

China on the Arabian Peninsula

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(Beijing duck meets figs)



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Introduction

The Middle Kingdom and the Arabian Peninsula represent two different geographic and cultural environments that, especially from a European historical perspective, have only had few points of contact or commonalities. Nevertheless, the two areas have developed remarkable economic networks with global impacts in recent decades. While Europe cultivated intensive relations with the Orient simply because of their geographical proximity and the millennia of economic and cultural exchange, the Arab world was in

earlier centuries assumed to have only few points of contact with China and was thought to have only a selective, trade-oriented exchange.¹ Historically, a connection between the two territories was not immediately evident; even the easternmost state on the Arabian Peninsula, the former Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, was economically and politically predominantly oriented towards East Africa and India.² The routes of the old silk roads of the Han dynasty did not touch the Arabian Peninsula, a circumstance that superficially consolidated the European – Venetian-influenced - image that there was little Arab-Chinese trade. From a purely geographical point of view, the sea routes from the East Asian region via the Red Sea ended in present-day Alexandria and were thus considered “dead ends” from the point of view of long-distance trade.³ The Suez Canal did not yet exist, the majority of goods and merchandise were transhipped to the Nile only and did not reach the trading centre of the kingdom of Venice via this route.⁴

Nevertheless, there was regular economic and political exchange between the Arab world and China’s historical dynasties. The first contacts can be dated back to the 8th century AD.⁵ With the opening of the Suez Canal, trade with the Far East naturally experienced a massive upswing, but most of it still involved European states. During the last two decades, however, the emergent China, with its export market oriented towards the West, massively changed its presence in the Middle East region in the course of global maritime trade. The following chapters provide a brief overview of China’s role in the region. One section focuses on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states on the Arabian Peninsula. The focus will be on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman. These

¹ Sanam Vakil, “China & Middle East: Regional Balancing,” Issue 1819, <https://www.hoover.org/research/china-middle-east-regional-rebalancing>.

² Britannica, “History of Oman,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Oman>.

³ Jana Niemeyer, “Die Neue Seidenstraße Chinas und seine geopolitischen Implikationen,” 2017, Kapitel 1, <https://mbei.nrw/sites/default/files/asset/document/gruppenprojekt.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Abdulaziz Al-Helabi, et.al., *Arabia, Greece and Byzantium: Cultural Contacts in Ancient and Medieval Times*, King Saud University, 2012, 311, https://www.mfa.gr/missionsabroad/images/stories/missions/saudi-arabia/docs/Arabia_Greece_and_Byzantium_en.pdf.

three states are representative of the abundance of Chinese investments in companies and infrastructure now characterising Arab-Chinese relations.⁶

Political dimension

With regard to the last five decades, the relationship between the states of the Middle East and the People's Republic of China can be divided into three historically distinct phases.⁷

In the 1980s, the “Cold War” and the geopolitical activities in its wake also dominated China's view of the region. This bipolar confrontation between two (ideologically) different economic systems decisively defined the relationship of the Arab states among each other and their foreign policies tailored to it. Also, the struggle for supremacy in the region defined the Arab states' mutual perception of the at the time non-aligned China. The Middle Eastern states oriented towards the Soviet Union, such as Syria or the Socialist Republic of South Yemen, viewed China primarily in the light of the communist ideology and therefore from an ideological rather than an economic-political perspective.⁸

By contrast, the Western-oriented states, such as Saudi Arabia as a close ally of the USA, but also Egypt under the then young “free officer” Hosni Mubarak, saw China primarily as an economic and political regional competitor of the USA regarding its Southeast Asia policy, and less as a potential competitor or even trading partner. In the case of Egypt, this circumstance was remarkable because it had already established official relations with Beijing through Nasser's state visit to China in 1955. Egypt also supported China's application for admission to the United Nations and,

⁶ Jonathan Fulton, *The Gulf monarchies in the Belt and Road Initiative*, Chapter 6, “Domestic, regional and international pressures,” 97, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429202346-6/gulf-monarchies-belt-road-initiative-jonathan-fulton>.

⁷ Camille Lons, Jonathan Fulton, “China's Great Game in the Middle East,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2019. Policy Brief, https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/.

⁸ Yahya al-Awd, “Yemen-China Relations: History and Development in Bilateral Relations,” *Medwell Journals*, 2017, <https://medwelljournals.com/abstract/?doi=ssscience.2017.1775.1794>.

due to the assumption of control under international law and subsequent nationalised operation of the Suez Canal, maintained regular contacts with the People's Republic of China, increasingly generating notable income from transit fees. The latter were generated predominantly from Sino-European long-distance trade via the Red Sea route and not so much from the bilateral Sino-Egyptian trade, which was only marginally developed at the time.⁹

In the 1990s, the Arab-Chinese relationship began to change. From that point of time onwards, China also observed that the strategic regional political activities of the two major blocs in the Middle East were increasingly failing. The People's Republic of China registered the political change in relations between the USA and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia just as much as Moscow's difficulties in its newly defined foreign policy to tie in with Soviet regional policy towards the former socialist-Baathist "brother states". This operational pursuit of Russian foreign policy was most successful in Syria, where the Russian (military) presence remained unaffected by all geopolitical upheavals.¹⁰ The USA under the Republican-dominated foreign policy of the Bush sen. administration was increasingly perceived on the "Arab street" as a "stooge and supporter of Israel" and increasingly failed in its attempts at moderating the burgeoning regional and religious fault lines. In addition, international terrorist activities had increased, entailing the early confrontational form of the later "Global War on Terrorism".¹¹

From the beginning of the 2000s, the relationship between the states of the Middle East and the People's Republic of China began to change fundamentally. Under the slogan of the geopolitical "chess game" within the framework of a "multipolar world order", China's relationship with the Gulf States became more closely differentiated, especially in the socio-economic sphere. The massive increase in trade and, connected with that, the rise in strategic Chinese investments in selected infrastructure projects on the

⁹ Mohamed El-Badri, "Egypt and China: Historical relationship into the future," *The Global Times*, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1189854.shtml>.

¹⁰ Fuchang Yang, "China-Arab Relations in the 60 Years' Evolution," *Center for Strategic Studies*, China Foundation for International Studies, 6, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19370679.2010.12023145>.

¹¹ Ivan Sascha Sheehan, "Has the Global War on Terror Changed the Terrorist Threat? A Time-Series Intervention Analysis," 2019, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32:8, 743-761, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100903039270>.

Arabian Peninsula met the changing economic needs of the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).¹² They were increasingly confronted with the need to diversify their predominantly petrochemical-based economies. On the one hand, this was due to the decline in the price of crude oil; on the other hand, however, it was also due to the increasing ecologisation of the Western national economies, which stepped up their efforts to decouple their economic growth from crude oil consumption.¹³

For the Gulf States, China's involvement was therefore very advantageous in terms of timing and nature. For China, the lack of diversification was the most relevant connecting factor because its own economic prosperity was massively dependent on the secured supply of energy imports. Consequently, the supply met a rising demand and enabled the Gulf States to basically start their capital-intensive economic transformation.¹⁴

From this moment, some Gulf States regarded the Chinese approach to the region very favourably under the slogan of a "free-rider policy". In terms of regional policy, this technical term of international policy used within Arabia for China's approach is characterised by the fact that Beijing gives priority to its economic presence in the Gulf over a military one. This interpretation of the regional policy approach was also taken up and discussed in the Chinese media.¹⁵ The form of coordinated geopolitics applied to the Gulf States represented an atmospheric novelty for them, since the decades-long intervention of foreign powers had been substantially backed by the respective military presence.¹⁶

Economic and diplomatic exchange with China intensified disproportionately from 2011, the year of what Western media called the "Arab Spring". Although the ruling systems of the Gulf States were spared

¹² Fulton, *The Gulf monarchies*, 97.

¹³ *European Economic Forecast*, Winter 2021 (Interim), Institutional Paper 144, February 2021, 8,
https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/ip144_en_1.pdf.

¹⁴ Lons and Fulton, "China's Great Game."

¹⁵ Jin Liangxiang, "Is China Really a Free rider in the Middle East?", *Shanghai Institute of International Studies*, Security Study, 2014,
<http://www.sius.org.cn/Research/EnInfo/2104>.

¹⁶ Lons and Fulton, "China's Great Game."

violent upheavals in the course of the civil society protests, the autocratic Sunni monarchies were increasingly alienated from the USA in particular, but also from Europe and its unrestricted support for democratisation.¹⁷

A decisive factor in this development was the overthrow of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, which was explicitly welcomed by the Obama administration. However, this deliberate US positioning on the side of Arab civil society came only a few weeks after a state visit by Mubarak to Washington, which had had the sole purpose of the bilateral approval of Mubarak's son Gamal succeeding his father and becoming the future president of Egypt. For the Sunni autocratic rulers in the Persian Gulf, Washington's "handshake quality" ended abruptly.¹⁸

Meanwhile, the economic policy of the Obama administration towards the People's Republic of China became more confrontational. The burgeoning US-Chinese rivalry was flanked by the Obama administration's publicly expressed desire to reduce its own involvement in the Middle East. This political simultaneity operated in the Obama administration under the slogan "It's the middle class, not the Middle East".¹⁹ Obama had come under domestic political pressure at the beginning of his second term. The US import market needed a general realignment due to the abundance of Chinese products in the domestic American markets, the foreign trade deficit with China had therefore already tilted to the disadvantage of the USA and finally led to such a high level of indebtedness of the US government to Chinese creditors that public opinion saw national security at risk.²⁰

¹⁷ Riccardo Alcaro, Miguel Haubrich-Seco (ed.), "Re-Thinking Western Policies in Light of the Arab Uprisings," *LAI Research Papers*, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2012, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/re-thinking-western-policies-light-arab-uprisings>.

¹⁸ France 24, "Obama presses Hosni Mubarak to make 'right decision' and step down," issued on February 5, 2011, <https://www.france24.com/en/20110205-obama-presses-hosni-mubarak-leave-office>.

¹⁹ Aron David Miller, "It's the Middle Class Not the Middle East," *Wilson Center Insight & Analysis*, Washington D.C., February 2013, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/its-the-middle-class-not-the-middle-east>.

²⁰ Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Obama Administration's Strategic Rebalancing to Asia: Quo Vadis in 2017?", *Strategic Rebalancing to Asia*, *Pacific Focus*, De La Salle University, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12115>.

At the beginning of his second presidency, Obama's political agenda addressed the priority problems and, in turn, decided to refrain from further regulatory and resource-intensive engagement in the Middle East for financial reasons alone. This was accompanied by US entry into new petrochemical production technologies, which increasingly reduced crude oil imports from the Middle East. This reorientation of the USA proved to be the driving force for closer cooperation between the Gulf States and the People's Republic of China.²¹

In the second decade of the 21st century, the current cornerstones of the relationship between the People's Republic of China and the Gulf monarchies were formed. China sees the region as an area of geopolitical competition, characterised by an abundance of energy resources and representing a hub of global trade. Moreover, despite several economic crises and the global SARS-CoV-19 pandemic, the GCC region still provides a significant banking sector and thus has a global presence with its strong financial system. These factors outline a region that is geographically located at the centre of China's territory, sphere of influence and financially strong and affluent markets in Europe – a circumstance that is per se relevant for Chinese leaders.²²

In return, the Gulf monarchies see the People's Republic of China as an important sales market for their petrochemical products, a potential infrastructure developer and a global power with nuclear participation and coordinated expertise in the high-tech sector. The latter also touches on the needs for knowledge transfer in the field of satellite technology and green technologies. These points of commonality are shaping a dynamic partnership, which has been given increasing freedom of action since 2017 due to the significantly decreasing US presence in the region.²³

In the third decade of the 21st century, the People's Republic of China is beginning to replace the USA with regard to fundamental geopolitical activities as well as the financial commitment and creative will required in this context. In so doing, it disregards any politically "disrupting" interference regarding the respect for human rights and has no desire for democratisation and adherence to binding standards of the rule of law.

²¹ Fulton, *The Gulf monarchies*, 100.

²² Ibid., 97.

²³ Ibid.

Public opinion, civil society and the rule of law are thus blanked out to a certain extent, giving the Gulf monarchies extensive freedom of action in their project development. The Gulf monarchies (still) interpret this as their own advantage. In these aspects, China is therefore clearly perceived as a “soft power” from an Arab perspective, in contrast to the historically strained relationship with the Western states.²⁴

Economic dimension

In 2016, the People’s Republic of China adopted its White Paper on its relationship with the Middle East, published in English under the title of “Arab Policy Paper”. This catalogue of political projects for the first time defined the strategic guidelines of an economic approach of the “Middle Kingdom” towards the partner states of the Middle East.²⁵ At the time of publication, the People’s Republic was already importing 50% of its crude oil requirements from these states. Three years later, the gas market opened up and with it the LNG-based Chinese industry, which from then on was already importing around 30% of the annually globally available natural gas for its home markets alone. The People’s Republic of China is thus the world’s largest user of petrochemical products from abroad in general, and from the Gulf region in particular, alongside Japan, which has to cover 90% of its energy needs from imports, and India, 60% of whose imports have to come from abroad.

The import markets from the Gulf region are currently as follows:

- China obtains about 16% of its national demand for crude oil from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
- The Kingdom is closely followed by the Arab Republic of Iraq, which is responsible for 10% of imports.
- The Sultanate of Oman with 8%
- and the Emirate of Kuwait with 6% are two further GCC states.
- The Islamic Republic of Iran is also relevant; with a 7% share of Chinese imports, it supplies more crude oil than Kuwait.

²⁴ Vakil, “China & Middle East.”

²⁵ Scott N. Romaniuk, “China’s ‘Arab Pivot’ Signals the End of Non-Intervention; China’s interests in the Middle East may lead Beijing to assume a military role in the affairs of Arab states,” December 20, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/chinas-arab-pivot-signals-the-end-of-non-intervention/>.

From an internal Arab perspective, unrestricted availability for the Chinese energy market is a necessary prerequisite for the country's own diversification. The revenues thus generated enable the cost-intensive restructuring of national economic systems. In return, the unrestricted supply of energy to China represents an essential contribution to its national security. This "win-win situation" makes it politically easy to win the national Arab markets of the GCC states over for Chinese investments and to receive priority over international competitors. Since 2017, Chinese direct investments have represented a disproportionately high volume of foreign direct investments in the GCC economic area with a share of around 30%.

These developments within the GCC economic community gained momentum due to several events. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched in 2013, and the first concrete steps in its operational implementation relevant to the GCC states were published two years later by the Chinese People's Congress in its white paper entitled "Vision and Implementation".

Going by the title "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road", the long-term strategy for a permanent Chinese presence in the Gulf region was finally presented. This first vision addresses the GCC states on several levels.

The first level concerns the economic area per se and its aforementioned geographical location. The second level focuses on bilateral activities with the individual GCC states. The BRI thus also takes into account the competitive situation of the individual states of the Gulf region and their different speeds in the respective economic diversification.

In recent years, all Gulf States have presented their diversification plans in order to convert from predominantly petrochemical rentier states to sustainable economic models for their own populations. The PRC's approach meets the Saudi "Vision 2030", the "New Kuwait 2035", the "Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030", the "Qatar Vision 2030", the "Oman Vision 2040" and finally the Bahraini "Vision 2030".²⁶

²⁶ Martin Hvidt, "The Development Trajectory of the GCC States: An Analysis of Aims and Visions in Current Development Plans," May 2021, 18, https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814566209_0002.

What all visions have in common is that they leave the political system untouched and focus exclusively on economic transformation. In addition, the common feature of all visions is that they are propagated under the Christian calendar and do not succeed under the Islamic calendar. Even Saudi Arabian newspapers do not write about the “Vision 1451 AH”. To put this into perspective, it should be noted that the Gregorian calendar had prevailed in the Muslim world in all economic matters since 1927. Nevertheless, it is a socio-political and religio-political symbol of change, since e.g. Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia is accompanied by far-reaching reforms that also shake the foundations of Wahhabi life (driving licence for women etc.). China’s seemingly “non-ideological” and predominantly “non-denominational” attachment to these reform plans is favoured by these circumstances.²⁷

The second level of China’s approach was touched by an intra-Arab crisis around the Emirate of Qatar from 2017. Internal disputes with the Saudi Arabian crown prince as well as the crown prince of the United Arab Emirates concerning the Qatari ruling family and its alleged support for various terrorist groups escalated and ultimately led to sanctions against GCC-member Qatar, formulated by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates and enforced by the GCC. Qatar’s membership was then “suspended”. However, this intra-Arab crisis also touched on international politics because the then US President Trump sided with Saudi Arabia relatively early and had to spend a relatively long time trying to find a diplomatic balance after this public declaration. The USA maintains one of the largest air force bases on Qatari territory, which is relevant to the operational approach of the US Central Command’s (CENTCOM), the highest command in the region.²⁸

In the short term, these developments also had a negative impact on Sino-Qatari relations, which can be described as very close, especially in the LNG segment. Exports from the Qatari economic zones were also made more

²⁷ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Mohammed bin Salman and Religious Authority and Reform in Saudi Arabia,” September 2019, Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/mbs-political-religious-authority-saudi-arabia/>.

²⁸ Christopher Woody, “Trump: The US is ready to leave one of its most important military bases if the Gulf crisis worsens,” July 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-us-is-ready-to-leave-al-udeid-military-base-amid-gulf-crisis-2017-7>.

difficult for China by a general GCC blockade policy. However, China's strict policy of non-interference, coupled with a very pragmatic access to the other trading partners in the Gulf, enabled a relatively quick continuation of the set projects and provided Qatar with economic leeway during the US-Saudi negotiation rounds. Further Chinese investments were also arriving in the United Arab Emirates at the time. The network-like linking of the individual infrastructure investments within the framework of the BRI, as well as the political maxim of strict non-interference on the part of the Chinese leadership, thus had an indirect de-escalating effect. The intra-Arab crisis was officially declared over in January 2021.²⁹

In addition to a wealth of infrastructure investments and smaller projects outside of media coverage, several large special economic projects stand out, especially in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman. In 2018, further expansion stages and, in some cases, an expansion of investments were agreed within the framework of the Sino-Arab Economic Cooperation Forum in Beijing.³⁰

The three relevant "lighthouse projects" for China's approach in the region are distributed among the three relevant GCC states. The projects are located in Saudi Arabia, in the United Arab Emirates and in the Sultanate of Oman, respectively. Specifically, the first project mentioned is the "Jazan City for Primary and Downstream Industries" (JCPDI) in the southwest of Saudi Arabia on the Red Sea. The strategically favourable location on the main shipping route to Europe is also used by the Saudi Arabian state petrochemical company ARAMCO. The favourable climate in the region also enables the Kingdom to massively expand agriculture. This makes the project strategically relevant for both the People's Republic of China and the

²⁹ Mohammed Turki al-Sudairi, "Why Beijing is Lying Low in the GCC Crisis?", November 2018, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, 7, <https://kfcris.com/pdf/bb7af816f4265c381c3431b14526b0115de8ac893cfbc.pdf>.

³⁰ Clara Giffoni, et.al., *The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCf)* fact sheet outlines the international cooperation between China and the Arab League countries promoted by the China Arab States Cooperation Forum, BRICS policy center, <https://bricspolicycenter.org/en/publicacoes/the-china-arab-states-cooperation-forum-cascf/>.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, because it encompasses several sectors of the economy.³¹

Among China's investments in the United Arab Emirates, the "Khalifa Industrial Zone Abu Dhabi; KIZAD" stands out. It is the largest commercial platform of the 34 or so commercial zones in the UAE and is located in the north-east of the emirate of Abu Dhabi on the border with Dubai. As of 2019, more than twenty Chinese companies maintain permanent representative offices in the industrial zone. This zone has become one of the most important Chinese landing points for GCC goods transshipment in the Persian Gulf, with its deep-sea port and several rail and highway access points.³²

As far as the Sultanate of Oman is concerned, the "China-Oman Industrial Park" in Duqmum is one of the People's Republic's larger investments in the GCC space in the Arabian Peninsula's largest free trade zone. The industrial park itself is located about 550 km south of the Omani capital of Muscat and measures about 2,000 km². The enclosed coastline to the Arabian Sea is around 80 km and enables the landing of ocean-going merchant and container ships. The industrial park was established in 2011, and since the Sino-Omani agreement of 2016, around 12.7 km² of land have been developed by several Chinese investors and consortia. China committed to an investment volume of around € 9 billion, until the completion of the BRI within the framework of several investment agreements.³³

Apart from these infrastructure projects, various bilateral state oil production cooperations were also ratified. China's state-owned SINOPEC, for example, entered into notable partnerships with Saudi Arabia's ARAMCO, as well as with Kuwait's state-owned oil company. The latter has an annual turnover of € 12.2 billion.

³¹ "Jazan City for Primary and Downstream Industries; Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu manages and operates its forth [sic!] city – Jazan City for Primary and Downstream Industries – the future zone for international investment," <https://www.refiningandpetrochemicalsme.com/article-18199-jazan-city-for-primary-and-downstream-industries>.

³² "Chinese companies invest Dh602b in KIZAD; Tyre manufacturer Roadbot to set up facility in Abu Dhabi industrial complex," July 2019, <https://gulfnnews.com/uae/chinese-companies-invest-dh602b-in-kizad-1.65353433>.

³³ Ed.: Yan, "Spotlight: China, Oman establish industrial park to boost bilateral cooperation," December 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-12/19/c_137683272.htm.

Military dimension

Military engagement of the People's Republic of China in the Middle East encompasses two fundamental fields of action. On the one hand, there are direct military activities; on the other hand, the BRI, as well as numerous infrastructure projects, can be attributed to military cooperation.³⁴

In general, it is important to note that the sum of all China's activities in the region is always based on military-industrial considerations. In addition to the global economic aspects, China also sees the BRI as a logistics and supply initiative that is to be used as an alternative in the event of a conflict in the Western Pacific region. The essence of China's strategy aims at being able to indirectly neutralise the permanent presence of US forces in Asia and on the Indian subcontinent by military means, if necessary. This is also the reason for China's involvement in the anti-piracy operation off the Horn of Africa. On the one hand, this concrete troop presence takes place as a safeguard for the flow of trade through the Bab al-Mandab from the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden into the Red Sea and through the Suez Canal to Europe; on the other hand, it also flanks the very strong presence at the Chinese armed forces base in Djibouti. This base, known as the Chinese People's Liberation Army Base in Djibouti, contains logistics and support elements in the order of up to 2,000 personnel.³⁵ This comparatively small military engagement with regard to space in relation to its economic footprint follows the White Paper logic, according to which the central government in Beijing pursues strict non-interference in regional conflicts and is exclusively concerned with securing trade flows away from any "imperialist airs".

By contrast, with its arms deals China aims at interweaving the respective national armed forces on the ground with its own military-industrial complex. China's involvement can be subsumed under the catchphrase "Games of Drones", a weapon system that will have massive influence on conventional warfare in the 21st century. For the states of the Middle East, access to high technology via Chinese companies is much more comfortable.

³⁴ Jonathan Fulton, "China's relations with the Arab Gulf monarchies; three case studies," 2016, University of Leicester, 17, https://figshare.com/articles/thesis/China_s_Relations_with_the_Arab_Gulf_Monarchies_Three_Case_Studies/10193954/1.

³⁵ Ibid., 192.

It prevents protracted political export discussions, which are usually linked to conditions and international control mechanisms. From the point of view of the Arab leaders, the influx of drones, smart weapons and satellite technology (including dual-use technologies) can thus be guaranteed without “political horse-trading”. China’s military engagement in these two fields of action subtly increases its classic military presence in the Middle East region. Further activities can therefore be assumed to take place.

Cultural policy dimension

Since the 1950s, there has been an internal conflict in the People’s Republic of China between the genuine Han Chinese on the one hand and a Muslim minority in the west of the country on the other. The geographical area of conflict of the official provincial name Xinjiang includes the area known as the “Tarim Basin”. The Uyghurs living there, a Turkmen population of Muslim faith, have for several decades unsuccessfully resisted Chinese control and the accompanying exercise of political power within the framework of a central administration. In terms of cultural history, the “Tarim Basin” is considered the cradle of the Turkic peoples and the starting point of the migration of peoples that led to the settlement of large parts of present-day Turkey. The ethnic conflict is regularly expanded to include a religious component; the Islam of the Sunni interpretation of the Hanafi school, enriched with elements of Sufism, serves as a central element of Uyghur religious identity.³⁶

However, the relationship between the Gulf States and the People’s Republic of China is not significantly influenced by this conflict. The official reading of Saudi Arabia focuses not so much on the religious component, but on the ethnic aspect. The kingdom’s official reaction to an interview with the Chinese ambassador to Saudi Arabia during a lecture in Jeddah in January 2021 is therefore that this is a Turkmen-Chinese problem, which therefore also affects the Republic of Turkey, but not so much Saudi Arabia with its

³⁶ Lucille Greer, “The Chinese Islamic Association in the Arab World: The Use of Islamic Soft Power in Promoting Silence on Xinjiang,” July 2020, *The Middle East Institute*, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinese-islamic-association-arab-world-use-islamic-soft-power-promoting-silence>.

economic ties to China.³⁷ There were no different reactions on the part of Saudi Arabian intellectuals; an analogy of the Uyghurs' liberation struggle to the Palestinians' liberation struggle against the Israeli occupying power was rejected by the Saudi Arabian royal family.³⁸

This interpretation of the Uyghur conflict is the result of a targeted Chinese state information campaign, which is based on a three-stage line of argumentation. The Chinese Islamic Association, founded in 1953, is responsible for it, moderating the complex dynamics of Chinese-Arab relations in terms of realpolitik and preparing them for general perception. The Chinese practices of practising Islam are presented as a religious role model for China that is worth protecting. In addition, close contact is established and a partnership developed with Saudi Arabian religious structures within the framework of "pilgrimage diplomacy". Finally, the Sino-Islamic Association presents itself as a supporter of these religious structures in the Kingdom itself. This ultimately enables the development of the Saudi narrative of an intra-Turkish, but not Islamic problem.³⁹

China can therefore isolate its internal problems from trade relations with the Arab world. Through this political strategy, it is not perceived disproportionately negatively "on the Arab street".⁴⁰

Conclusions

China's influence in the Middle East has grown massively in recent decades. This influence is wielded primarily via inter-economic relations and large-scale infrastructure projects. China's motive for its regional commitment is the result of calculations with regard to economic policy and brought to bear under the catchphrase "Belt and Road Initiative". In addition to concrete infrastructural land connections, this global economic trade initiative requires a multitude of trade centres and economic zones to serve as connecting points for regional trade structures.

³⁷ بلومبرغ: السعودية تركز على مصالحها الوطنية أكثر من الدفاع عن القضايا الإسلامية

³⁸ Greer, "The Chinese Islamic Association."

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Guy Burton, "Public Opinion in the Middle East toward China," December 2018, *The Middle East Institute*, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/public-opinion-middle-east-toward-china>.

Increasing interdependence also positions China as a regional political actor. Alongside the USA, Russia and the individual regional powers themselves, another global entity is thus present. However, China's approach is different due to its reliance on economic cooperation, which is preferred to political or military partnerships. This position of strict non-interference in internal Arab affairs will be undermined in the future by its economic strength and cannot be maintained, not least because of global competition. Moreover, the role of the USA in the Middle East is often "sanctions-driven" in terms of economic policy and focuses on the Islamic Republic of Iran as an adversary of Saudi Arabia. Since these two states maintain intensive economic contacts with China, the latter's "neutrality" is also at risk in the event of an Iranian-Saudi escalation. A possible repositioning of the USA therefore also has an impact on Sino-Arab relations and can exert an influence on them in individual cases.

Ultimately, China's principle of strict non-interference with the respective domestic affairs of its partner and cooperation countries constitutes an advantage, compared to the more robust and partly militarily backed approach of the USA, which also provides more opportunity for political criticism. With respect to this principle and the associated competition for spheres of influence in the South China Sea, China will continue to be under scrutiny. The Chinese People's Liberation Forces will not be able (or willing) to ignore the demands for "safe passage through Belt and Road" in the future. Therefore, China's military presence in the region is likely to increase in the medium term. The economic projects currently realised make a reduction of Chinese involvement seem almost impossible.