

China's Political, Military and Cultural Engagement in the MENA Region

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Introduction

Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have traditionally acted as energy suppliers and markets for Chinese goods but Beijing's interest in this region is no longer limited to economic cooperation. Across a wide spectrum of political, diplomatic and cultural issues, the Chinese state is becoming ever more active. Although China has no view of the Middle East as such and thus seeks to establish relations with different actors in the region on a case-by-case basis, a new strategic vision towards what is for China its Western periphery is being developed. This is manifest in China's first Arab Policy Paper, published in 2016, which aims to continue and expand ways of "mutually beneficial cooperation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [MFA], 2016), as well as in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) itself. In the context of President Donald Trump's "America First" foreign policy, China's "marching westwards" is seen as a strategic necessity (Panda, 2013). This takes shape in, on the one hand, the "traditional" Chinese policy of filling in the vacuum left by the United States (US) and other Western powers, but also in demanding a say as a "proper" superpower, on the other. This chapter disentangles the complex relationship between China and the MENA region, focusing upon its political, military and cultural engagements.

China's Political Engagement in the MENA Region

Conflict Mediation and Balancing Between Regional Rivals

China's political engagement in the MENA region encompasses a wide range of tools that Beijing employs for various purposes. Of particular significance in this chapter are two among them: conflict mediation and balancing between regional rivals. Conflict mediation is a cross-section between the political and the military, and it necessitates that the mediator is accepted by the parties in the conflict as a non-biased party with the necessary political clout to perform the mediation. With a cleaner slate than the US and a primarily development-focused logic, China is able to establish cordial ties with MENA countries that are otherwise opposed to each other. The development of the BRI shows that there is even a kind of competition among regional states to become involved in the BRI, which boosts China's ability to engage with all. China has stepped up as a mediator in regional conflicts as the responsible and benevolent superpower, on the one hand, and as a permanent member in the United Nations (UN) Security Council, which has a specific function related to international peace and security, on the other.

Chinese attempts at regional conflict management testify to a new role according to which the Beijing government wishes to mediate between parties locked in conflict (Legarda & Hoffmann, 2018). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a case in point. Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward a four-point peace proposal in 2017 to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and establish an independent Palestinian state (“China pushes”, 2017). Beijing even hosted trilateral talks to restart negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians (Burton, 2018). China stands firm in its support for Palestinian statehood, yet enjoys friendly relations and strong economic ties with Israel, which Beijing sees as an important access point to the Mediterranean and thus a potential transportation and logistics hub in the context of the BRI. Besides, Chinese companies are looking to tap into Israel’s potential as the tech hub of the MENA region. Jack Ma, CEO of the Chinese company Alibaba, participated at the 2018 Innovation Conference hosted by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, where he praised Israel for its welcoming atmosphere and focus on inviting foreign expertise. Alibaba invested in the greater Tel Aviv area in 2017, purchasing augmented reality company Infinity and e-commerce search venture Twiggle and establishing a research and development centre. The Chinese Kuang-Chi group opened an office in Tel Aviv to serve as its International Innovation Headquarters, from where further acquisitions are planned to be made in the coming years.

However, there are obvious limitations to the development of this bilateral relationship. Israel is a key American ally, and the Chinese government condemned the Trump administration’s December 2017 decision to recognise Jerusalem as the country’s capital (Gao, 2017). In 2015, a deal was struck to bring 6,000 Chinese construction workers to Israel. According to the Israeli government, the purpose of the deal was to help alleviate the country’s housing crisis (“Israel signs”, 2017), but the Beijing government made clear that they are not to be employed in the West Bank. According to the Chinese government, it follows resolution 2334 of the UN Security Council, according to which Israeli settlements are illegal (“Israel signs”, 2017). Following the break-down of the Arab-Israeli peace process, Israel has also become largely isolated from the rest of the MENA region, despite the fact that in the past few years some Gulf Arab states, most notably Saudi Arabia, have established behind-the-door contacts with it. As the BRI is focused upon intra- and cross-regional connectivity, Israel’s value is severely limited in that regard.

Furthermore, China also stepped up its efforts to mediate between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition in 2016, as well as to ease tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the same year. As Beijing can no longer ignore regional strife that may jeopardise the success of the BRI and other high-profile economic engagements, the objective at

the very least is to mute conflicts for the sake of regional stability. In another telling instance, Beijing actively intervened in South Sudan in 2013 to stabilise the country politically and protect its economic interests, which was a deviation from the much-vaunted principle of non-intervention. China has since then cemented its presence by, among other efforts, investing in South Sudan's oil fields and sending peacekeeping troops to the country (Nyabiage, 2020).

The Chinese abstention from a vote in the UN Security Council in April 2017 to condemn the Syrian chemical attack signalled a departure from Beijing's previous practice to veto any resolution seen as compromising another country's sovereignty (Wong, 2017). Prior to the incident, Beijing stood consistently with Damascus throughout the Syrian Civil War, with the expectation of reaping the benefits of its unswerving support in the future reconstruction of Syria (De Stone & Suber, 2019).

Chinese foreign policy faces another painful dilemma in the case of Iran. While the Beijing government would like to keep the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) alive (Lo, 2018), Beijing wishes not to improve its relationship with Tehran if the costs of doing so are a further deterioration in its relationship with Washington. The hesitancy China displayed in nuclear cooperation with Iran is a good illustration. The collaboration to redesign the Arak heavy water reactor – a non-proliferation measure assigned to China under the JCPOA by the international community – temporarily slowed down in January 2019, amid growing fears that Chinese companies participating in the project may be hit by US sanctions (Lee, 2019). As much as Beijing would like the JCPOA to remain in place, US withdrawal and the reintroduction of sanctions may severely punish Chinese companies. The Trump administration, however, renewed waivers allowing Tehran to continue cooperating with foreign countries on building a civilian nuclear programme, which means the Chinese companies involved in the Iranian collaboration need not worry (Mortazavi, 2019). Nevertheless, it remains the case that China's relationship with Iran, as with any other state in the MENA region or over any issue related to the region, is generally subordinated to the twists and turns of Beijing's relationship with Washington.

A similar Chinese balancing act takes place between Saudi Arabia and Iran, arguably the two most important MENA actors in conflict with each other. Though Saudi Arabia remains the biggest regional trading partner for China and a key recipient of Chinese investment, the Beijing government elevated its ties with Iran to the status of comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016 ("China, Iran lift", 2016), testifying to a new quality in the bilateral relationship. China also objected to the US's maximum pressure policy on Iran ("China urges", 2019), favouring instead the JCPOA and reaffirming its

commitment to the agreement even after Washington had withdrawn from it in May 2018 (“China fully committed”, 2019). This stance allows the Chinese government to claim some credit as a responsible contributor to regional peace and stability. For China, some balance in the regional distribution of power is vital, and Iran plays a key role in countering American-backed Saudi influence.

At the same time, China remains Saudi Arabia's largest oil client (Kuo, 2019), as Saudi oil amounted to 10.68% of China's total import in 2018 (ICT Trade Map; Neuhauser, 2019). In addition, Saudi Arabia enjoys a key geostrategic position on the Arabian Peninsula. This explains why China's gestures towards Tehran tend to be balanced by a similarly attentive foreign policy towards Riyadh. The second stop during Xi Jinping's 2016 tour was in the Saudi capital, where the two sides upgraded their ties to the level of comprehensive strategic partnership. However, China's relationship with Saudi Arabia also has certain limits. On the one hand, Iran also features quite prominently in the implementation of China's signature BRI initiative, specifically for developing Iran's energy infrastructure and transportation capacity and for potentially reassuming its key political and economic role along the historical Silk Road (Shariatinia & Azizi, 2019). On the other, Riyadh is a key US ally, and a major disseminator and supporter of Sunni Jihadist militancy and ideology. The spread of extremist ideas threatens to undermine not just the stability of the MENA region, but that of China's restive Xinjiang province, as well as China's near abroad in Central Asia (Leverett, 2016).

Another conflict, in which China is forced to take sides, is the ongoing civil war in Yemen. A proxy confrontation of Iranian- and Saudi-backed forces, the Yemeni civil war imposes again upon Beijing a delicate task of balancing between seemingly irreconcilable interests. In principle, the Beijing government wishes to see the reunification of Yemen under a stable authoritarian leadership, and whichever side is better positioned to achieve that goal enjoys Chinese support (Ramani, 2017). In April 2015, the Chinese navy evacuated foreign nationals and Chinese citizens from the port of Aden (“Yemen crisis”, 2015). More than two years later, China delivered its first humanitarian batch to the port of Aden (“First batch of China's”, 2017). China's support for the Saudi-backed Hadi government began around late 2015, when the Houthi forces' territorial expansion came to a halt. In the Chinese president's landmark 2016 tour in the region, Xi Jinping announced that China supports the Hadi government in its efforts to reunite the country (“China offers support”, 2016). While this decision was likely to have caused some resentment on the side of Iran, Tehran's overall reliance upon Chinese support in a myriad of global matters renders any threat of retaliation quite negligible. China follows a similar logic in its relationship with Iraq. While Beijing – due to its already mentioned positions

– is officially opposed to Kurdish independence, China would likely be a willing partner to support an independent Iraqi Kurdistan by investing in its vast energy sector and seeking cooperation in counter-terrorism matters (Ramani, 2017).

Obstacles and Criticism of China's Engagement

China's relations with some other MENA states are also not without frictions. Outstanding in this respect is China's crackdown on its ethnic Uyghur minorities in Xinjiang province, and the backlash it caused in Turkey (Maizland, 2019). In February 2019, Ankara finally broke its silence over the abuse Uyghur Turks and other Muslim communities suffered at the hands of the Chinese authorities, condemning what it sees as a clear deterioration of China's human rights situation (Tiezzi, 2019). Another thorn in the relationship is China's reaction to Turkey's invasion of Syria in late 2019. The Chinese government urged Ankara to "return to the right track" and stop its military operations against Kurdish forces in Northern Syria. This was another illustration of China's emphasis on non-intervention and respect for sovereignty in the MENA region (Wong, 2019). Despite Chinese support in the UN for condemning Turkey's move, Russia vetoed a joint statement with the Western powers, arguing that the illegal military presence of other countries, not only Turkey's, would also need to be addressed ("Divided UN fails", 2019).

In August 2019, Qatar likewise criticised the Beijing government over the treatment of its Muslim minorities by withdrawing its support for a letter that acknowledged and lauded China's human rights achievements (Fattah, 2019). The Qatari decision came despite China's willingness to mediate in the conflict between Qatar and the so-called anti-terror quartet of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain (Blanchard, 2019), which severed diplomatic ties with Qatar after accusations that Doha supports terrorist organisations ("Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt", 2019).

While the US foreign policy stresses human rights and democratisation, the Beijing government extends cordial ties to MENA countries regardless of their domestic political systems. At a September 2018 Forum of African-Chinese Cooperation (FOCAC) meeting, President Xi Jinping pledged to provide USD 60 billion in aid to African countries, all the while emphasising that the money comes with "no strings attached" ("China offers Africa", 2018). This was a clear reference to the fact that Western infrastructure and aid projects are generally linked to political conditions, with the goal of pressing recipient countries in the direction of emulating Western political and social practices. In all fairness, while the Chinese government stays silent over its partner countries' domestic political situation, it nonetheless often sets the condition to use Chinese contractors in the implementation of the projects for which it provides funding.

It is this particular conditionality that fuels the discussion about China's allegedly neo-colonial agenda, specifically in the context of the BRI initiative (Kleven, 2019). Another criticism sometimes raised against the Chinese government is that it pursues a “debt-trap diplomacy,” proposing large-scale infrastructure projects irresponsibly, without sound evidence to their financial sustainability, to countries that are economically unable to bear the long-term economic burden of those projects (Green, 2019). Though many Western observers subscribe to this characterisation, others claim that there is no solid evidence showing that Chinese banks are “deliberately over-lending or funding loss-making projects to secure strategic advantages for China” (Brautigam, 2019).

In either case, what is of utmost significance is that China's charm offensive towards the MENA region is a success story (see Chapter 1 for an overview of public perceptions of the Chinese in the region). China offers a viable and attractive developmental alternative, which does not require the region's strongmen to undergo democratisation or Westernisation. More importantly, the vision Beijing propagates through the BRI is a positive one for the region and consistent with the status quo (Fulton, 2019). While the West tends to perceive the MENA region as a hotspot of geopolitical challenges, China sees it as a land of untapped opportunity. Accordingly, the Chinese message is that the region's troubles can be fixed once the MENA states embark upon a developmental path that marries strong authoritarian leadership with openness towards foreign capital, a process in which participation in the BRI is held up as an attractive milestone.

China's Military Engagement in the MENA Region

China's military engagement in the MENA region – besides the role of the responsible and reliable global power – is defined, on the one hand, by the internal development of the Chinese political and strategic thinking, and, on the other, by the strategic need to ensure a stable environment in order to realise economic interests. The sale of weaponry to the region contributes to the realisation of both.

The Development of Strategic Thinking

It is usually taken for granted that the military capabilities of the People's Republic of China have drastically increased in the decades since the “reform and opening” policy was put forward by Deng Xiaoping. Yet, in many aspects relatively little is known about its details, which is attributed to Deng's philosophy “to keep a low profile”, and to the relatively low share of the military budget within the Chinese gross domestic product (GDP) – although it is a widely held notion that China spends much more on its military than is officially

acknowledged (Bartók, 2018). For instance, although China has been a significant arms exporter in the past decade, especially to the third world and to the MENA region, data pertaining to these transfers are not included in the official figures of the military budget. However, following the end of the Cold War, but especially with the Taiwan crisis in 1995-1996, the relative lagging behind of Chinese strategic deterrence capabilities made the development of China's military capabilities imminent. By the end of the 1990s the Chinese military industry came to complement the until-then mainly Russian arms imports and new types of Chinese-developed weaponry started to be produced. The modernisation of the armed forces as well as the weapon systems responded to the changed Chinese strategic environment and thinking: widening the scope of territorial defence to the high seas around China, and then expanding these power projection capabilities further is related to the stepping into office of Xi Jinping, who initiated comprehensive reforms in the Chinese defence policy. The modernisation of the Chinese armed forces and equipment, the increased reliance on sea forces and the enhanced Chinese foreign policy activities, however, are still based on a defensive doctrine ("China's military strategy", 2015). This gradual shift from the "active defence" of territory towards deterrence and power projection both on land and sea went hand in hand with the transformation of the Chinese geopolitical ambitions and activities, and the launch of the BRI – both on land and sea.

The Responsible Global Power – From Counter-Piracy and Peacekeeping Missions to Conflict Mediation and Balancing between Regional Rivals

The first field of this combined strategic defence activity includes the participation in international counter-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden and along Africa's eastern coasts. Beijing's objective – also in its perceived role as the responsible superpower – is to contribute to regional stability and safety, with special focus upon maritime trade routes. To that end, China is developing a "soft" military approach (Sun, 2015), which entails military exercises with regional countries, the deployment of military patrols, trainers and peacekeeping forces, as well as the establishment of soft military infrastructure like joint intelligence facilities. These steps do not generate a "hard" military presence, which would be incompatible with China's general foreign policy approach to the region. This is so, in spite of the fact that following President Trump's statement that the countries exporting from the Persian Gulf most should be protecting their own ships, the question if China should step in and police the Strait of Hormuz started to be debated. It is argued that China should "resist and reduce the ability of other regions or great powers seeking to dominate the Strait" (Goldstein, 2019). Except for the Chinese naval base in Djibouti, Beijing tries to keep its military involvement to a minimum, which allows some contribution to managing security concerns in the region without assuming overall responsibility for them.

China has had joint military exercises and naval drills with its partners in the Persian Gulf. With Iran, their first ever joint military exercise was held in 2014 (Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, 2014), to be followed three years later by a joint naval drill in the Gulf of Aden ("Iran and China conduct", 2018). A Russia-China-Iran joint naval exercise was announced "in the near future" in September 2019 and held in December 2019. In spite of the fact that China has significant maritime cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia is the closest US ally in the region, which puts limits on further military cooperation with China. The Saudi war in Yemen has been another obstacle, particularly as it came at an unopportune time for China. Though the Beijing government dispatched a nuclear submarine to the coast of Yemen, the ongoing intervention led by Saudi Arabia essentially disrupted its demonstration effect (Scott, 2015). The focus of the exercises was maritime security, specifically naval escort missions that support the safety and protection of merchant ships and energy supply lines against pirate attacks around the Horn of Africa. This is a key concern for Beijing in the context of the BRI, and the exercises illustrate that China is willing to step up its military efforts to help regional countries maintain stability on the high seas, especially on the waters off the Horn of Africa, which are particularly exposed to pirate attacks.

China inaugurated its anti-piracy mission in 2008, sending People's Liberation Army Navy warships to secure the waters and the Chinese vessels transiting through them. The purpose of the deployment is deterrence by force demonstration, but also to join the rest of the permanent members of the UN Security Council that had already established a naval presence in the region ("Navy ships may", 2008). China has also steadily diversified its vessels operating off the Somali coast. In April 2019, Beijing added a new missile destroyer to its anti-piracy fleet, and Chinese submarines had been deployed to assess their operational capability and usefulness in the region ("China deploys new", 2019). Unsurprisingly, the expansion of the Chinese fleet, and its regular route through the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, raised concerns in India. More generally, however, Western countries tend to acknowledge the role China plays in keeping the high seas safe in the region.

China is also more active in the field of peacekeeping operations. As China is steadily expanding its investment and business portfolio across the MENA region in line with the 2013 BRI, Beijing has a key stake in regional stability and peace. Chinese peacekeepers are deployed in Darfur, South Sudan and Mali, while Chinese observers are present in a few other countries like Lebanon. Although China's military footprint in the MENA region still remains small in comparison with the US, globally Beijing is now the second biggest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget, and Chinese troops have been deployed in

large numbers in key conflict zones. Its intensive participation in such missions allows Beijing to fend off some of the criticism that China is free-riding in the region by taking advantage of a US-guaranteed security environment in the MENA region, and also to buttress its claim of being a responsible great power. To be sure, Beijing prefers to help in those conflict zones where important economic interests are at stake. This was the case in South Sudan in 2015, where China deployed more than 1,000 troops and a helicopter squadron in Darfur to address the situation (“China’s role in UN peacekeeping”, 2018). Prior to the Sudanese conflict, the Beijing government sent peacekeeping troops and logistical personnel to Liberia in 2003. In addition, China also opened a UN peacekeeping police centre in 2008, which offers training for civilian police officers from across Asia (“China’s role in UN peacekeeping”, 2018). Overall, China’s contribution to peacekeeping operations and humanitarian aid in the MENA region has been hailed as a step in the right direction, as well as an indication that the Beijing government is willing to shoulder more responsibility for maintaining peace and stability in this part of the world.

Officially intended to support peacekeeping operations and securing naval trade routes in the Gulf of Aden, a new Chinese military base was inaugurated in Djibouti in August 2017. This is the only overseas military base China operates today, although the Pentagon expects many more to be established in different parts of the world in the future (“China will build”, 2019). The Chinese base in Djibouti will no doubt be a test case to assess how Beijing will use its growing military presence in the region. Though strictly speaking Djibouti falls outside of the geographical limits of the MENA in our understanding, the Chinese base will nonetheless influence security developments across the region. China argues that the base is primarily meant as a logistics facility, but satellite images show that the available on-site infrastructure allows for a much more considerable role (Zheng, 2017). American troops who serve in Camp Lemonnier, only a couple of miles away from the Chinese base, claim the base looks more like a fortress able to accommodate thousands of troops (Cheng, 2018). Located at the mouth of the Red Sea, the Chinese base is indeed well-positioned to support China’s growing geopolitical ambitions in the region.

China is also directing attention towards the African continent in multilateral security frameworks. In July 2019, Beijing hosted the first China-Africa Peace and Security Forum. In addition to the African Union (AU), 50 countries from the continent were represented in discussions about expanding cooperation with China in peace and security (“First China-Africa peace”, 2019). By doing so, Beijing offers assistance in creating and maintaining stable local conditions, not least in order to make sure that infrastructure projects financed by China come safely to fruition (Risberg, 2019). The forum fits into a series of similar events in the past, such as the 2018 China-Africa Defense and Security Forum, informed by an

overall Chinese strategy to step up as a manager of peace and security on the continent (Kovrig, 2018). In his 2015 UN General Assembly speech, Chinese President Xi Jinping also pledged USD 100 million of “free military assistance” to the AU (Xi, 2015).

Countering terrorist activities is another key objective for Beijing. International terrorism is seen as a direct threat to Chinese nationals living and working in the MENA region (Duchâtel, 2016). Chinese policy-makers also see a clear link between peace and stability in the MENA region and peace and stability in China’s restive Xinjiang province, whose vicinity to East Turkestan directly exposes it to separatist ideologies. The MENA region is considered to be a key source of terrorist ideology that is associated with Uyghur extremism. Chinese propaganda outlets point out that Xinjiang must be prevented from becoming “China’s Syria” or “China’s Libya” (“Protecting peace, stability”, 2018). Accordingly, the Chinese Communist Party takes measures not just to make impossible the flare-up of ethnic and religious strife in Xinjiang but to prevent the import of extremist ideologies by fighting against them where they originate. Syrian sources claim that as many as 5,000 ethnic Uyghurs from Xinjiang province have been engaged in the Syrian Civil War in recent years (Blanchard, 2017). Fighting their own separatist cause, the Chinese government fears that upon returning these terrorist elements may cause further conflict in Xinjiang, and thus sent Chinese troops to fight Uyghur terrorists in Syria. Back in 2013, it was revealed that around 1,000 Uyghurs might have received terrorist training in Afghanistan (Neriah, 2017). Domestically, the first anti-terrorism law passed in December 2015 paved the way for the military and police forces to play a more active role in countering terrorism (“China passes controversial”, 2015). Within China, the Falco Commando Unit, a top anti-terror squad, is the eminent police force tasked with countering terrorism (“China’s top anti-terror squad”, 2017).

It should be noted, however, that besides the Uyghurs there is another community of Muslim population in China: the Hui, an ethnically Han people who embraced Islam. The discrimination and repression experienced by the Uyghur minority are unknown for the Hui. Despite their Islamic faith, their cultural and linguistic identification with the ruling regime translates into a much better societal standing (Crane, 2014). The Uyghurs have been consistently fighting against assimilation and attempted to secede from the Chinese state and, as such, have remained both ethnically and religiously alien to the dominant Chinese culture (Friedrichs, 2015).

Internationally, China has emphasised the role of the UN and joined a number of conventions since 2006 to show its commitment to fight against global terrorism. Beijing has also established bilateral cooperation mechanisms with many of the MENA states, exchanging



information and best practices with key actors in the region. China's unwavering stance has generated cooperation with the US, too. In October 2001, China complied with Washington's request to seal off its border with Afghanistan, which proved to be an important contribution to successful American military operations in the country (Zhu, 2018). Beijing also sees counter-terrorism as a possible solution to many of the ongoing conflicts in the MENA region, such as the Syrian crisis. China also actively supported the Iraqi forces' fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) by providing intelligence and training, and Beijing sought cooperation with Turkey in order to deal with the threat of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (Chen, 2018).

Bilateral Military Relations – The Economic Aspect

The instability caused by a number of ongoing conflicts turns the MENA region into a market for Chinese arms exports. Compared to the previous five years, the 2013-17 period registered a 38% increase in China's arms exports to the region, making the country the fifth-largest weapons supplier in the world (Ng & Zhen, 2019). Chinese drones, first instance, are among popular weapons systems employed by many of the local armed forces. Yet, it is not MENA but South Asian countries that are the primary clients for Beijing: Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh (Al-Saud, 2018). It should also be kept in mind that despite the surge in Chinese weapons exports, the US remains the uncontested top exporter of arms to the MENA region. Nevertheless, the region is an eager buyer of Chinese weapons technology, either complementing their US military equipment or, when under US and/or European arms embargo, acquiring modern military technology. While the UAE, Iraq and Egypt are also important customers for China, in 2017 China reached an agreement with Saudi Arabia to establish a drone factory in the country, the first of its kind across the region (Chan, 2017). However, besides the politically "selected" great partners – Algeria, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia –, more than half of the states in the MENA region have purchased Chinese weapons in the past ten years (2008-2018) as shown by the data in Table 1 on the transfer of major weapons between China and the MENA countries¹.

China's military modernisation efforts are of special relevance in the two most dangerous conflicts of the region at the moment: Iran-Israel and Iran-Saudi relations. Ever since the 1980s, Tehran has been a recipient of Chinese military technology through the transfer of tactical ballistic and anti-ship cruise missiles (Hughes, 2018). Today, Iran's overall air defence capabilities are highly advanced primarily because of the country's close collaboration with China ("China and Iran", 2019). And Iran received nuclear assistance from China in the form of technology and machinery in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Harold & Nader, 2012). Most of this assistance was related to civilian use, but taking into consideration the dual-use nature of the nuclear industry, it is usually mentioned in this regard.

¹ For more, see Table 1 in the annexes

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has also been trying to reach out to China for defence equipment. The weapons Beijing can provide may not be as sophisticated as those from the US, France, Britain and Germany, but at least they are not conditioned politically. China has not supplied unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Saudi Arabia, but in the summer of 2019 intelligence reports revealed that Saudi Arabia had expanded both its missile infrastructure and technology through recent purchases from China (Mattingly, Cohen & Herb, 2019).

The China-Israel military-related cooperation goes back to the Cold War, when the US encouraged such relations in order to draw China away from the Soviet sphere. However, direct arms sales by Israel to China generated serious tensions between the US and Israel in the 2000s, leading on two occasions to the cancelling of already agreed transactions between Israel and China (2000 Phalcon deal; 2004 Harpy agreement). Instead, Chinese companies linked to Israel's military are looking at civilian technologies adaptable to military use. The Chinese-Israeli technological cooperation (Silicon Wadi), therefore, gives much concern to the US, but has come to make Israel an important participant in the BRI project (Herman, 2019).

In summary, China's military presence has been growing in the past years, and this tendency is expected to continue as US interest towards the MENA region is declining or is perceived to decline. Through a combination of joint military exercises, arms exports, contributions to UN peacekeeping, counter-terrorism efforts, and a more robust naval presence, Beijing has cautiously but steadily increased its soft military profile in the area (Selim, 2019). The reception of the MENA states has so far been mostly positive, as they understand that Beijing considers cooperation in peace and security as a foreign policy priority and a precondition for the successful implementation of the BRI. On the other hand, China's increasingly advanced weapons technology and its readiness to sell it with no political conditions attached, not only boost the Chinese economy but also provide an increasing potential for China to help establish a secure environment to promote and realise its strategic aims.

China's Cultural Engagement in the MENA Region

Chinese cultural engagement complements China's political and economic involvement in the MENA region. While it is still something exotic for the MENA public at large, the Chinese physical presence – Chinese people on the ground – is increasingly visible.² The biggest Chinese expatriate community – some 300,000 – is

² Though the Chinese diaspora in the MENA states is still relatively small, it has been gradually increasing. There are no official statistics but some 550,000 Chinese are estimated to live in the Middle East (Scobell & Nader, 2016).

living in the UAE (Al Dhaheri, 2019). The historical ties between China and some of its regional partners have rarely been conflictual, and interactions have been characterised mostly by cooperation rather than confrontation.

China's perception in the MENA region is closely related, on the one hand, to China's successful global power status (it is notably the only non-European, non-Christian state on the UN Security Council) and its standing up to the US, and to its economic success, on the other. While the former also implies that China makes no demands to its partners over their social and political structures, norms and values, the latter is often attributed to "the Chinese model". The common historical experience of Western intrusion and foreign aggression, coupled with the lack of Western-style liberal democracies in the region, informs a shared understanding that China and the MENA countries are similar in other respects. A widespread notion exists among MENA leaders that the developmental path China has taken since 1978 is adaptable to their own conditions. As Dorsey explains, Arab rulers "marvel at China's ability to achieve extraordinary economic growth while maintaining its autocratic political structures." Furthermore, the attractiveness of the Chinese model is illustrated "by surveys that show reduced faith in democracy among Arab youth" (Dorsey, 2017). The primary appeal of the "Beijing Consensus" is that rapid economic modernisation is possible in the absence of fundamental democratisation or Westernisation (Ramo, 2004). As such, the model consists of an unlikely marriage between a dominant state structure, which is able to control the day-to-day processes that affect the domestic economy, with a relatively liberal trade and investment regime that works to invite foreign capital to China. Although no one has tested the applicability of the model or the conditions in which it could be realised in the MENA countries, "the Chinese model" has been part of the rhetoric. The MENA countries appreciate Beijing not only for the tangible support it provides today but as a role model of an eventual – successful – development alternative.

Just as the official media representations of China tend to focus on the BRI and its positive potential for the MENA region, public perceptions of Beijing confirm a primarily welcoming attitude in the region. In recent years, though the international reception of China's global presence is mixed, it has been overwhelmingly positive in the MENA region and Africa (Silver, Devlin & Huang, 2019; see also Chapter 1). In a similar way, while China is regularly condemned by Western publics for not respecting personal freedoms, those in the Middle East and Africa are much less critical (Wike et al., 2018). China's improved public image across the region has to do with its carefully articulated engagement strategy. Without challenging the US-led security architecture in the region, the Chinese focus on economic development and win-win solutions improves the

Table 2. Number of Confucius Institutes in the MENA region.

Number of Confucius Institutes	Number of Confucius Classrooms	Country	Where?
1		Bahrain	University of Bahrain
2	3	Egypt	Cairo University Suez Canal University Classroom at Ain-Shams University Classroom at Neil Thematic Channel Classroom at Luxor University
2		Iran	University of Tehran University of Mazandaran
2		Israel	Hebrew University of Jerusalem Tel Aviv University
2		Jordan	Ammam Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organization Philadelphia University
1		Lebanon	Saint-Joseph University
3		Morocco	Mohammed V University Hassan II University Abdelmalek Essaadi University
1		Palestine	Al-Quds University
1		Saudi Arabia	University of Jeddah
1		Sudan	University of Khartoum
1	1	Tunisia	University of Carthage Classroom at CRI in Sfax
4		Turkey	Boğaziçi University Middle East Technical University Okan University Yeditepe University
2		UAE	University of Dubai Zayed University
23	4		MENA Total

Source: Own compilation based on data from Confucius Institute Online.

chances of positive reception, as well as making sure that the Beijing government is not seen to antagonise any of the MENA actors. The generally welcoming attitude of the MENA region illustrates that this strategy has so far been a success.

Consequently, Chinese soft power has been on the increase and has been received favourably, as proven by the appearance of the Confucius Institutes in the MENA region, on the one hand, and by the Chinese universities attracting students (and lecturers) from the region, on the other. Among the Gulf countries, the UAE was the first where a Confucius Institute opened at the University of Dubai in 2010, with the purpose of enhancing the understanding of the culture and language of the Chinese people (Moussly, 2010). Since then, Beijing has also established 13 Confucius Institutes across the Arab world, the most recent one in Tunisia (Sawahel, 2018), two in Israel, two in Iran and four in Turkey. In March 2019, Saudi Arabia announced its plan to start teaching the Chinese language in various stages of education (“Saudi Arabia to launch”, 2019). People-to-people exchanges are also expanding, as more and more Arab students study at Chinese universities and cultural institutions seek closer ties. The number of Arab students studying at Chinese universities grew by 26% from 2004 to 2016, while the number of Chinese students enrolled in Arab universities grew by 21% over the same time period (Sawahel, 2018). Beyond the promotion of such exchanges, China’s Arab Policy Paper also encourages culture years and art festivals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China [MFA], 2016), in order to increase cross-cultural familiarity between China and the MENA countries. For instance, in 2019 the famous Sharjah Islamic Arts Festival featured the work of renowned contemporary Chinese sculptor Li Hongbo (Abdel-Razzaq, 2019). Furthermore, the Expo 2020 Dubai, though postponed to 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, will host the China Pavilion, one of the largest at the months-long spectacle and intended to spread the word about “5,000 years of Chinese culture” (Al Dhaheri, 2019). Home to the biggest Chinese diaspora across the region, Dubai also held, for the third consecutive year, a range of cultural programs to celebrate the Chinese New Year in 2020 (Haziq, 2020).

Nevertheless, for Beijing, the relevance of this kind of groundwork goes far beyond matters of culture, as it serves the greater aim of political and economic contacts. For instance, the China-Arab Culture and Trade Exchange Promotion Association, a Chinese civil society organisation founded by Chinese investors in Lebanon in 2011, operates with the purpose of coordinating and helping trade relations through cultural cooperation. The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, created in 2004, also envisages the promotion of such exchanges. But cultural cooperation is also expected

to grease the wheels of diplomacy and make sure there is a sustained regional support for China's signature BRI initiative. This is especially considered necessary as the MENA region has been historically much more accustomed to Western cultural norms and values, making China somewhat disadvantaged in its own relationship with the region (Fulton, 2019).

The rapid increase in Chinese tourism as the result of the economic development has created a further previously practically non-existent channel of direct people-to-people communication. This has become manifest in the China-MENA region context as well: although the Middle East is not among the 10 most important tourist destinations for the Chinese, Chinese tourism has been on the rise. Though this figure is likely to be much smaller due to global travel restrictions related to Covid-19 throughout 2020, the Chinese government initially calculated that some 150 million Chinese tourists will visit the countries involved in the BRI by 2020 (Keju, 2019). The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states expect some 2.5 million for the year 2021.³ It should be also taken into consideration that the GCC states serve as transit stages for Chinese tourists. Until 2022, Chinese tourism to Abu Dhabi is expected to rise by more than 250% compared to 2018, and the welcoming cultural atmosphere supported by the Chinese government is meant to further encourage Chinese nationals to come (Scott, 2016). Chinese tourists likewise flock in growing numbers to Egypt. In 2018, half a million Chinese nationals visited the country compared with 300,000 in 2017 (Ghiles, 2017). The Chinese government also approached the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for setting up a Chinese Excavation Center in Luxor. Iran is equally looking to tap into the vast potential of Chinese tourism. Despite excellent political ties, a meagre 50,000 Chinese nationals visited Iran in 2018 (Motamedi, 2019). To make the country more accessible, Tehran decided to waive all visas for Chinese nationals as part of its ambitious plan to increase their number to 2 million by 2020 (Motamedi, 2019). Easing entry requirements appears to be an efficient way to invite Chinese tourists. While the African continent has so far missed out on the booming Chinese tourism (Bavier, 2018), Morocco welcomed 200,000 people from China in 2018, compared with a mere 10,000 in 2015 ("Tourism Minister: Morocco attracted", 2018). According to Moroccan officials, the surge was due to the lifting of visa requirements, as well as to the visit of King Mohammed VI to China in 2016 ("Tourism Minister: Morocco attracted", 2018). Turkey has been one of the favourite destinations: with 250,000 in 2017 and 400,000 in 2018 ("Turkey sees increase in Chinese tourists", 2018), it has been one of the most dynamically expanding destinations. Israel also received more than 100,000 Chinese tourists in 2018, and the number has been rapidly growing (Chaziza, 2019).

³ The Chapter was completed before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, which will most definitely severely affect the number of Chinese tourists, pilgrims, as well as students and teachers, travelling to the MENA region (and elsewhere). The exact figures with regards to tourism and other exchanges are thus likely to decrease in the coming years.

Table 3. Number of Chinese tourists towards the MENA region

MENA country	Number of tourists from China (year)
Morocco	200 000 (2018)
Tunisia	22 000 (2018)
Libya	N/A
Algeria	N/A
Egypt	500 000 (2018)
Sudan	N/A
Somalia	N/A
Israel	100 000 (2018)
Palestine	N/A
Jordan	32 000 (2018)
Syria	N/A
Lebanon	9 450 (2018)
Turkey	400 000 (2018)
Iraq	N/A
Kuwait	N/A
Bahrain	N/A
Qatar	62 000 (2018)
Oman	44 000 (2018)
Saudi Arabia	N/A
UAE	1 000 000 (2017)
Iran	50 000 (2018)
Djibouti	N/A

Sources: "Tourism Minister: Morocco attracted", 2018; "Chinese tourists to Tunisia", 2018; "Egypt sees surging number", 2019; "Xinhua: Spotlight: Israel strives to bring more Chinese tourists", 2019; "Parulis-Cook", 2017; "Xinhua: Interview: Lebanon takes steps to promote Chinese-Lebanese tourism ties to new height: minister", 2019; "Turkey looks to welcome", 2019; "Aljundi", 2019; "Over 44,000 Chinese tourists", 2019; Kader, 2018; Motamedi, 2019.

Nevertheless, some key obstacles remain in China-MENA region cultural cooperation. The prevalent images of an "Islamic threat" in China may be a shared concern with most of the MENA states' understanding of the radical Islamist threat, consequently, anti-terrorist cooperation – as mentioned before – may materialise any time. However, the situation of the Uyghur minority in China's restive Xinjiang province may still prove a sensitive issue. Despite the Chinese authorities' harsh treatment of the Uyghur community, the reaction from the MENA region has been remarkably timid. In July

2019, the UN Human Rights Council issued a letter criticising the abuse of ethnic Uyghurs, yet none of the Muslim-majority countries joined those 22, primarily Western,⁴ countries supporting the document (Westcott & Shelley, 2019). In fact, in the same month 37 countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, sent a letter to the UN lauding China for its human rights achievements in Xinjiang (“Uyghur: Saudi Arabia and Russia”, 2019). This second letter was later signed by an additional 13 countries, rounding up the number of supporters to 50 (Yellinek & Chen, 2019).⁵ The incident was held up as an illustration of how cultural and religious considerations are inevitably subordinated to good political ties with Beijing.

In summary, China has continued in the past few years to cement its presence in the MENA region by applying a wide range of political, military and cultural tools. Politically, the Beijing government is interested in nurturing mutually beneficial relations across the MENA region. In case its partners are locked in an adversarial relationship, China tends to refrain from picking sides and instead seeks cooperation with both to make sure not to exacerbate the underlying conflict. The overarching objective of its diplomatic and political efforts is to secure a positive environment for the BRI, as well as to garner support for domestic and foreign policies, such as the controversial treatment of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang province, that are often met with significant criticism in the West. Militarily, China is walking a fine line by cautiously increasing its military footprint across the region, primarily within the context of UN-mandated tasks but also by increasing bilateral military cooperation, without challenging the US-led security architecture. Finally, Beijing’s cultural programs are meant both to proactively buttress its positive image as well as to counteract the potential perception of China as a threat. As visions of a menacing China fuel much of the global suspicion with regards to the BRI, the Beijing government is making concerted efforts across the MENA region to be seen as a force for good.

4 Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

5 The following MENA countries supported this second, pro-PRC letter: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and the United Arab Emirates.

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