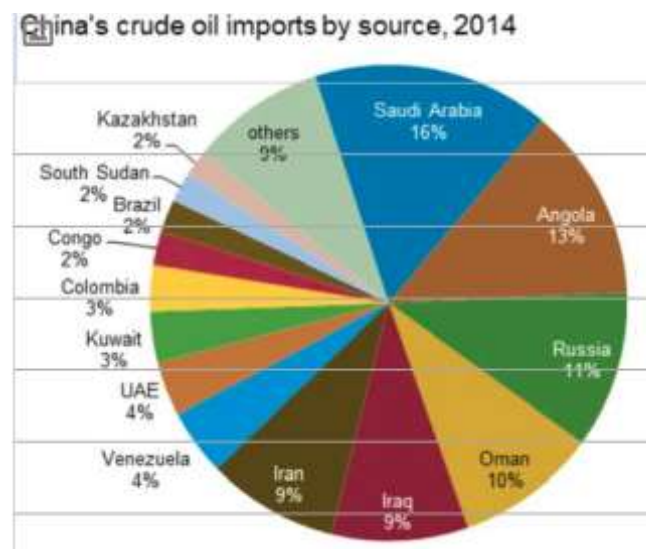
<sup>2</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, US-China Relations: Groping towards a New Modus Vivendi, Institute of Policy Studies, S. R. Nathan Lecture, 25 February 2016

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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 principle 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 potentially spill out of the region and closer to home. 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 as a result of its One Belt, One Road initiative and the threat of blowback in Xinjiang of unrest in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia.

**Figure 1: China’s Crude Oil Imports by source 2014**



Source: U.S. Environment Information Agency<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Davis Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, Kindle edition

<sup>4</sup> Wu Jianmin, *One Belt and One Road, Asia’s Stability and Prosperity*, RSIS Distinguished Public Lecture, 12 March 2015

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Energy Information Agency, *China*, 15 May 2015, <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis.cfm?iso=CHN>

For many in the Chinese policy community, this elevates the need for cooperation with the United States to the level of an imperative. The question however is: 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 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy that is being fought out in the South China Sea and the creation of Chinese-led institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (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 realising 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 growing doubts about U.S. reliability. The late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia already highlighted those expectations by making China the first country he visited after his coronation in 2006. In doing so, Abdullah, like other Middle Eastern leaders, also see relations with China as a way to pressure the United States to re-engage in the Middle East and North Africa and become more supportive of their often divisive policies.

The need for Middle Eastern and North African leaders to balance their relations with the United States and China is further fuelled by the fact that China's record of living up to those expectations has been poor. Its backing of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad with its vetoes in the United Nations Security Council and support for Russia's aggressive policy in Syria puts it at odds with most states in the region. Similarly, China, pointing to its principle of non-intervention has cold-shouldered the repeated calls by Gulf States for it to take a more active role in Middle Eastern affairs, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraq, Yemen and Libya.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, 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 from the Chinese debate as U.S. prestige fluctuates and its credibility lessens. The United States' standing in the world has been weakened as a result of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, U.S. waxing and waning in Syria and in its relations with Saudi Arabia, and its narrow regional focus on confronting IS, the jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq. China is, however, not yet at the point at which it is willing and/or able 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 and its One Belt, One Road initiative. As a result, China's strategic dialogues remain focussed on free trade agreements with the six-nation, Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Israel rather than the forging of broader strategic partnerships that go beyond economics with any one country or group of countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Harrison, Relations between the Gulf Oil Monarchies and the People's Republic of China, 1971-2005, Lancaster University, Unpublished PhD thesis, 2006

Chinese reluctance is further informed by a belief that U.S. support for political change in the Middle East and North Africa was misguided. Officials see subsequent U.S. reluctance to become embroiled in the region's conflicts, foremost among which Syria, and its inability to nudge Israelis and Palestinians towards a resolution of their dispute, as indications of waning U.S. influence.

An Huihou of Shanghai International Studies University's (SIIS) 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 U.S. President Barack Obama shied away from acting militarily on what he had earlier described as a red line. "U.S. backing off on the Syrian chemical weapons issue signalled the end of U.S. hegemony," An said.<sup>7</sup>

Doubts about U.S. reliability that are shared by China and the Gulf states were further fuelled by cuts in recent years in the U.S. defence budget and repeated statements by Obama that the United States would reduce its involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. During his 2012 re-election campaign, Obama noted that fracking technologies that enhance domestic U.S oil production make the U.S. "less dependent on what's going on in the Middle East."<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, China recognised the increasing importance it attributes to the Middle East 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 issues 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."<sup>9</sup>

In doing so, both China and the Gulf are 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 as a result of America's sharply reduced dependence on Gulf production. Both China and the Gulf rely on the fact that U.S. allies remain dependent on Gulf oil, U.S. dependence on Gulf investment has picked up since 9/11 when it tapered off for a while, and the U.S. has need for Arab allies in its fight with IS. China, moreover, realises that if predictions that the U.S. 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.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 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>

<sup>8</sup> Kathy Gill, *Barack Obama Acceptance Speech - DNC - 28 August 2008*, About.com, 28 August 2008, [http://uspolitics.about.com/od/speeches/a/obama\\_accept.htm](http://uspolitics.about.com/od/speeches/a/obama_accept.htm)

<sup>9</sup> 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,

<sup>10</sup> 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>



As a result, Chinese reliance on the U.S. 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.<sup>11</sup> China’s recognition of its need to work with the U.S. facilitated the establishment in 2012 of an annual senior level Middle East Dialogue to facilitate understanding and avoid misunderstandings and/or mishaps.<sup>12</sup>

Ironically, the U.S. presence in the Middle East and North Africa benefits China not only in security terms. U.S. 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 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.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, China is seeking 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.<sup>14</sup> China has further strengthened its soft power through retail. Dubai’s Dragon Mart, a 1.6 kilometre-long, mall in which some 4,000 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.<sup>15</sup> The strategy has however not been an unmitigated success. Gulf scholar Sean Foley noted in 2015 with a series of pictures that the 150,000 square-metre China-Middle East Investment and Trade Promotion Center has been all but abandoned.<sup>16</sup>

All of this suggests that China and the U.S. could, for example, find common ground on the principle of adherence to international legality, a principle Obama emphasised when he was first elected and whose interpretation is driven as much by power politics and interests as it is by ideology. Moreover, international relations scholar Jian Junbo suggested that if China can cooperate with the United States and other Western countries in countering terrorism, “they should also be able to help each

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Wu Jianmin

<sup>12</sup> 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>

<sup>13</sup> 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](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/16/world/middleeast/uae-becomes-a-magnet-for-chinese-students.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0)

<sup>14</sup> 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>

<sup>15</sup> 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>

<sup>16</sup> 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

other to protect their interests overseas.”<sup>17</sup> Cooperation has so far been complicated by major policy differences symbolised by the frequent blocking of resolutions regarding Syria by China and Russia that have largely rendered the United Nations Security Council impotent. Like Russia, China’s approach to the resolutions was rooted in a sense that the United States had abused a 2011 UN Security Council resolution authorising humanitarian intervention in Libya to pursue the toppling of Qaddafi.

China’s policy approach to the Middle East is reinforced by its conclusion from the U.S. predicament in the region that no one power can help the region restore stability and embark on a road of equitable and sustainable development. “Replacing the U.S. is a trap China should not fall into,” Wang Jian, director of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences’ (SIIS) 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 allows China to let the U.S. stew in its own soup. Nevertheless, doubts about U.S. reliability and perceptions of waning U.S. influence are forcing China to prepare for the day when it will need or want to ensure its own energy security.

### **Avoiding the Pitfalls of Diverging Interests**

The Chinese debate on the management of relations with the U.S. appears to have informed China’s first articulation of a Middle East policy with the publication in January 2016 of an Arab Policy Paper<sup>18</sup> on the eve of President Xi’s visit to the Middle East and North African, the first by a Chinese head of state in seven years. The paper shied away from spelling out concrete policies. Instead, it 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 emphasised China’s key interests in the region: economics, energy, counter-terrorism, security, technical cooperation and its One Belt, One Road initiative.

In the process, the paper failed to answer influential Chinese blogger Ma Xialing’s question: “What’s China’s strategy in the Middle East?” Xialing argued two years earlier 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 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

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* Jian Junbo

<sup>18</sup> Xinhua, Full text of China’s Arab Policy Paper, 13 January 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-01/13/c\\_135006619.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-01/13/c_135006619.htm)

big empires through history collapsed after getting involved and failing in the Middle East,” Xialing noted.<sup>19</sup>

Hesitancy to become embroiled in the Middle East and North Africa’s pitfalls appears to still be the basic instinct of Chinese leaders even though facts on the ground inevitably push them towards greater engagement. And the stakes for China are rising as its interests in the region mushroom. Energy and resource security are key to China’s continued economic growth and rising standards of living on which the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CCP) rides. Add to that, the geo-strategic importance of Middle Eastern and North African states as hubs for access to African and European markets and their centrality to China’s One Belt, One Road strategy is obvious. Finally, as was evident in China’s complex 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 is increasingly resembling the act of a dancer on a tightrope.

In line with the sanctions, China’s diminished its oil imports from the Islamic republic. Chinese imports of Iranian oil dropped from 555,000 barrels a day in 2011 to 402,000 in the first quarter of 2013.<sup>20</sup> Chinese compliance, however, came at a price. China repeatedly pushed the U.S. to grant it a sanctions waiver that allowed it to purchase additional amounts of Iranian oil. The International Energy Agency (IEA) reported that Iran by 2014 had increased exports to 1.32 million barrels per day. The hike put Iranian exports at 32 per cent higher than the limit that had been agreed in November 2013 as of the U.S.-led negotiations to end the nuclear crisis.<sup>21</sup> Xi ensured that he became the first foreign leader to visit Iran after the lifting of the sanctions in January 2016. Xi’s visit and an agreement to raise trade 10-fold from US\$60 billion in 2015 to US\$600 billion over a 10-year period held out the prospect that Iran would be able to win back its lost share of the Chinese oil market.<sup>22</sup>

Increased oil purchases from Iran highlighted China’s dependency on Middle Eastern oil that had grown exponentially. In 2007, China imported 3.2 million barrels a day with 1.46 million barrels, or 46 per cent, coming from the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> Seven years later, in 2014, China imported an average of 6.1 million barrels of oil a day. Of that, more than 52 per cent—or 3.2 million barrels—came from the Middle East with Saudi Arabia in the lead.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ma. Xiaolin, #38 Event Report: Islamic Caliphate in Iraq: What Can China Do? thinkINchina, 22 October 2014, <http://www.thinkinchina.asia/38-event-report/>

<sup>20</sup> US Energy Information Administration China, 4 February 2014, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/China/china.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> International Energy Agency, IEA releases Oil Market Report for February, 13 February 2014, <https://www.iea.org/newsroomandevents/news/2014/february/ieareleasesoilmarketreportforfebruary.html>

<sup>22</sup> James 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>

<sup>23</sup> Michael 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>

<sup>24</sup> Keith 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/>

China has sought to enhance its energy security within the limitations of its inter-dependency with the United States and its continued reliance on the U.S. 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 or 15 of the 22 member states of the Arab League. At the same time, China has taken its first tacit step to shield its currency, the renminbi, against the fallout of U.S. dollar-linked crises by agreeing on a US\$6 billion bilateral currency swap with Qatar and a similar US\$24 billion deal with Russia.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the region's increased economic and security importance to China is reflected in the fact that an estimated 60 per cent of Chinese exports travel through the Suez Canal. As a result, China has invested heavily in the channel's ports. Investments include a US\$186 million joint venture to operate a container terminal in Port Said, a US\$219 million expansion of the port's quay and the construction of a US\$1 billion quay and US\$416 million container terminal in Al-Adabiyya.<sup>26</sup>

China has also moved to ensure robustness by investing in a rail line that links the Israeli Red Sea port of Eilat with the Mediterranean Sea that would enable Chinese exports to circumvent the canal<sup>27</sup> as well as Israeli ports. Shanghai International Port Group won in 2015 a tender for the management of Haifa port<sup>28</sup> while China Harbour Engineering Co is building Israel's first private port in Ashdod at a cost of US\$876 million.<sup>29</sup>

The need for robustness symbolised by the Israeli backup to the Suez Canal 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."<sup>30</sup> 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

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<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Rapozza, Internationalization of China Currency Continues with Qatar Deal, Forbes, 4 November 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapozza/2014/11/04/internationalization-of-china-currency-continues-with-qatar-deal/>

<sup>26</sup> 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](http://www.ccs.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/CCS_Commentary_Suez_and_China_ES_2014.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* Scott

<sup>28</sup> Avi Bar-Eli, Chinese company to run new Haifa port, Haaretz, 24 March 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/business/premium-1.648483>

<sup>29</sup> 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>

<sup>30</sup> 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](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/al_furqan_brigades_claim_two_a.php)

under construction” and China’s intention to “build and manage transport projects totalling tens of billions of (Israeli) shekels.”<sup>31</sup>

China’s footprint and associated interests is evident across the Eurasian landmass that it envisions as part of its One Belt, One Road initiative. In 2010, China overtook the EU as Iran’s largest trading partner,<sup>32</sup> and has more recently agreed to press ahead with the construction of a natural gas pipeline linking Iran with Pakistan.<sup>33</sup> The pipeline is part of a US\$46 billion infrastructure spending plan in Pakistan, China’s largest planned investment to date in any one single country.<sup>34</sup>

China’s plans to invest in an array of Pakistani projects, including a 1,700-mile trade route to the Gulf illustrate the politics of its One Belt, One Road Initiative. Xi Jinping believes that he can achieve Chinese dominance through investment and inter-connected infrastructure. In doing so, China is convinced that it can succeed where the United States has failed. It expects its massive investment will serve as an incentive for Pakistan to step up its crackdown on Pakistani militants and to end the support of the country’s intelligence service, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), for radical Islamist groups. China hopes moreover that Chinese-built transport infrastructure could spur economic development in its troubled north-western province of Xinjiang where harsh measures against the cultural practices of the Uighurs have fuelled Islamist violence. A job boom in Xinjiang would allow the government to further dilute Xinjiang’s Uighur population through the immigration of non-Uighurs.

Sun Degang, the deputy director of Shanghai International Studies University’s Middle East Institute, argued that China could afford to adopt its economically focussed approach because of its insistence on non-alignment and non-interference and differences in definitions of national interest between the West and China. In contrast to the West, which sees terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and other great powers seeking political and military dominance in the Middle East as national security threats, China prioritises protection of its economic, trade, and energy interests.<sup>35</sup>

Underlying the Chinese approach is the notion that rising living standards will enhance domestic stability and the security of the regime. These different definitions constitute the backbone of China’s One Belt, One Road initiative, described by Wu as “the most expansive Chinese initiative ever.”<sup>36</sup> Wu argued that the initiative was needed given that “the epi-centre of war and conflict is the Middle East and North Africa” and that “Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya prove that war does not solve problems.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> 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>

<sup>32</sup> 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>

<sup>33</sup> 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>

<sup>34</sup> 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>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* Sun Degang Sun

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* Wu Jianmin

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* Wu Jianmin

Xi first gave a foretaste of Chinese priorities in the Middle East and North Africa when he outlined in June 2014 his country's policy framework towards the region with the announcement of the One Belt, One Road initiative.<sup>38</sup> "The Silk Road is an important guide for China's Middle East diplomacy," said Wang Jian. "Arab countries are at the western intersection of One Road, One Belt," added SIIS's Ye Qing.

**Figure 2: One Belt, One Road**



Source: Xinhua

In effect, One Road, One Belt is the latest version of concepts to spread China's influence westwards that date back to 138 B.C. when the Han dynasty first dispatched emissaries to establish economic and political relations with the Middle East which inaugurated the Silk Road that for more than a millennium has linked China by land to Persia and by sea to the Arabs. One Belt, One Road is driven by a logic similar to and traverses much of the territory covered by the ancient Silk Road. International relations expert Wang Jisi argued in 2012 that China should respond to the United States' pivot towards Asia and the Pacific by filling diplomatic and economic voids in central Asia, south Asia and the Middle East created by the U.S. withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan.

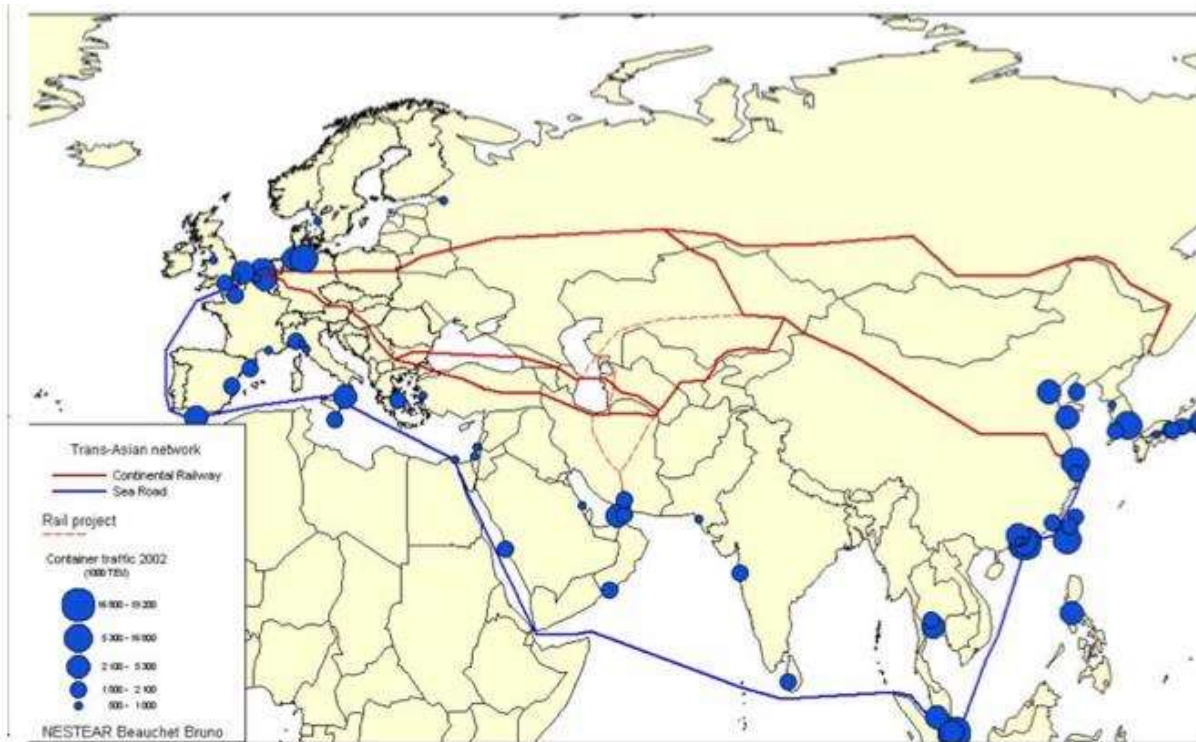
China's vast investments across Eurasia are rooted in a belief that geopolitics and economics ultimately mitigate in its favour. The era of a primary economic focus of oil-rich Gulf states on the United States and Europe ended in 2013 with a shift in trading patterns that pushed the U.S. to second place in the Gulf and saw India moving Japan out of third place. "It's a shift from the old industrialised powers to the newly industrialised powers," said Tim Niblock, a renowned expert on Gulf-Asian relations.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> 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](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1163554.shtml)

<sup>39</sup> 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



Figure 3: China's envisioned Trans-Asia networks



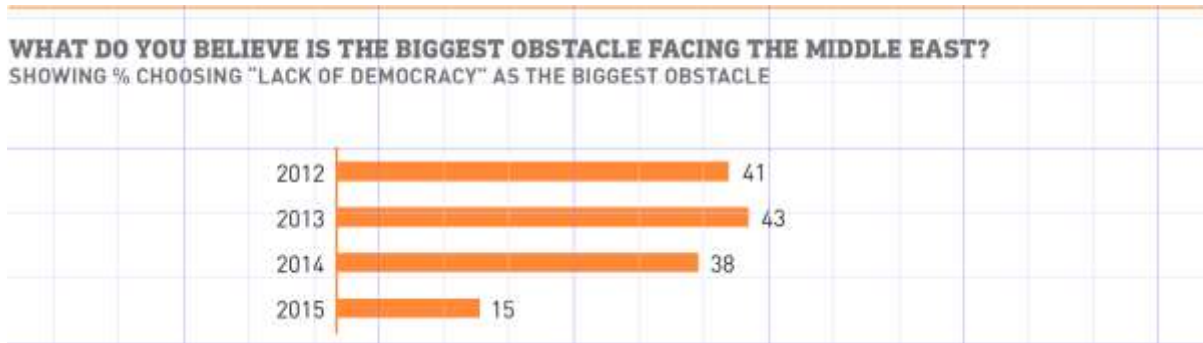
Source: IDC Herzliya Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs<sup>40</sup>

China has further been able to enhance its regional soft power with Arab rulers who marvel at China's ability to achieve extraordinary economic growth while maintaining its autocratic political structures. The appeal of the Chinese model is magnified by surveys that show reduced faith in democracy among Arab youth.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> 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/>

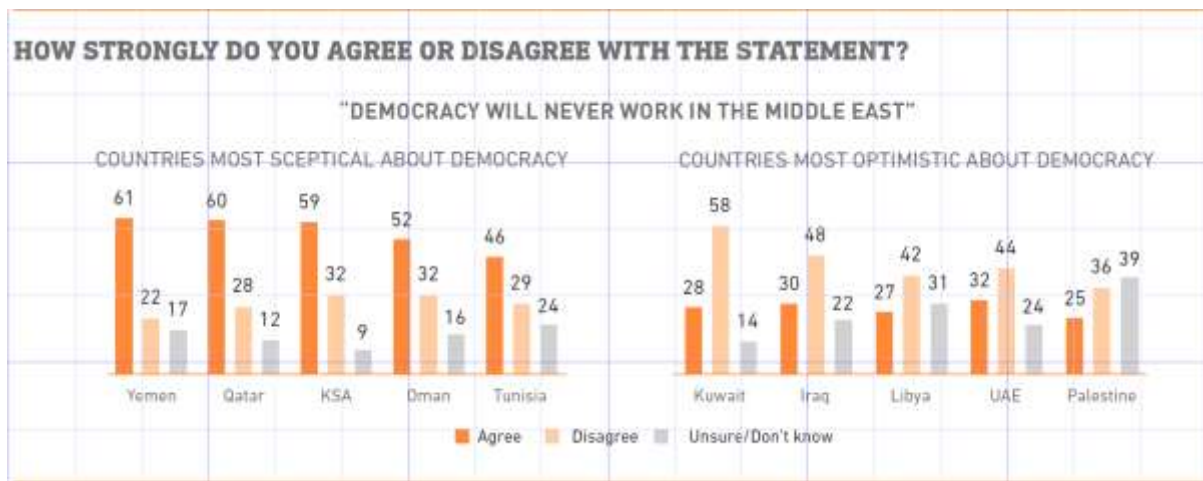
<sup>41</sup> ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, 7th Annual ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey, 2015 <http://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/>

**Figure 4: Survey of Arab Youth (1)**



Source: ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller<sup>42</sup>

**Figure 5: Survey of Arab Youth (2)**



Source: ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller<sup>43</sup>

Established in 2001, the SCO serves China's aim of strengthening its soft and hard power. Two Middle Eastern states that are key to the One Road, One Belt initiative are associated with the SCO; Iran as an observer and Turkey as a dialogue partner. China has said that it would back Iranian membership in the SCO. Filling the Eurasian void would put China in a position in which the U.S. would need Chinese support in stabilising the Middle East, Wang Jisi argued.<sup>44</sup>

If the U.S. approach is rooted in the Washington Consensus, a set of value-oriented free market economic ideas, supported by international organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank, China's approach amounts 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"<sup>45</sup> focused not only on securing resources and global transportation routes but also on access to consumer export markets and access to innovative technologies.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller

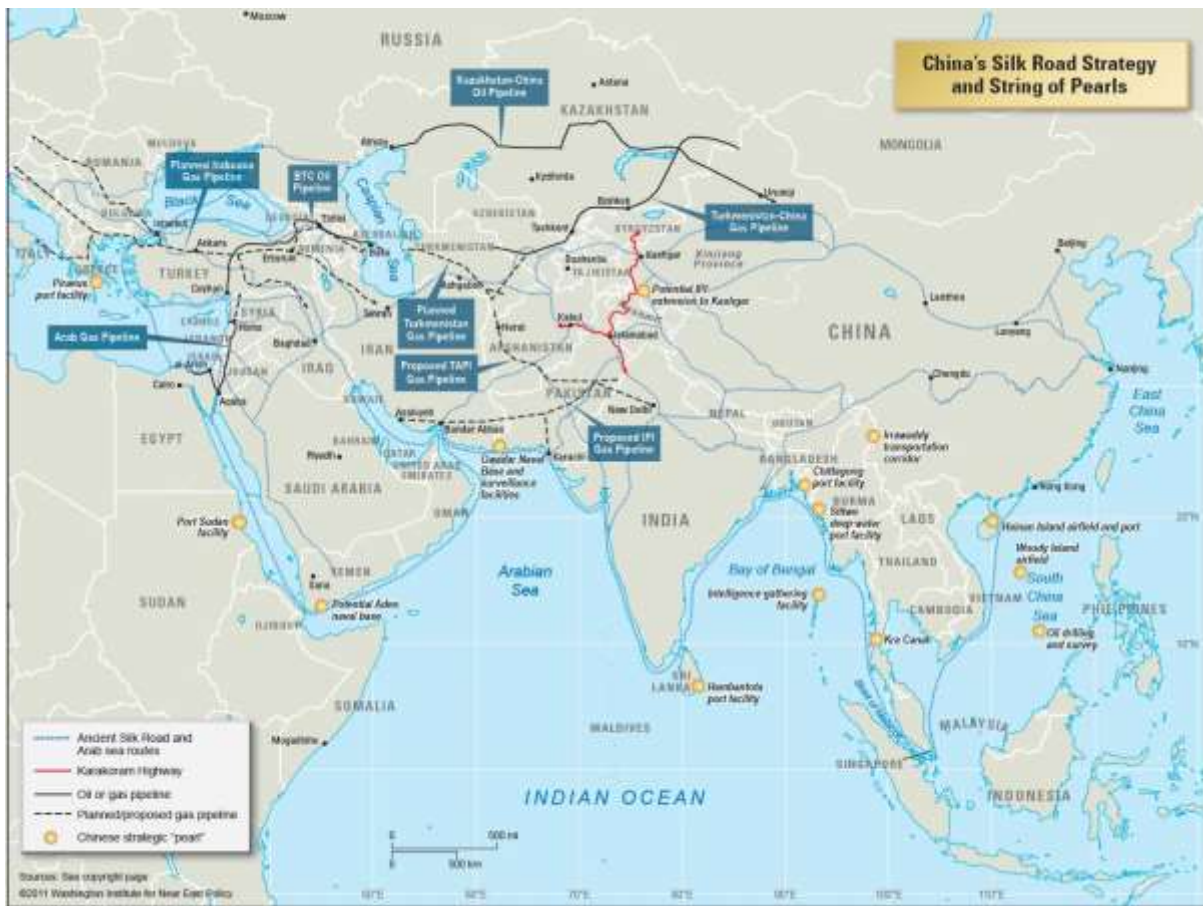
<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller

<sup>44</sup> 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>

<sup>45</sup> Mojtaba 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



Figure 6: Map of China's One Belt, One Road Initiative



Source: Christina Lin, *The New Silk Road*<sup>46</sup>

Leaving aside the sheer audacity and scope of Xi's Silk Road project that focuses on integrating the enormous swath of territories between China and the Middle East by concentrating on infrastructure, transportation, energy, telecommunications, technology and security, applying China's lofty principles is easier said than done and raises a host of unanswered questions. Its insistence on multi-polarity as opposed to U.S. dominance in the Middle East implicitly means that the status of the U.S. in the region would have to deteriorate further significantly before Washington, despite Obama's inclination to consult with others, would be willing to entertain the Chinese approach.

Some Chinese scholars have moreover begun to question One Belt, One Road's economic feasibility. China scholar Irene Chan noted that Chinese scholars were advising prudence in pursuing the development of infrastructure connectivity. Chan said the 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 loss-making as a result of a lack of due diligence.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Christina Lin, *The New Silk Road*, China's Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus #109, April 2011, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus109.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> Irene 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>

## 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 further evident in the way Chinese officials, policy analysts and former ambassadors to the Middle East conceptualise China's approach in discussions with their scholarly Western and Arab colleagues. The debate is coloured by what appear to be generational differences. Often older current and former Chinese officials appear 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 are Chinese official statements supporting the re-election in June 2014 of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad despite the fact that the vote lacked legitimacy or credibility in a country in which the government no longer is in control of all of its territory and has demonstrated a willingness to retain power irrespective of cost.

This approach camouflages Chinese support for autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa behind a veil of declared non-interference in a country's domestic affairs and recognition of a government legitimately constituted in nominal terms. It is, despite Chinese denials, a policy akin to the U.S. emphasis on stability in the region rather than adherence to liberal American values. It is a policy for which the United States, Europe and the international community have paid dearly given that it produced the violent and often brutal undercurrents of change that are sweeping the Middle East and North Africa as well as the emergence of jihadism, forces that increasingly also threaten Chinese interests.

Current and former Chinese officials often frame the debate by emphasising external rather than domestic drivers of crisis in the Middle East. To be sure, Chinese policymakers and politicians do not have to take into account powerful ethnic and national lobbies like the Israel, 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 policy making. 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.<sup>48</sup> These players include major state-owned enterprises such as national oil companies whose interests in the Middle East and North Africa have mushroomed. The oil companies argue that China's lack of engagement and insistence on non-intervention deprive the People's Republic of leverage needed to negotiate pricing and supply in energy contracts in a market that is virtually inelastic.<sup>49</sup> 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

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<sup>48</sup> Linda Jakobsen and Dean Knox (2010). *New Foreign Policy Actors in China*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRI26.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> 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>

in 2013 that 140 Chinese companies were involved in contracts worth US\$18 billion in Saudi Arabia's construction, telecommunications, infrastructure and petrochemical sectors.<sup>50</sup>

**Figure 7: Chinese Investments of More Than US\$10 billion in the Middle East**

Year of First Investment	Investor	Investment in millions (USD)	Partner/Target	Sector	Subsector	Country
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 Organisation 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				Egypt
2013	FosuniPharma	240	Alma Lasers	Technology	Medical	Israel

Source: *China the 'Next U.S.' in the Middle East?* MEI NUS<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> 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>

<sup>51</sup> 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](https://mei.nus.edu.sg/index.php/web/publications_TMPL/Volume-7-1-China-the-Next-U.S.-in-the-Middle-East)

The domestic drivers of Chinese foreign policy further involve popular insistence that the government ensure 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 employ a total of 16,000 Chinese workers.<sup>52</sup> Dubai boasts the Middle East's largest Chinese expatriate community with 200,000 nationals and an estimated 3,000 companies.<sup>53</sup> China has framed its need to protect its expatriate nationals as humanitarian aid and used it to project itself as a global power<sup>54</sup> and justify its mushrooming military budget.<sup>55</sup>

A further driver of Chinese policy towards the Middle East and North Africa is mounting concern that jihadist groups like the Islamic State (IS) could fuel unrest among Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking people that has long felt culturally more akin to the region's Turkic trading partners than to the majority Han Chinese and Hui Muslims.<sup>56</sup>

These domestic drivers and the growing realisation that China will at the very least have to be opportunistic about adherence to its policy principles have helped to narrow the gap between hardliners and moderates. Hardliners favour 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 harks back to former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's maxim of keeping a low profile that would allow China to avoid challenging U.S. regional hegemony and benefit from conflicts sapping U.S. strength.<sup>57</sup> The gap is narrowed by the fact that China has de facto already let go of Deng Xiaoping's maxim.

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." He 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 Africa<sup>58</sup> as Col. Muammar Qaddafi's efforts to repress mass-anti-government protests turned violent. Sun Degang was also making reference to subsequent kidnappings of Chinese nationals in Sudan and Egypt's Sinai desert. The Libyan

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<sup>52</sup> Naser M. Al-Tamimi, *China-Saudi Arabia Relations, 1990-2012: Marriage of Convenience or Strategic Alliance?* London: Routledge, 2014, p. 126-143.

<sup>53</sup> 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>

<sup>54</sup> Chengqiu 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

<sup>55</sup> Ministry 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](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Opinion/2015-04/24/content_4581804.htm)

<sup>56</sup> Enrico Fardella, *China's Debate on the Middle East and North Africa: A Critical Review*, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 26:1, p. 5-25

<sup>57</sup> Globalsecurity.org. *Deng Xiaoping's "24-Character Strategy*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/24-character.htm>

<sup>58</sup> Shaio H. Zerba, *China's Libya Evacuation Operation: A New Diplomatic Imperative: Overseas Citizen Protection*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 23:90, 2014, p. 1093-1112.

evacuation prompted President Hu in 2012 to identify the protection of nationals overseas as one of three new diplomatic priorities in his work report to the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.<sup>59</sup> “You need to protect your overseas interests. We will do that in a cooperative way... It is not a zero-sum game,” added Wu Jianmen, the foreign ministry advisor.<sup>60</sup>

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 IS conquered significant chunks of the region,<sup>61</sup> and a large number in 2015 from Yemen where a Chinese warship docked while special forces protected the boarding Chinese and other foreign nationals.

**Figure 8: Chinese non-combatant evacuations across the globe, 2006 – 2014**

Country	Date	Event	No. of evacuees	Method
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	3 346	Charter flights
Haiti	Jan. 2010	Earthquake	48	Charter flights
Kyrgyzstan	June 2010	Ethnic fighting in the Osh region	1 321	Charter flights
Egypt	Jan. 2011	Arab Spring	1 800	Charter flights
Libya	Mar. 2011	Riots and civil war	35 860	Air, land and sea
Japan	Mar. 2011	Great East Japan Earthquake	9 300	Flights
CAR	Dec. 2012	Civil war	>300	Flights
Syria	Sep. 2011/ Sep. 2013	Civil war	2 000	Road, flights
Vietnam	May 2014	Anti-Chinese riots	3 553	Flights, ferries

Source: SIPRI<sup>62</sup>

The evacuations from Libya, Syria and Iraq helped China realise that populating its investments in the region with Chinese workers rather than helping to create jobs by employing local labour was fuelling resentment. “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,” said 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.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> 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](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c_131981259.htm)

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* Wu Jianmen

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* Pan Guang

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* Duchatel, Braunel, and Hang

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* Pan Guang



The Middle East and North Africa's violent convolutions have persuaded some Chinese analysts that the region has become a testing ground for an inevitable adjustment of Chinese policy principles, including the notion of non-intervention. Their views are 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.<sup>64</sup> 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 Middle East and North Africa's seemingly intractable problems.

As a result, these scholars warn 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.<sup>65</sup>

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.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Chen argued that it was not a question of if but when China would seek to mediate in the Israeli Palestinian conflict.<sup>67</sup> China has recently 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 ancien regime to the bitter end.<sup>68</sup> Libya has since asked Chinese businessmen to return to Libya, according to Pan. "We told our businessmen that it is not yet

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<sup>64</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, *The Middle East in China's Foreign Policy, 1949-1977*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977 p. 160-161

<sup>65</sup> 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](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18053.shtml)

<sup>66</sup> 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>

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* Chen

<sup>68</sup> 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>

time. Libya has yet to pay for previous work,” Pan said.<sup>69</sup> Chinese analysts estimate that China suffered US\$18.8 billion in losses as a result of the Libyan crisis.<sup>70</sup>

Potential friction as well as China’s experience in Libya coupled with the kidnappings in Sudan<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup> “The Chinese government is not only familiar with but also fond of developing relations, including economic relations, with ruling parties, but somehow neglects to foster ties with the opposition forces or rebel groups in countries with civil conflict. Accordingly, once an opposition force or rebelling group in an African country decides 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 imply that the Chinese government has yet to enhance efforts to protect its overseas interests,” noted Fudan University political scientist Jian Junbo.<sup>73</sup>

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 Council<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup> The shift in Chinese policy was facilitated by the fact that China had never clearly defined what would constitute intervention in the domestic affairs of another country,<sup>76</sup> a vagueness that allowed China in the 1950s and 1960s to support revolutionary movements in Africa, South America and Southeast Asia.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* Pan Guang

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* Fardelli

<sup>71</sup> Jian Junbo, Beijing’s New Overseas Imperative, Asia Times Online, 17 February 2012, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/NB17Ad01.html>

<sup>72</sup> Aron Shai, Detachment No Longer Serves Chinese Interests in Middle East,” Global Times, 2 August 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/724885.shtml>

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* Jian Junbo

<sup>74</sup> Gareth Evans, Responding to atrocities: the new geopolitics of intervention, SIPRI Yearbook, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 30

<sup>75</sup> Chinese State Council, The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces, Defence White Paper, Beijing, April 2013, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/>

<sup>76</sup> 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>

<sup>77</sup> Mikhail Barabanov, Vasilii Kashin and Konstantin Makienko, *Shooting Star*, China’s Military Machine in the 21st Century, Minneapolis: East View Press, 2012, section 3.1

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 U.S., 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."<sup>78</sup> 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 puts the Middle East in the context of China's relations with the United States and determines 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 include the lack of the kind of soft and hard power available to the United States and persistent tension with the Uighurs.

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 civilisations 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.<sup>79</sup>

China's limitations notwithstanding, some analysts suggest that China has 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."<sup>80</sup>

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

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<sup>78</sup> Liu Zhongmin, Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Response 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, p. 106-125

<sup>79</sup> Zhou Weilie, On the Strategic Relationship between China and the Middle East Islamic Countries 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, p. 147-177

<sup>80</sup> 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)



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.”<sup>81</sup>

Christina Y. Lin, a former U.S. 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 neutralise 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.<sup>82</sup>

### **Expanding China's Naval Horizons**

Doubts about U.S. reliability in the Middle East that are bolstered by the United States' declared pivot towards Asia reinforce Chinese concerns that differences with Washington over disputes in the South and East China Seas or Taiwan could prompt a U.S. naval blockade of the Malacca Straits through which much of China's energy imports flow. These concerns constitute a basis for China's gradually more assertive military policy in the region as well as its massive investment in naval modernisation. They also explain the creation of a string of ports that link China to commercial and refuelling 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,<sup>83</sup> and pipelines connecting it to Central Asia and the Middle East.<sup>84</sup>

China long sought to tread carefully in its initially limited military contacts with the Middle East and North Africa. China was, for example, slow to engage in security cooperation with Saudi Arabia that started in secret in 1985, five years prior to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. In a deal that was only disclosed three years later, Saudi Arabia in its first weapons deal with China bought in 1985 36 Chinese CSS-2 East Wind intermediate range ballistic missiles for US\$3.5 billion even though they were known to be highly inaccurate in conventional use.<sup>85</sup>

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

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<sup>81</sup> Beijing Review, New Direction for China's Diplomacy, 8 March 2012, [http://www.bjreview.com.cn/world/txt/2012-03/05/content\\_439626.htm#](http://www.bjreview.com.cn/world/txt/2012-03/05/content_439626.htm#)

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* Lin, China's Strategic Shift

<sup>83</sup> Pakistan Defence, China's Military Railway Transport, 24 June 2010, <http://defence.pk/threads/china%C2%92s-military-railway-transport.62935/>

<sup>84</sup> 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

<sup>85</sup> 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>

States to be more forthcoming with weaponry that had offensive capabilities.<sup>86</sup> In a further indication that China was making only limited inroads and that Saudi Arabian arms purchases remained focused on Western suppliers, Saudi Arabia while engaged in a massive weapons buying spree, waited 30 years to acquire a more up-to-date Chinese missile system, the DF-21 East Wind ballistic missile.<sup>87</sup> Saudi Arabia meanwhile has yet to decide on a possible acquisition of China's JF-17 Thunder fighter jet.<sup>88</sup>

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 U.S.-led international alliance that forced Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait in 1991, 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 raining 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."<sup>89</sup> Saudi Arabia is no longer as secretive about its dealings with China but has since the 1980s not significantly deepened its military relationship with Beijing.

China nonetheless has begun to take on a cautious military role in the Gulf and other international waters. Chinese warships have participated since 2009 in the international anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden, and have paid fleets visits to the Mediterranean. China claimed in August 2014 that its naval vessels had escorted some 5,670 ships in the region and come to the aid of 60 others.<sup>90</sup> China used that deployment, according to Sun Degang, as a platform for military diplomacy.<sup>91</sup> It has since held joint anti-piracy and counter-terrorism 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 has also deployed troops to Kashmir to protect construction projects.<sup>92</sup>

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 practiced "joint action in distant seas" in the Mediterranean with

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<sup>86</sup> John Calabrese, Saudi Arabia and China Extend Ties Beyond Oil, *China Brief*, Vol.5:20, 27 September 2005

<sup>87</sup> Zachary Keck, China Secretly Sold Saudi Arabia DF-21 Missiles with CIA Approval, *Newsweek*, 31 January 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/01/china-secretly-sold-saudi-arabia-df-21-missiles-with-cia-approval/>

<sup>88</sup> 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/>

<sup>89</sup> Khaled bin Sultan with Patrick Seale, *Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War by the Joint Forces Commander*, New York: HarperCollins, 1995, p. 139

<sup>90</sup> Xinhua, China Sends 18<sup>th</sup> Escort to Somali Waters, *People's Daily*, 1 August 2014. <http://english.people.com.cn/n/2014/0801/c90786-8764152.html>

<sup>91</sup> 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>

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* Lin, *The New Silk Road*

live ammunition.<sup>93</sup> “One thing is certain: the transit of PLAN (People’s Liberation Army Navy) 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.<sup>94</sup> 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 U.S. 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. Cole said that China also hoped that the survival of the Assad regime would weaken U.S. regional hegemony, counter perceived U.S. support of Southeast Asian nations that threatens Chinese interests, and enlist Russian support in responding to a U.S. pivot towards Asia.<sup>95</sup>

Like the Middle East’s multiple conflicts and geostrategic relevance, China’s gradual emergence as a global naval power threatens the integrity of its principle of non-interventionism. A report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (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 on-going 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.<sup>96</sup>

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.<sup>97</sup> Military analysts suggest that it is at best a matter of time until China will have the capability to act in line with the paper once it has completed the training of troops tasked with protecting overseas investments and Chinese nationals and put in place the necessary transportation and

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<sup>93</sup> Frank 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>

<sup>94</sup> J. Michael Cole, China’s Navy in the Mediterranean? The Diplomat, 30 July 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/2012/07/whys-chinas-navy-in-the-mediterranean/>

<sup>95</sup> 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, p. 126-143

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* Duchatel, Braeuner and Hang

<sup>97</sup> 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](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.htm)

logistics infrastructure. Meanwhile, China in situations of emergency will likely have to limit itself to smaller scale hostage rescue missions.<sup>98</sup>

The change in China's defence and foreign policy posture will probably be further fuelled by its future acquisition of additional aircraft carriers that in turn will heighten the need for overseas bases. This cautioned U.S. Naval War College scholar Nan Li, 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."<sup>99</sup> An op-ed in the Global Times suggested that while the West should become accustomed to a Chinese presence in the Mediterranean, China was seeking to smooth the process without ruffling feathers.<sup>100</sup>

The Chinese approach to the Mediterranean is informed by Sun Degang's argument that China's initial military approach was designed to balance its security interests with its reliance on the U.S. by adopting a soft military policy. It also stroked with the notion put forward by Niu Xinchun, director of the Middle East Program 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 counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, humanitarian aid, and disaster relief.<sup>101</sup>

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.<sup>102</sup>

China has contributed in recent years, peacekeeping forces and military observers to the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (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.<sup>103</sup>

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

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<sup>98</sup> 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>

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* Nan Li

<sup>100</sup> Jonathan Holslag, *Naval visits accustom Mediterranean to new role*, Global Times, 1 August 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/724645.shtml>

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* Fardelli

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* Sun Degang Sun

<sup>103</sup> United Nations Peacekeeping (2015). *Troop and police contributors*, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/contributors.shtml>

the Chinese anti-piracy task force. The supply problems fuelled domestic debate about the eventual need for foreign military bases.<sup>104</sup>

The evolution of the debate since then is 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.<sup>105</sup> 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 evident with the disclosure by Djibouti President Ismail Omar Guelleh that China was negotiating the establishment of a naval base in the African state's northern port of Obock.

The base is an outcome of a military agreement concluded in 2014 between China and Djibouti that was criticised by the United States.<sup>106</sup> 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.<sup>107</sup> Michael Singh, managing director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) and a former U.S. National Security Council Middle East expert warned that the negotiations with Djibouti were "sure to heighten concerns in Washington about Beijing's geopolitical aspirations."<sup>108</sup> The Chinese base is in close proximity to the United States' only permanent military facility in Africa, Djibouti's Camp Lemonnier, which is used for covert, anti-terrorism and other operations in Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere in Africa.

The change in China's approach became formal with the 2015 defence white paper that emphasised China's intention to improve and project its naval capabilities far beyond its coastline.<sup>109</sup> 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, 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 Seychelles and Madagascar.<sup>110</sup>

China's changing approach traces its roots to late Chinese admiral Liu Huaqing who played a key role in conceptualising the modernisation of the Chinese navy. Liu's strategic doctrine envisioned already

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* Duchatel, Braunel, and Hang

<sup>105</sup> Zhou Bo, The String of Pearls and the Maritime Silk Road, China-US Focus, 11 February 2014, 2014 <http://www.chinausfocus.com/print/?id=35512>

<sup>106</sup> Al Jazeera, China 'negotiates military base' in Djibouti, 9 May 2015 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2015/05/150509084913175.html>

<sup>107</sup> Private communication from an informed source, 26 May 2015

<sup>108</sup> Michael. 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](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)

<sup>109</sup> Xinhua, Full Text: China's Military Strategy, 26 May 2015, <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0526/c90785-8897779-7.html>

<sup>110</sup> China 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>

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.<sup>111</sup> Nan Li quotes 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.” Li viewed forward operations and offense 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 offense would help it optimise its naval force structure, and ensure that it is more cost-effective. Li envisioned an incremental increase of Chinese naval capabilities that would allow it to become a global sea power by 2020.<sup>112</sup>

**Figure 10: Near Abroad versus Far Abroad**



Source: *China Sign Post* #55<sup>113</sup>

In addition to its naval strategy, China has sought to forge broader military relations with various Middle Eastern and North African nations. The Chinese and the Turkish air forces conducted a joint exercise in 2010 at a time when Turkish-U.S. relations were strained. To reach Turkey, Chinese Su-27 and Mig-29 fighter aircraft flew across Pakistan and refuelled in Iran.<sup>114</sup> Five years later, Turkey first decided to purchase a long-range Chinese surface-to-air missile system that could have proven

<sup>111</sup> Nan Li, The Evolution of China’s Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From “Near Coast” and “Near Seas” to “Far Seas,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 5:2, p. 144-169

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* Nan Li

<sup>113</sup> Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, Near Seas “Anti-Navy” Capabilities, not Nascent Blue Water Fleet Constitute China’s Core Challenge to U.S. and Regional Militaries, *China Sign Post*, No. 55, 6 March 2012, <http://www.andrewerickson.com/2012/03/china-signpost-55-near-seas-anti-navy-capabilities-not-nascent-blue-water-fleet-constitute-chinas-core-challenge-to-us-and-regional-militaries/>

<sup>114</sup> Burak Ege Bekdil and Umit Enginsoy, Turkey, China in Exercises, *Defense News*, 17 October 2010, <http://archive.defensenews.com/article/20101017/DEFPEAT04/10170302/Turkey-China-Exercises>



difficult to integrate with its NATO allies<sup>115</sup> 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 Uighur separatist groups but maintain its support for the minority's economic and cultural rights.<sup>116</sup> The upgrade was a far cry from the days between 1949 and 1971 when Turkey recognised Taiwan rather than the People's Republic.

Turkey hoped that Turkish investment in Xinjiang as part of the strategic relationship would increase its ability to help Uighurs achieve their rights while China was offering investment incentives in the expectation that heightened Turkish influence would help dampen nationalist sentiment.<sup>117</sup> Its hopes were symbolised by the launch in 2011 of direct flights linking Istanbul to Urumqi that were operated by China Southern and Hainan Airlines. At the same time, China decided to send religious students to Turkey, including those wanting to become imams.<sup>118</sup> The missile deal, if concluded, would have pushed the boundaries of China's arms sales to the Middle East and North Africa given that Beijing continuously looks over its shoulder at the United States in sensitive dealings with the Middle East.

The missile deal would have taken on added significance given the fact that possibilities for closer military cooperation between China and the Gulf states as is evident in Saudi Arabia's hesitancy to get too deeply involved with China were further hampered by policy differences over Iran and Syria, two regimes that are backed by Beijing but bitterly opposed by the Gulf states. The impact of these differences was on display when Chinese flags were burnt in various Arab capitals in protest against Chinese vetoes in the UN Security Council resolutions that favoured the Assad regime.<sup>119</sup>

Similarly, anti-government demonstrators in Iran in 2009 whose protests coincided with riots in Xinjiang accused China of helping keep the Iranian regime in power by selling it in violation of international sanctions anti-riot gear and tracking technology.<sup>120</sup> Iranian protesters countered chants by pro-regime demonstrators of "Death to America" by shouting "Death to China." Criticism of China was not restricted to the protesters. Conservative and liberal Iranian clergy condemned China for its simultaneous crackdown on the Muslim demonstrators in Xinjiang.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> 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-haberi/4414>

<sup>116</sup> Altay Atli, A View from Ankara's Turkey's Relations with China in a Changing Middle East, *Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 26:1, p. 117-136

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* Atli

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* Atli

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgR4VVgfRBc>

<sup>120</sup> 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\\_-\\_7.7.20111.pdf](http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Tools_of_Oppression_Memorandum_-_7.7.20111.pdf)

<sup>121</sup> Tehran Times, Clerics stand up for rights of Uyghur Muslims, 14 July 2009. [http://www.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=198757](http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=198757)

In forging military ties to key Middle Eastern and North African players, Iran in some ways has proven to be a less prickly partner than Turkey. 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<sup>122</sup> which date back to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s when China was the Islamic republic's main military hardware supplier.<sup>123</sup> Those supplies caused tension with the United States when in 1987 Iran fired Chinese-made Silkworm missiles at Kuwaiti vessels in the Gulf.<sup>124</sup> Forced to halt the supply of sophisticated weaponry, China helped Iran kick start the development of an indigenous military-industrial sector evident in the design and technology of Iranian-made missiles.<sup>125</sup>

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, including 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.<sup>126</sup> In 2010, China inaugurated a missile plant in Iran that produced the Nasr anti-ship missile which is identical to China's C-704.<sup>127</sup> To hide the supply line, China at times filed off the serial numbers of weapons to hide their origin.<sup>128</sup> China has also forged bilateral maritime security cooperation with Iran.<sup>129</sup>

In anticipation of the lifting of the sanctions, Chinese Admiral Sun Jianguo 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 counter-terrorism, 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 the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain at a time of tension between the United States and Iran over the Islamic republic's nuclear programme.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> 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](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP351.pdf)

<sup>123</sup> Reuters, China aims to boost military relations with Iran, 5 May 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/05/05/uk-china-iran-idUKKBN0DL0DU20140505>

<sup>124</sup> Mark Thompson and James M. Dorsey, Pentagon Pool report, US Department of Defence, 23 July 1987

<sup>125</sup> Jane's Strategic Weapons Systems, Surrey: Jane's Information Service, Volume 100-101, 1990

<sup>126</sup> John W. Garver, China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006, p. 182-9

<sup>127</sup> 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/](http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2010/04/23/China-opens-missile-plant-in-Iran/82791272037022/)

<sup>128</sup> 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>

<sup>129</sup> Zachary Keck, China Calls Iran a 'Strategic Partner', The Diplomat, 6 May 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/china-calls-iran-a-strategic-partner/>

<sup>130</sup> Ben Blanchard, Chinese admiral visits Iran, wants closer defense cooperation, Reuters, 14 October 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-iran-idUSKCN0S907Q20151015>



## Navigating Regional Rivalries

Xi's January 2016 visit to the Middle East illustrated the increasing degree to which China is walking a tightrope in its efforts to avoid being bogged down and mired in the region's numerous wars, conflicts, disputes and animosities. That is proving to be a gargantuan, if not impossible task. While Xi made sure that he visited both Riyadh and Tehran, he left little doubt that the lifting of international sanctions allowed China to reinforce ties with Iran with which it has far more in common than with Saudi Arabia.

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 Wahhabism, a puritan interpretation of Islam that many fear breeds jihadism, and a relative decline in Chinese reliance on Saudi oil and the fact that the Gulf plays a secondary role compared to Iran in the One Belt, One Road initiative. The overland component of One Belt, One Road passes in its current conception through Iran rather than the Gulf while the maritime touches the Gulf only on the Red Sea approach to the Suez Canal.

Chinese officials worry that alleged Saudi funding of Islamic schools or madrasahs in Xinjiang may be encouraging Uighur militants who have staged several attacks in a low intensity campaign for equal rights and autonomy, if not independence. Saudi officials have assured their Chinese counterparts that they do not support the violence despite the fact that the Uighurs, some of whom have joined IS, are Turkic-speaking Sunni Muslims. Those assurances appear to have 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.<sup>131</sup>

Chinese media in 2002 questioned Saudi Arabia's ability to cope with the threat of Wahhabism breeding radicalism<sup>132</sup> 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 Turkestan, the anti-Chinese Uighur reference to the region.<sup>133</sup> 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 turn a blind eye."<sup>134</sup>

Religious affinity is not something China has to worry about with Shiite-majority Iran, which has long projected itself as a revolutionary not a sectarian power. China moreover supports the Iranian-backed regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and favoured Russian intervention in Syria to prop up the Assad regime—a position that puts it at odds with Saudi Arabia that backs the rebels and has hinted

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<sup>131</sup> 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/>

<sup>132</sup> China Daily, Saudis face dilemma over Islamic militancy, 2 February 2002, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-8785765.html>

<sup>133</sup> Arab News, Uighurs, 24 March 2002

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* Harrison

at intervening militarily on their behalf. Russian and U.S. airstrikes against Saudi-backed Islamist rebels have allowed Syrian and Kurdish forces to gain increasing control of much of Syria's borders, making it more difficult for Uighurs from northwest China to find their way to Syria.

China's subtle shift towards Iran is also visible in the oil market. Iran is determined to win back Chinese market share with the lifting of the sanctions. Iran expects to boost oil exports by 500,000 barrels a day, much of which it hopes will go to China. Iran's oil plans put it in direct competition with Saudi Arabia, which had emerged as one of China's largest suppliers. That has begun to change with China apparently shifting its reliance on oil away from Saudi Arabia. Chinese oil imports from the kingdom rose a mere two per cent in 2015 while its purchase of Russian oil jumped almost 30 per cent. The shift is likely to create an opening for Iran at Saudi Arabia's expense.<sup>135</sup>

Despite the lofty pledges of increased trade during Xi's visit, Chinese self-centeredness in its management of economic ties called in Middle Eastern and North African minds to question China's sincerity and commitment. Iran cancelled in 2014 a US\$2.5 billion contract with the China National Petroleum Corporation (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.<sup>136</sup> Iranian businessmen were 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. The businessmen charged that Chinese banks and businesses had exploited the sanctions to charge them high commissions and delay deliveries in the knowledge that they had no choice but to buy Chinese products.

The stakes for Chinese companies are high. Iran has said that with sanctions lifted it would need up to US\$50 billion in foreign investment in energy; road, rail and air transportation; agriculture; and industries such as household, textile and ceramics.<sup>137</sup> In a symbolic gesture, the first train loaded with Chinese products to traverse China's One Belt, One Road land expanse arrived in February 2016 from China's eastern Zhejiang province in Tehran within weeks of Xi's visit. Mohsen Pourseyed Aqayi, the head Iran's railway company, greeted the train, which 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."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Bloomberg News, Russia Races Past Saudi Arabia in Tussle for Chinese Oil Market, 21 October 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-21/russia-races-past-saudi-arabia-in-tussle-for-chinese-oil-market>

<sup>136</sup> 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>

<sup>137</sup> 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#axzz3xcDnbvlw](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6ce8bb08-bdbf-11e5-846f-79b0e3d20eaf.html?ftcamp=published_links%2Frss%2Fworld_asia-pacific_china%2Ffeed%2F%2Fproduct#axzz3xcDnbvlw)

<sup>138</sup> 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](https://news.yahoo.com/first-silk-road-train-arrives-tehran-china-134703954.html?soc_src=mail&soc_trk=ma)

The tightrope China walks across the Middle East and North Africa's pitfalls was also evident in its approach towards the Iranian nuclear crisis before it was resolved. China as a permanent member of the UN Security Council was part of the negotiations to end the crisis. Like most in the international community, it was opposed to Iran becoming a nuclear military power but appeared more sanguine about it 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 Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1993. Chinese policy towards Iran's nuclear ambitions moreover acknowledged that 40 per cent of Iran's nuclear capability predated the fall of the shah in 1979. Pan summarised Chinese opposition to a potential U.S. and/or Israeli military strike against Iran in his warning that "if you bomb Iran, you radicalise them."<sup>139</sup>

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 of the Isfahan Nuclear Research Centre that was central to Iran's nuclear programme.<sup>140</sup>

China hoped that by being seen to be playing a visibly constructive role in the Iranian and other Middle Eastern and North African crises would buy it time as it debates what amounts to major policy changes. During his visit to the region, Xi projected China as the nation best equipped to tackle the Middle East and North Africa's multiple problems.<sup>141</sup> In a speech to the Arab League in Cairo, Xi argued that "dialogue and development" offered the solution – a tough proposition in a part of the world in which opposing parties either refuse to talk to each other or only go through the motions to ensure that they are viewed as being constructive with no intention of arriving at a negotiated resolution. Xi suggested that China would succeed where others had failed by building a "cooperative partnership network for win-win outcomes" in the framework of One Belt, One Road and the establishment of the AIIB, the Chinese-led infrastructure bank.<sup>142</sup>

The list of failed Chinese initiatives involves many of the region's major disputes. It includes efforts to bridge the gap between Sudan and South Sudan in 2011 and 2014,<sup>143</sup> half-hearted Chinese attempts in 2012 and 2013 to negotiate a political solution in Syria,<sup>144</sup> and an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* Pan Guang

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.* Garver, pp. 156-158

<sup>141</sup> Tian Shaohui, Xi's fruitful Middle East tour highlights China's commitment to building new type of int'l relations, Xinhua, 24 January 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/24/c\\_135040319.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/24/c_135040319.htm)

<sup>142</sup> Xi Jinping, Work Together for a Bright Future of China-Arab Relations, China Daily, 22 January 2016, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitmiddleeast/2016-01/22/content\\_23191229.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitmiddleeast/2016-01/22/content_23191229.htm)

<sup>143</sup> Shannon Tiezzi (6 June 2014). *In South Sudan Conflict, China Tests Its Mediation Skills*, The Diplomat, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/in-south-sudan-conflict-china-tests-its-mediation-skills/>

<sup>144</sup> Xinhua, China announces new proposal on Syria, 31 October 2012, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-10/31/c\\_131942913.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-10/31/c_131942913.htm)

The Israeli-Palestinian and Syrian efforts were based on four-point plans put forward by Beijing. The Israeli-Palestinian one died a quiet death after it was rejected by Israel<sup>145</sup> while the Syrian plan failed to generate serious interest.<sup>146</sup> The Sudanese, Israeli-Palestinian and Syrian initiatives constituted nonetheless an early testing of concepts of “constructive” or “creative” intervention put forward in 2010 and 2011 by scholars Zhao Huasheng and Wang Yizhou.<sup>147</sup>

The failures notwithstanding, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi signalled his country’s recognition that it will progressively have to move from non-interference to active engagement in a speech in 2013 to the United Nations General Assembly. China intended to play a “more proactive and constructive role” in the world’s hot spots and provide “public goods to the international community,”<sup>148</sup> Wang said. Wang was building on President Hu’s statement in 2004 that Chinese diplomacy should “enhance the capability of protecting interests overseas, improve relevant laws and regulations, strengthen the early-warning and fast-response system, improve the style of work and enthusiastically serve Chinese citizens and legal persons in foreign countries.”<sup>149</sup>

China’s recognition of changing realities on the ground was also on display in its shifting approach towards Afghanistan, a prime case study for how domestic issues make it increasingly difficult for China to remain aloof to developments beyond its borders, insist on the principle of non-interference, and attempt to make economics and investments the core drivers of its foreign policy. Stability in Afghanistan is of vital interest to China. The Central Asian country’s eastern tongue, the Wakhan Corridor, barely touches China’s borders but it potentially could serve as a route into Xinjiang for Uighur rebels abroad who take advantage of the region’s porous borders.

Chinese engagement in Afghanistan is further driven by the withdrawal of the bulk of NATO forces from the country and the United States’ more limited military commitment to a country in which China has invested heavily. China has invested in the world’s second largest copper mine in Afghanistan as well as an oil field in the country. “Chinese companies can’t go there without U.S. security. We hope the U.S. keep their troops in Afghanistan. The U.S. can’t just leave after 14 years of killing,” said Pan.<sup>150</sup>

China’s concern is heightened by the fact that the scala of jihadist and Islamist groups operating in Afghanistan includes not only the Taliban, IS and Al-Qaeda but also the East Turkestan Islamic

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<sup>145</sup> Xinhua (6 May 2013). *Chinese President makes four-point proposal for settlement of Palestinian question*, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-05/06/c\\_132363061.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-05/06/c_132363061.htm)

<sup>146</sup> Amrutha Gayrathi, *China Signals Greater Role in Global Affairs but Sticks to Principle of Mutual Non-Interference*, Associated Press, 11 September 2012, <http://www.ibtimes.com/china-signals-greater-role-global-affairs-sticks-principle-mutual-non-interference-866668>

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* Fardella

<sup>148</sup> Andrew Small (26 March 2015). *Chinese Foreign Policy Comes of Age*, The New York Times, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/27/opinion/chinese-foreign-policy-comes-of-age.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/27/opinion/chinese-foreign-policy-comes-of-age.html?_r=2)

<sup>149</sup> Permanent mission of China to the UN at Geneva(Undated). *The 10th Conference of Chinese diplomatic envoys stationed abroad held in Beijing*, <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/xwdt/t156047.htm>

<sup>150</sup> Pan Guang, *Keynote Speech at International Conference on China in the Middle East*, Indiana University and Peking University, Beijing, 17-18 March 2015

Movement (ETIM). East Turkistan is the name nationalist Uighurs and pan-Turkists use to identify Xinjiang. China's effective support for autocratic governments or governments whose legitimacy is contested under the guise of non-interference has reinforced perceptions among Uighur nationalists and Islamists and their jihadist allies of China as a pillar of the status quo.

The potential threat emanating from Afghanistan was underscored by the execution by IS in November 2015 of Chinese hostage Fan Jinghui, a freelance consultant from Beijing. The execution signalled the willingness of the jihadists and other militant groups to target not only Xinjiang itself but also Chinese interests and nationals in the Middle East and elsewhere. The threat heightened Chinese concerns about the security and safety of massive investments by state-owned enterprises and projects related to the One Belt One Road initiative in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. The threat looms ever larger given the effectiveness of China's crackdown on dissent in Xinjiang itself and its enhanced control of the border regions.<sup>151</sup>

A video clip distributed in August 2015 by the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), a Uighur group whose Syrian branch, the Turkistan Islamic Party in the Levant (TIP-L), is aligned with the Al Nusra Front, an Al-Qaeda affiliate, and Jaish al Fatah, a coalition of jihadists active predominantly in the Syria's northern Aleppo and Idlib provinces, drove the threat home. The video showed an attack by Uighur militants on Afghan security personnel hired by China's state-owned Metallurgical Group of China (MCC). The Afghans were responsible for the security of MCC's US\$3 billion investment in Mes Aynak, the world's largest undeveloped copper field, in Afghanistan's Logar province.<sup>152</sup>

China blames the increasingly real threat emanating from instability in Afghanistan on U.S. and Saudi mismanagement of Islamist forces that fought the Soviets in the 1980s and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. "We gave a lot of aid to the mujahedeen in Afghanistan. They fell into the hands of jihadists," said Pan. Pan was referring to the anti-Soviet Islamists who spawned jihadist groups across Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>153</sup>

To achieve its goal in Afghanistan, China has stepped up its contacts with the government and invited Taliban and former Taliban for visits to the mainland. In one instance China brought former Taliban officials with close ties to Pakistan's intelligence agency together with an Afghan government envoy in Urumqi<sup>154</sup> for what Foreign Minister Wan termed an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" reconciliation process.<sup>155</sup> On an earlier visit to Kabul, Wan announced China's intention to help Afghanistan become a "unified, stable, developing, and friendly" country.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Nodirbek Soliev, Growing Uighur Militancy: Challenges for China, RSIS Commentary, 4 February 2016, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CO16027.pdf>

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* Soliev

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* Pan Guang

<sup>154</sup> Edward Wong, Taliban and Afghan Peace Officials Have Secret Talks in China, The New York Times, 26 May 2015, [www.nytimes.com/world/taliban-and-afghan-peace-officials-have-secret-talks-in-china.html](http://www.nytimes.com/world/taliban-and-afghan-peace-officials-have-secret-talks-in-china.html)

<sup>155</sup> Li Jing, China stands by Afghanistan, China daily, 28 September 2015, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015xivisituz/2015-09/28/content\\_22000357.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015xivisituz/2015-09/28/content_22000357.htm)

<sup>156</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, Foreign Minister Wang Yi arrived in Kabul to begin a visit to Afghanistan, 22 February 2014, [http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2014-02/22/content\\_2619024.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2014-02/22/content_2619024.htm)

Former Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Iftakhar Ahmed Chowdhury credited Pakistan for China's attempt to mediate in Afghanistan. Chowdhury said China had followed Pakistan's advice to contact Taliban leader Mullah Omar directly which led to the group assuring Beijing that it would not allow attacks on China from territory it controlled. China's ambassador to Pakistan was further reported to have been the only non-Muslim to have at the time met with Taliban leader Mullah Omar. The reports were denied by China.<sup>157</sup>

China was at the same time pressing Pakistani generals to clean up their act after Chinese Muslims joined the ranks of the Taliban, some of whom are believed to be responsible for attacks in Xinjiang.<sup>158</sup> China has also urged Pakistan to step up military action against militant safe havens in North Waziristan as well as efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan.<sup>159</sup> China, Chowdhury noted, was the only country to have remained in continuous contact with the Taliban once they were implicated in the 9/11 Al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington.<sup>160</sup> Pakistani media reported on the day of the 9/11 attacks that the minister of mining and industry of the Taliban government in Kabul had signed a memorandum of understanding on technical and economic cooperation with a Chinese delegation in Peshawar.

### **Spill-over in Xinjiang**

Militant Chinese Muslims have meanwhile expanded their international links beyond the Taliban and increased their popularity among Uighurs as well as some Hui Muslims who adhere to the most puritan schools of Islam, Wahhabism, Salafism and jihadism.<sup>161</sup> Up to 1,000 Uighurs are believed to have joined IS as of 2015. That is up from an estimate by The Global Times of 300 in 2014.<sup>162</sup> 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.<sup>163</sup> 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 IS fighter captured by Iraqi forces.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.* Harrison

<sup>158</sup> Ahmed Rashid, Why Pakistan is Sinking, The New York Review of Books, 2 April 2015,

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.* Small

<sup>160</sup> Iftakhar Ahmed Chowdhury, Pakistan in China's Eyes: Pawn, Pivot or a Pointer to its World View, Institute of South Asian Studies, 2015, [http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS\\_Special\\_Report\\_No.\\_23\\_-\\_Pakistan\\_in\\_China's\\_Eyes\\_06052015003608.pdf](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Special_Report_No._23_-_Pakistan_in_China's_Eyes_06052015003608.pdf)

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.* Fardelli

<sup>162</sup> Qiu Yongzheng Turkey's ambiguous policies help terrorists join IS jihadist group: analyst, Global Times, 15 December 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/896765.shtml>

<sup>163</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hTJr9rgCx0&utm> (no longer accessible)

<sup>164</sup> Iraqi Ministry of Defense, Facebook, 2 September 2014, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=731771496858619&id=611071662261937](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=731771496858619&id=611071662261937)



Uighurs reach Syria by taking a circuitous route through Central Asia or employing people-smuggling networks in Southeast Asia. They cross borders using forged Turkish passports or by claiming that they are Turkish nationals. Chinese authorities said in January 2015 that they had arrested 10 Turks and a number of Uighurs in Shanghai for smuggling Uighurs out of the country.<sup>165</sup> "There are Uighurs that have fled overseas and joined IS. The organisation has a huge international influence and Xinjiang can't keep aloof from it and we have already been affected. We have also found that some who fought returned to Xinjiang to participate in terrorist plots," said Communist Party secretary of Xinjiang Zhang Chunxian.<sup>166</sup>

IS 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."<sup>167</sup> Muhammed Amin, an 80-year old Uighur-speaking cleric from Xinjiang called in a 15-minute IS video published in July 2015 on Muslims to join the group and kill "Chinese infidels."<sup>168</sup> The video also featured a classroom filled with Uygur boys dressed in headgear bearing the black-and-white IS logo. One of the boys pointed to the IS flag as he pledges: "O Chinese infidels ... we will come to you and raise this flag in Turkestan."<sup>169</sup> In December 2015, IS's foreign language media arm, Al-Hayat Media Center, distributed a chant in Mandarin exhorting Muslims to revolt.<sup>170</sup> IS greeted 2016 by hacking the website of Tsinghua University, one of China's most prestigious educational institutions, with a call to jihad.<sup>171</sup>

Chinese media have accused Turkey 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).<sup>172</sup> 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.<sup>173</sup> In its first detailed listing of Xinjiang-related incidents of violence, China asserted in 2002 that ETIM was "supported and funded" by Al-Qaeda.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Jonathan Kaiman, China arrests 10 Turkish nationals on suspicion of aiding terror suspects, The Guardian, 14 January 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/14/china-arrests-10-turkish-nationals-on-suspicion-of-aiding-terror-suspects>

<sup>166</sup> The Associated Press, China says Muslim Uighurs have joined ISIS, Haaretz, 11 March 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/world/1.646317>

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.* Qiu Yongzheng

<sup>168</sup> 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/>

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.* Heavy

<sup>170</sup> 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/>

<sup>171</sup> 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>

<sup>172</sup> 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>

<sup>173</sup> [http://www.guancha.cn/military-affairs/2015\\_04\\_23\\_317042.shtml](http://www.guancha.cn/military-affairs/2015_04_23_317042.shtml) / John Hall. 2015. Meet the Peshmerga's International Brigade: From IT workers to ex-soldiers, the men from the West teaming up with Kurdish forces to

Figure 12a: A Chinese Fighter in Syria



Source: Guancha<sup>175</sup>

Figure 12b: Chinese graffiti in Syria



Source: Guancha<sup>176</sup>

fight ISIS, The Daily Mail, April 21, <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>

<sup>174</sup> 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>

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.* Guancha / John Hall



Concern about Turkey's role as a conduit for Uighurs joining IS is grounded in the fact that Turkey historically has offered refuge to Uighurs fleeing Chinese rule. Turkish empathy with the Uighurs is rooted in a belief that the group represents the forefathers of primordial Turkism.<sup>177</sup> The Ottomans recognised as emir Muhammad Yaqub Beg, a Tajik commander, who exploited the Hui uprising in Xinjiang in the period between 1865 and 1867 to capture Kashgar and Yarkand and assert control over the region. The recognition gave Yaqub Beg legitimacy and access to arms. Ottoman military officers moreover served as Yaqub Beg's advisors and supplied him with arms.<sup>178</sup>

Modern Turkey has been home to Uighur nationalists since the PLA captured Xinjiang in 1949. Secular Turkish nationalism long served as a model for the Uighurs that sought refuge in Turkey but in more recent years has increasingly been pushed aside by militant Islamic ideology. The post-1949 refugees included Isa Yusuf Alptekin, who became the voice of the Uighur diaspora during the Cold War, and maintained close relations with Turkish leaders, including former presidents and prime ministers Suleiman Demirel and Turgut Ozal. Current president Recep Tayyip Erdogan named in 1995 when he was mayor of Istanbul a section of the city's Sultan Ahmet Park in honour of Alptekin. A memorial in the park commemorates the martyrs who lost their lives in Eastern Turkestan's struggle for independence. The martyrs include Uighurs who were executed by the Chinese authorities. "Eastern Turkestan is not only the home of the Turkic peoples but also the cradle of Turkic history, civilisation and culture. To forget that would lead to the ignorance of our own history, civilisation and culture... The martyrs of Eastern Turkestan are our martyrs," Erdogan said at the time.<sup>179</sup>

Chinese analysts have compared the presence of Uighur nationalists and Islamist in Turkey to the Taliban's harbouring of Osama bin Laden.<sup>180</sup> Chinese officials, hoping to exploit Turkey's conflict with the Kurds, have insisted in discussions with their Turkish counterparts over the last two decades that the two countries need to combat the "three evil forces of separatism, terrorism and extremism," including "East Turkestan terrorism."<sup>181</sup> Ultimately, China's highlighting of the discrepancy between Turkish support for Uighur nationalist demands and Turkey's refusal to recognise similar rights for its Kurdish population and the gradual rise of China as an economic power persuaded Turkey to moderate its support for Uighur independence.

Turkey's changing attitude was enshrined in a directive in 1999 issued by then Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz that recognised Xinjiang for the first time as a part of China and banned government

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid* Guancha / John Hall

<sup>177</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, Ethno-Diplomacy: The Uyghur Hitch in Sino-Turkish Relations, Policy Studies, No. 53, East-West Center, 2009, <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/ps053.pdf>

<sup>178</sup> Hodong Kim, Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864-1877, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, Kindle edition

<sup>179</sup> Eastern Turkestan Information Bulletin, Istanbul Names Park for Isa Yusuf Alptekin, Vol. 5 No. 4 (August 1995), [http://caccp.freedomsherald.org/et/etib/etib5\\_4.html#4](http://caccp.freedomsherald.org/et/etib/etib5_4.html#4)

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.* Shichor

<sup>181</sup> Michael Clarke, Uyghur 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](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45067&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=200344abdd89976c56dee55481597515)

officials from attending events promoting the concept of Eastern Turkestan.<sup>182</sup> Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit described the Uighurs during a visit in 2002 by his Chinese counterpart, Zhu Rongji, as a “friendship bridge” between the two countries.<sup>183</sup> The effect of the Chinese pressure proved however to be double-edged. The departure to Europe and the United States of some Uighurs provided the nationalists a voice in countries that were less susceptible to China’s carrot-and-stick approach.

Turkey’s bowing to Chinese pressure has however failed to erase the legacy of Turkish support for Uighur nationalism. China, which denounces Uighur nationalism as a foreign conspiracy and international terrorism, continues to view Turkey as what China scholar Yitzhak Shichor termed “the political and cultural epicentre of pan-Turkism.”<sup>184</sup> Chinese perceptions were reinforced by Turkey’s response to the death in 2009 of at least 200 people and mass arrests during riots in Xinjiang’s capital of Urumqi days after Turkish President Abdullah Gul had visited the city, and Thailand’s deportation in 2015 to China of more than 100 Uighurs, which sparked violent demonstrations in Istanbul and Ankara.<sup>185</sup> Then Prime Minister Erdogan described the events in Urumqi as “almost genocide.” Erdogan’s industry minister Nihat Ergun called for economic sanctions against China, saying “organising protests is not enough.”<sup>186</sup> Six years later, Turkey’s foreign ministry used strong language to denounce the deportation of the Uighurs.<sup>187</sup>

China has used its assertion that IS and Al-Qaeda are linked to a rising number of violent incidents in China to justify the adoption in December 2015 of controversial counter-terrorism legislation. It requires technology firms to help decrypt information and allows the military to venture overseas on counterterror operations.<sup>188</sup> The legislation, said Mei Jianming, director of the Counter-terrorism Research Center at the People’s Public Security University of China, “took the growing influence of Islamic State into consideration after it planned to recruit Muslims from all ethnic groups in China, posing new challenges for the country.”<sup>189</sup> “We are very worried about this. We are worried that young Chinese will go through Turkey to Syria and then come back to China,” Pan Guang said.<sup>190</sup> Concern

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<sup>182</sup> Selcuk Colakoglu, Dynamics of Sino–Turkish Relations: A Turkish Perspective, East Asia, Vol. 32:1, p 7-23

<sup>183</sup> China Daily, Zhu in Turkey, Vows to Fight Terrorism, 17 April 2002, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Apr/30829.htm>

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.* Shichor

<sup>185</sup> Lucy Hornby and Piotr Zalewski, China accuses Turkey of aiding Uighurs, Financial Times 12 July 2015, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/93607210-285c-11e5-8613-e7aedbb7bdb7.html>

<sup>186</sup> Burhan Dogus Ayparlar, Turkish PM Erdogan: 'Incidents at Xinjiang are almost Genocide,' Journal of Turkish Weekly, 11 July 2009, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/2009/07/11/news/turkish-pm-erdogan-incidents-at-xinjiang-are-almost-genocide/>

<sup>187</sup> Hurriyet Daily News, Turkey slams Thailand for deporting Uighurs, 9 July 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-slams-thailand-for-deporting-uighurs.aspx?pageID=238&nID=85214&NewsCatID=510>

<sup>188</sup> Ben Blanchard, China passes controversial counter-terrorism law, Reuters, 28 December 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security-idUSKBN0UA07220151228>

<sup>189</sup> Cui Jia, New anti-terror security guidelines made public, China Daily USA, 17 December 2015, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/xinjiang/urumqi\\_toutunhe/2015-12/17/content\\_22744319.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/xinjiang/urumqi_toutunhe/2015-12/17/content_22744319.htm)

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.* Pan Guang

about Xinjiang alongside the principle of non-intervention also informs Chinese opposition to military aid to rebel groups in the Middle East and North Africa. It has further prompted China to significantly expand its international cooperation on counter-terrorism through regional frameworks like the SCO and in its bilateral relations.

The threat to China took on an alarming quality 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 ETIM and other Uighur groups.<sup>191</sup> The tunnels raised the spectre of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of militants. China, in contrast to Gaza where Hamas uses tunnels that the Israelis seek to destroy but do not counter with underground networks of their own, has dug an entire subterranean city with 3,000 miles of nuclear tunnels that crisscross China. In Xinjiang, China has stored nuclear warheads in tunnels under Urumqi.<sup>192</sup>

Fears of the IS's potential impact on Xinjiang, has prompted some Chinese analysts to call on their government to join the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. "China lacks military capabilities to join anti-terror operations... China can instead provide funding, equipment and goods for the allies. It can also help by providing training local army and police personnel, an area in which China is experienced," said Ma Xiaolin. He noted that China was already sharing intelligence with coalition partners.<sup>193</sup>

IS threatens security not only in Xinjiang but also that of Chinese interests in the Middle East and elsewhere. The group has targeted Iraq's northern oil resources in a bid to secure revenue streams and to weaken the government in Baghdad economically and strategically. China has invested heavily in Iraq's energy sector. Sinopec Limited has stakes in oil fields in Iraqi Kurdistan while CNPC has stakes in multiple fields in the south.<sup>194</sup> "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.<sup>195</sup>

Chinese concerns about Xinjiang were bolstered when IS identified East Turkistan as one of its target areas and the group's caliph, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi listed the People's Republic at the top of his list of

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<sup>191</sup> China Radio International English, Satellite Spots Cross-border Tunnels, 25 August 2014, <http://english.cri.cn/12394/2014/08/25/2281s841656.htm>

<sup>192</sup> Eli 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>

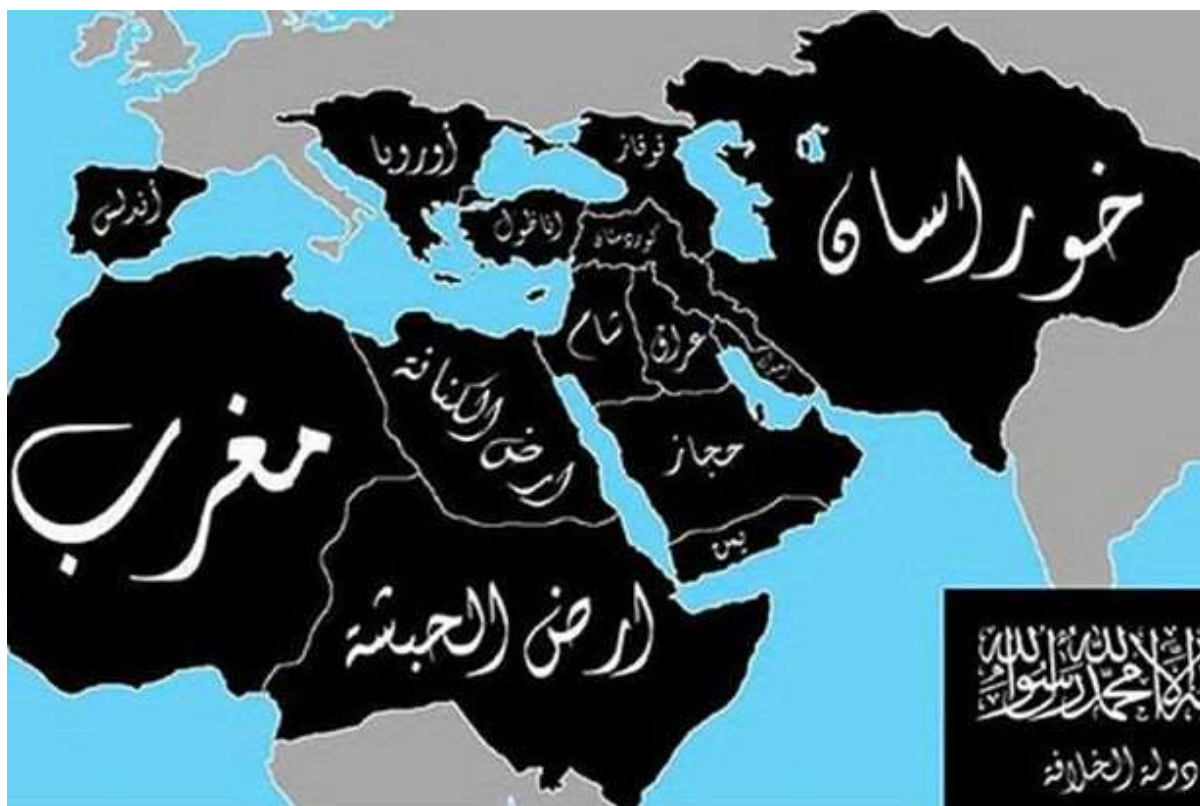
<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.* Ma Xiaolin

<sup>194</sup> Zachary Keck, *China Doubles Down on Iraqi Oil Gamble*, The Diplomat, 18 October 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/10/china-doubles-down-on-iraqi-oil-gamble/> / 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](http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/china-keeps-a-close-eye-on-oil-interests-in-iraq/?_r=0)

<sup>195</sup> Pu 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](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2014-09/04/content_18546632.htm)

countries that violate Muslim rights in his declaration of the caliphate.<sup>196</sup> Maps circulating at the time on Twitter purporting to highlight IS's expansion plans included substantial parts of Xinjiang.

**Figure 13: The Islamic State's territorial ambitions**



Source: *Mirror*<sup>197</sup>

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.”<sup>198</sup> IS's declared pivot eastwards as well as westward posed a threat not only to Chinese policies in Xinjiang but also to the land pillar of China's proposed Silk Road in Central Asia and the Middle East. In response, China has cracked down on the region with a heavy hand. Former U.S. government official Lin noted that China's internal security budget has surpassed that of its military every year since it put down an uprising in Xinjiang in 2009.<sup>199</sup>

<sup>196</sup> Abu Bakr Al-Husayni Al-Baghdadi (4 July 2014). *A Message to the Mujahidin and the Ummah in the Month of Ramadan*, Al Hayat Media Center, [https://ia902501.us.archive.org/2/items/hym3\\_22aw/english.pdf](https://ia902501.us.archive.org/2/items/hym3_22aw/english.pdf)

<sup>197</sup> 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](https://twitter.com/Third_Position)

<sup>198</sup> 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](https://twitter.com/Third_Position/status/478626230418173952/photo/1)

<sup>199</sup> 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/>

A Chinese religious leader, Adudulkrep Tumniaz, deputy director of the Xinjiang Islamic Association, warned that a lack of respected Chinese Muslim leaders puts the country at a disadvantage in its ideological battle with the 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.<sup>200</sup>

China’s emphasis on improving Uighur standards of living without addressing political and cultural grievances could over time, complicate China’s relations with Middle Eastern and other Muslim nations. So could its drive to eradicate Uighur culture by restricting fasting during Ramadan and the consumption of yogurt, forbidding men to wear beards, and the marginalisation of teaching the Uighur language or using it in interactions with the government and the judiciary. China’s efforts to ensure Han Chinese dominance in Xinjiang, and its imposition of travel restrictions on residents of Xinjiang border regions also constitute potential points of friction with Middle Eastern and Muslim countries. Middle Eastern sensitivity to the Uighur issue and a willingness to help China resolve the issue provided it respects Uighur cultural rights was already evident in the 1980s with a Kuwaiti agreement to invest in a chemical fertiliser plant in Xinjiang. The investment was in line with Kuwait and the Gulf’s aid policy that was designed to buy friends in the international community as part of the region’s defence and security policy. The aid policy focussed on Muslim majority countries and regions.<sup>201</sup>

China’s refusal to address Uighur grievances risks political blowback in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly if the violence escalates. China’s “policies will likely have a positive short-term effect, but because they do not address deep-seated problems, we cannot afford to be sanguine about Xinjiang’s future, nor can we be certain that violence will not erupt again. If the government is to win broad-based popular support and achieve genuine long-term peace and stability, it must promote further systemic and social adjustments,” warned Uighur scholar Ilham Tohti, who was arrested in 2014 by Chinese authorities.<sup>202</sup>

Tohti’s warning came as jihadist influence appeared to be behind an apparent shift in militant Uighur tactics with two attacks in 2014, one on a train station in Yunnan province and near the Tiananmen Rostrum in Beijing. Both attacks targeted civilians rather than the government and extended the violence beyond Xinjiang to other parts of China.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Ucan, 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/>

<sup>201</sup> Abdul-Reda Assiri, Kuwait’s Dinar Diplomacy: The Role of Donor-Mediator, *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 14:3, p.24-32

<sup>202</sup> Ilham Tohti, Present-Day Ethnic Problems in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region: Overview and Recommendations, *China Change*, 22 April 2015, <http://chinachange.org/2015/04/22/present-day-ethnic-problems-in-xinjiang-uighur-autonomous-region-overview-and-recommendations-1/>

<sup>203</sup> Stratfor, China’s Uighur Militants Make a Strategic Shift, 2 March 2014, [www.stratfor.com](http://www.stratfor.com)

For now, Middle Eastern and North African governments, determined not to muddy relations with China, have remained largely silent about the plight of the Uighurs. Their attitude appears to confirm Chinese scholar Zhang Xiandong's call for close Chinese political and economic cooperation with Middle Eastern nations in a bid to create a favourable environment for a crackdown in Xinjiang should Chinese Muslims "integrated with the minority separatism" spark a development that would "be a great challenge to the social stability and economic development in Northwestern China."<sup>204</sup> Middle Eastern and North African attitudes could change if the tension in Xinjiang escalates. Chinese unwillingness to accommodate a significant part of its own Muslim population is likely at some point to raise questions about Chinese willingness to support the aspirations of its Muslim partners.

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<sup>204</sup> Zhang Xiaodong, China's Interests in the Middle East: Present and Future, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 30 April 2009, <http://iwaas.cass.cn/kycg/hjcg/2009-04-30/202.shtml>



## Conclusion

Increased tension and volatility in the Middle East is likely to complicate China's effort to focus on economics and trade in a bid to avoid being sucked into the region's multiple conflicts and torturous transition. In seeking to learn from U.S. mistakes, China has the advantage that Middle Eastern and North African politics have far less domestic impact compared to influence of the Israeli and other national and ethnic lobbies in the United States. That is not say that there is no domestic fallout. The potential impact was demonstrated in 2011 with the evacuation of tens of thousands of Chinese nationals from Libya and criticism of China's limited ability to protect its nationals in the wake of the kidnappings in Sinai and the Sudan. It is also reflected in China's fears regarding Xinjiang.<sup>205</sup> The Middle East has a way of ensuring that it is at the heart of concerns of major external players in the region. There is little reason to assume that China will become the exception that proves the rule. Said Jiang Xudong, a Middle East scholar at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences: "Economic investment will not solve all other problems when there are religious and ethnic conflicts. Possible Chinese political involvement will increase."<sup>206</sup>

That became evident on the eve of Xi's visit to the Middle East and North Africa in January 2016. The visit laid bare the limitations of China's first Middle East policy paper published on the eve of Xi's visit to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran. Despite an emphasis on close relations with arch rivals Riyadh and Tehran, Xi's visit constituted a rebalancing of ties to the two regional powers. The visit left little doubt that China was tilting towards Iran as the Islamic republic returned to the international fold with the lifting of punitive international sanctions.

The tilt highlights the inevitability of China being drawn into the myriad of Middle Eastern and North African conflicts and rivalries. Besides, China is positioning itself for far closer security and military cooperation with regional forces on the basis of its recent anti-terrorism law that allows the Chinese military to stage overseas counter-terrorism operations provided it has the agreement from the relevant country. This is also true for China's abandonment of its rejection of foreign military bases with the establishment of a naval and logistics facility in Djibouti.

All of this illustrates that increased Chinese interests in the Middle East and North Africa coupled with expectations by regional forces that China play not only an economic but also a political and diplomatic role and the region's multiple wars, conflicts and economic, social and political problems, is forcing China to revisit in deed, if not in words, the fundamental principles of its foreign and defence policies. China has begun its journey down that road even if it has yet to elevate it to officially declared policy.

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<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.* Dorsey

<sup>206</sup> Jiang Xudong, China's Role, Operation Progress and Strength Limitation since Iraq Reconstruction: An Analysis Based on the Swot Model, International Conference on China in the Middle East, Indiana University and Peking University, Beijing, 17-18 March 2015

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