

## **China's Interdependent Relations with the Middle Eastern States: Prospects for Reconciliation and Peace**

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### **Abstract**

The emergence of China in the international arena through strengthening the domestic economy and investing the surplus abroad has granted it the central position around the globe. China's aspiring plan of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has further contributed to its rise on the world stage. BRI is aimed to link various regions of Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe into the interconnected land and maritime corridors. To transform the project into reality, the Middle East is pivotal for Chinese ambitions since it is located at the crossroads of all the three continents. For this reason, the turbulent region of the Middle East is expected to witness the rise of Chinese involvement. Eventually, as the Chinese involvement would remain primarily economic in nature, the security of these economic ventures is going to transform the political role of China in the longer run. The regional drive of diversification and consolidation

of the economies, by the regional states, might also assist China to actively involve politically and initiate the reconciliatory efforts between the regional foes. However, China would be required to ensure that its involvement in the region does not irk Washington, or else the region might become the new arena for geopolitical competition between two global powers.

**Keywords:** *Middle East, conflict, BRI, Chinese investment, US-China rivalry, geopolitics*

## **1. Introduction**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been the momentous enterprise of China which is aimed at enhancing its status at the international stage. The initiative is directed at intertwining the economic future of the developing nations with that of China's rise. As China is capitalizing the investment projects in various regions of Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe, the prospects of joint collaboration between the states in these regions and China are optimistic. To connect the three continents, the most crucial region is the Middle East, not only because of its strategic location but also the resources which are imperative for the success of the BRI.

Middle East is located adjacent to the Eurasian plate and on certain points, overlaps with it. It contains around 60% of the world's total proven oil reserves (Balat, 2006). It also contains the major routes of trade which were historically been the part of ancient Silk Road. In the maritime domain, the region encloses two vital choke points, i.e. the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-ul-Mandib. Since China requires the continuous supply of energy to grow its industrial base, the security and the infrastructural development of the Middle Eastern States are of

significant importance for China. Thus, while China seeks to invest in the region mainly in the energy and transportation sector, the growing political tensions in the Middle East make the investment opportunities risky.

The situation of the region is further complicated owing to the presence of multiple actors. The foremost is the US which has been playing the role of the “policeman” since becoming the leading world power after the collapse of the bipolar world order. Its policy of strategically aligning itself with the State of Israel and Arab Monarchies has created the divisions within the region. The gulf is further widened as anti-US state and non-state actors have managed to form an alternative bloc consisting of Iran and its proxy networks. The consolidation of Russo-Iranian Nexus in the wake of Syrian Civil War has further deepened the breach within the region. As of now, the region reflects the bipolarity with the US and its Arab allies on one side while Russia and Iran on the other.

By strategically aligning themselves with the opposing powers of either US or Russia, the regional political entities pursue the divergent goals. The divergence brings them into a conflicting position which is evident in Syria, Iraq and Yemen where the Arab states like Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) support those factions who oppose Iran and its allied forces. Both the US and Russia also get involve in the regional conflicts by sponsoring and coordinating the operations with the regional blocs. For example, the US is complicit in providing the logistics support to Saudi Arab in its military adventure on Yemen. Similarly, Russia provides the air cover to the Iranian-affiliated groups inside Syria.

Among the great powers, China is the only state which has so far avoided the direct involvement in the conflicts of the Middle East. China has always remained the “silent spectator” instead of an “active

stakeholder”. China also pursues its Middle East policy irrespective of the political association and has developed the cordial relations with all the political entities. This is partially due to China’s reliance over the oil and gas which translates into the strong commercial ties of China with the regional states.

Therefore, as China is planning to pace up its investments in the region, the security of the investments would be the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy towards the Middle East. China finds itself as an ideal candidate to lead the reconciliation and mediation process due to its impartial posture. Hence, the first part of the article would examine the extent of the relations between China and the regional state entities in economic and security domains. The second part would then focus on China’s role as a possible mediator while the last part would analyse the challenges in the reconciliation process.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The article will address the issue through employing the theory of complex interdependence. As the objective of China and the Middle Eastern nations is to attain the economic advantages through multiple channels, i.e. governmental sector, private sector and cross cultural events, it aligns with the basic principles of “complex interdependence” – proposed by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph Nye – which argues that the fortune of every regional state is aligned together (Keohane and Nye, 1977). Complex interdependence highlights the complicated growing relations between the states in which every actor which is involved is sensitive to other’s actions. Hence, although the states cooperate for their own national interests yet the overall beneficiary of that cooperation is the system in which they operate. The most striking factor of this theory is its integration of two opposite views, i.e. power politics and economic

interdependence. Hence, where the economic cooperation opens the path for sustainable relationship, on the other hand, the less depended actor tries to influence its counterparts owing to its leverage upon them (Keohane and Nye, 1977).

By taking into consideration these aspects of complex interdependence, the relationship between China and Middle Eastern states will be drawn so as to comprehend the level of partnership – not alliance – in the region. As complex interdependence validates the dominant role of economics which overshadows the military force, the study would draw the line in accordance with the economic stakes of each state in the region which would compel them to minimize their mutual conflicts. Finally, the term “interdependence” highlights that the states are inextricably joint together in regional or extra-regional affairs and the decisions taken by one state would impact the others. Under this framework, the competition between the US and China and its geopolitical impact on the regional states of the Middle East would be studied. If the US and China decide to confront each other, it would create the predicament for the regional states to balance between the two great powers. Hence, the realignment of alliances, when formed, could result in the bi-polar regional structure.

### **3. Sino-Iranian Strategic Partnership: The Bilateral Need**

China and Iran share the common insight for the Middle East, i.e. the opposition to the US intervention. This common objective of both the states have converged their interests in the region. For Iran, the Middle East holds the significant geostrategic and geopolitical position as any development in the region would have the direct implications for Iran. On the other hand, Chinese interests in the region are so far limited to the energy, i.e. the import of oil and gas through the Strait of Hormuz,

to fulfil its industrial needs. Since Iran is the major energy supplier and virtually controls the Strait of Hormuz, good ties with Iran are vital for China. Hence, the partnership between Iran and China is encouraged due to the interdependence of the two countries in the domains of security, economics and Iran's "Look East Policy" which coincides with Chinese ambition of "Rising Asia".

In terms of security, both China and Iran feel apprehensive of the US intervention in the South China Sea and Persian Gulf respectively. Due to imposed sanctions, Iranian military equipment is considered to be obsolete. In order to vanquish the military inadequacy, Iran depends upon the arms imports from the US rivals, i.e. Russia and China (Fite, 2012: 13, 31). Iran has managed to endorse the security arrangements with both these states through strategic alignment and participating in the naval exercises (*Financial Times*, 27th December 2019). Specifically, with China, Iran's military collaboration takes precedence with Iran's eight-year-long military conflict with Iraq (1980-1988), when China supplied arms to Iran (Liu Currier and Dorraj (eds.), 2011: 56). In 2016, both the states signed the agreement of sharing military equipment and technology (Gady, 2016) along with holding the joint maritime drills in the following year. China has also assisted Iran by providing 27-kw Miniature Neutron Source Reactor (MNSR) and Electromagnetic Isotope Separation Device (EMIS), in 1991 (Davis *et al.*, 2013) to enhance the nuclear capability of the latter.

Another converging factor between Iran and China is their economic collaboration. The commercial ties of both the states witnessed the boost after the squeezing financial sanctions over Iran by the US that restricted the transportation of Iranian oil to the international markets and hampered Iran from pursuing its regional goals (Katzman, 2018: 59). The trade between the two countries is mainly categorized

into energy and non-energy sectors. As per the statistics of 2018, China is the largest export and import partner of Iran having the share of 29 percent and 22 percent respectively (Holmquist and Englund, 2020). Since Iran is one of the largest oil and gas producing country and China has been the premier consumer of these resources, Iran exported around 6,50,000 barrels per day crude oil to China (Scheid and Gupte, 2020), accounting for nearly a quarter of Iranian oil exports, in the same year. As the US unilaterally pulled out from the Iran Nuclear Deal, Iran had to experience the tough economic sanctions under the “maximum pressure strategy” of then US President Donald Trump, which enormously disturbed the oil revenues of Iran (Brown, 2020: 5-6). Resultantly, the oil exports of Iran to China dropped to more than half to 300,000 barrels per day in 2019 on average (Scheid and Gupte, 2020). The trend suggests that China is not willing to resist the US upfront for the sake of its partnership with Iran. However, it is also noticeable that despite of lessening its reliance upon Iranian oil, China has not annulled entirely.

On the contrary, China and Iran have consolidated their partnership in the realm of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Iran is the crucial country of the Central Asia-West Asia Corridor of BRI which connects China to Europe. The most important project of China-Iran partnership under the banner of BRI is the “High Speed Railway” between Tehran, Qom and Isfahan (Shariatinia and Azizi, 2019; Shariatinia, 2019). In 2020, both China and Iran reached a mutual agreement in which China would invest in the telecommunication, cyber space, oil exploration, transportation, infrastructural development and security, worth of US\$400 billion, in return for oil purchases in half prices (*Al-Monitor*, 10th July 2020). The deal signifies two interconnected aspects; China's growing frustration over trade war with the US and subsequently, the urge for exploring alternative ventures for investments.

In the light of aforementioned details, the contemporary circumstances of both China and Iran make their partnership a natural phenomenon. The strengthened partnership with Iran provides China the space in the Middle East, and the growing influence of Iran across the Middle Eastern spectrum offers China the economic clout over the US (Scita, 2019: 42). Iranian footings in the region are imperative for China to contest with the US – at least economically – as Iranian influence can be substantial for China to earn the energy related contracts in Iraq due to the former’s embedded influence across the Iraqi political and economic sphere. Through Iran, China is expected to expand its influence in competition with the US through the joint initiative of “strategic forum for regional dialogue” (CGTN, 11th October 2020). Such initiatives reflect the Chinese ambitions to act as the balancer that can subsequently prove to be the impetus of minimizing the US role in the region.

#### **4. Post-War Reconstruction in Iraq and Syria: The Collaborative Approach**

Both Iraq and Syria are not yet the part of BRI. This is mainly because of the ongoing conflicts in these two states. Iraq has been experiencing the political instability and mass protests due to the rising corruption, inflation and unemployment. Likewise, Syria is witnessing the decade long civil war that has crippled down the economy. For China, both Iraq and Syria, nevertheless, provide vigorous opportunities. Iraq is the energy source while Syria holds the geo-economic position due to its ports in the Mediterranean Sea. In the interdependent manner, both these states require the post-war reconstruction and investment to stabilise their economies.



#### **4.1. Iraq**

The cooperation between Iraq and China complements the requirements of each other. After the collapse of the Baathist regime, Iraq managed to secure the position of one of the largest oil-producing countries while China has become the leading recipient of its oil. To garner further benefit, China capitalized in the reconstruction and subsequent up-gradation of Iraq's oil sector which had been inefficacious owing to the UN sanctions during the Saddam period (Calabrese, 2019). China's HBP has won the bid of water treatment plant worth of \$32 million in 2019 (Tang, 2019). China's state-owned company, CPECC, has also managed to earn the contract of developing Majnoon oilfield in Iraq which accounted for \$204 million in 2020 (Reuters, 23rd March 2020). The greater involvement of China inside Iraq's economic structure lies in two reasons. The first one is its strategic partnership with Iran. Iran provides China the passage inside Iraq owing to its influence over Iraqi political spectrum as previously mentioned. The second propounding reason is the reluctance of the US to contribute financially in the reconstruction of Iraq (Cordesman, 2017) after the defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS). This forced the Iraqi political leadership to look towards China as the alternative economic option.

Iraq occupies the central position for China in the Middle East for two reasons. The first one is the China's aim of incorporating the interconnectedness across the Middle East for which Iraq is essential in providing the link between Eurasia, Africa and the Gulf states. The second reason is the China's goal of diversifying its energy supplies. To reap the energy benefits inside Iraq, China's state-owned companies like China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) are involved in developing the oil-fields and refining of oil within Iraq (Al-Shafiy, 2015). In the post-ISIS

era, the economy of Iraq has shrunken due to the infrastructural loss but at the same time, the production of its oil has rapidly increased as Iraqi government managed to regain the control of oil-fields which were previously been under ISIS-controlled territory. This has further widened the prospects of China-Iraq collaboration as Chinese companies have shown their interest in rebuilding the oil-field in East Baghdad (Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2008: 38). In the reconstruction efforts, Chinese firm has won the bid of \$1.39 billion to build civil engineering projects in Southern Iraq (Xinhua, 8th August 2019).

The subsequent protests of 2018 and 2019 have led to the replacement of multiple premiers of Iraq (Al-Rikabi, 2019), including Haider Al-Abadi and Adel Abdul Mahdi. Although the core of the protests have died down yet the grievances of the people are still to be addressed. Iraq still experiences the small-scale protests nearly on the regular basis. To address the demands of the protestors, Iraq requires the revitalization of its economy for which China is crucial since it brings the investment opportunities. China is already being one of the largest trading partners of Iraq having approximately 24 percent share in Iraq's total exports in 2016 (Workman, 2016), mainly in oil sector. The prospects of further enhancing the cooperation were solidified after the former Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi led the senior delegation to China on September 23, 2019. As per the agreement, which is still tentative, China would provide \$10 billion to Iraq in reconstruction efforts by developing airports, transportation, oil fields, educational institutions, housing societies and water pollution treatment plants (Khalil, 2020). In return, China would get the 10 percent of oil export revenues of 100,000 barrels per day for its two state-owned companies (EPC, 2020). By entrenching itself into the economy of Iraq, China's geo-economic impact is anticipated to translate into its geo-political influence. Although, China is not eyeing for substituting the US inside

Iraq, but the troubled relations of Iraq with the US, under President Trump, and the ongoing battle between the US and Iran on Iraqi soil, tempts Iraq to look for the alternative to develop itself financially. The consolidation of Iraqi economy would be meaningful in its independence from the US in fostering the foreign policy.

#### ***4.2. Syria***

The regional and global competition among the varying states has contributed significantly in influencing the course of ongoing civil war in Syria. Nevertheless, as the danger of the Islamic State has subsided and the reinforcement of state's writ over the former ISIS-held areas has been materialized, Syria has now been focusing on reviving its economy and infrastructure. The allies of Syria, i.e. Russia and Iran, seem to be the favourites in winning the bid for the reconstruction projects as they have provided political backing and security to the Syrian government during the time of turbulence. Nevertheless, funding the Syrian reconstruction is the gigantic task for both Russia and Iran. According to the estimates of the World Bank, the amount of \$400 billion is required to rebuild the war-torn areas of Syria (Daher, 2018). As both Russia and Iran are struggling with their weak economies and the US-imposed sanctions, the prospects of their funding are less likely.

The US and the EU are two other candidates with their huge economic resources that can offer economic aid to the Syrian government. Nonetheless, as the anti-Assad rhetoric of the West and the economic and political boycott of the Syrian government continues to prevail, both the US and EU are less likely to contribute financially in the Syrian reconstruction (International Crisis Group, 2019: 14). The wealthy Gulf nations are the third and a viable option to grant assistance to Syria. The Gulf States, owing to their common Arab linkage and the fear of a spill over effect if Syria gets destabilized, might consider to

offer aid to Syria. However, due to their sponsorship of anti-Assad forces, their chances of winning any construction projects are grim. The Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has mentioned in one of his statements to not offer any role to the rebels' supporting states in the reconstruction efforts of Syria (Heller, 2017). Under these circumstances, China is the only state which not only maintains good ties with Syria but is also capable of rebuilding its war-torn areas. China has maintained its relatively low profile in Syrian Conflict. The official position of China is the immediate end to violence and to resort to the political solution of the crisis through the negotiations of the political groups (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Botswana, n.d.). China has backed the UN-led efforts of "impartial investigation" of Syrian Crisis and carefully responded to the chemical attacks without holding "anyone" responsible (*ibid.*). In the Security Council, China has repeatedly aligned itself with the Russian stance on Syria (Reuters, 21st December 2019) and thus, reflected its opposition to the US policies.

China's concerns over Syria emerge mainly from the security vulnerabilities. The members of China's ethnic Muslim group, Uyghurs, have been reported to fight alongside Syrian Jihadists inside Syria (Reuters, 11th May 2017). China has already faced the Islamic Militancy from East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), an Islamic militant group formed by separatist Uyghurs and alleged to have ties with Al-Qaeda. The group is also blamed for conducting approximately two hundred terrorist attacks in the Xinjiang province of China between 1990 and 2001 (Xu *et al.*, 2014). In a recent move, the US has delisted ETIM from its terrorist organization list which poses a strategic threat to China. Hence, to counter the US objectives, China requires the strong geostrategic alliance with Russia inside Syria.

Although as of 2021, Syria is not the part of BRI project of China yet it holds an important geostrategic position. For example, the Latakia Port of Syria offers both geostrategic and geo-economic route into the Mediterranean Sea in comparison to the Suez Canal. The port could be helpful in evading the choke point of Bab Al-Mandib in Red Sea as well as cutting short the travel time. In terms of the security of the port, China can collaborate with Russia and Iran, who already have the military presence, for the joint security agreement. In the China-Arab Cooperation Forum, China has already promised the amount of nearly \$23 billion in aids and investments, \$20 billion for the reconstruction of the conflict driven states, \$3 billion in special loans for the region's financial sector, nearly \$150 million to support social stability and \$90 million in humanitarian and reconstruction aid for Yemen, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon (Fulton, 2019: 6), while ratifying another \$2 billion in "First Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects" (Elazar, 2017). Eventually, its efforts in the reconstruction of Syria would consolidate China's alliance with Russia while at the same time would enhance its leverage over the political spectrum of the country. The post-war developmental projects would allow the Syrian refugees to return to their home country and would pave the path for the political settlement regarding the Syrian future.

## **5. Economic Interdependence between China and the Gulf States**

The prosperous ties of China with the Gulf States are entrenched in the vast energy potential of the Gulf States. As the Gulf States garner the huge sums of revenue through their oil exports, China, on the other hand, requires the energy to keep its industry functional. Moreover, the attempt by the Gulf States to expand their economic output, other than the oil, and revitalizing the economic structure also makes China their

priority. In the Gulf, China is developing the port city of Madinat Al-Hareer in Kuwait, worth nearly \$82 billion (*Trade Arabia*, 19th February 2019). Similarly, Bahrain provides an important juncture in the Maritime Silk Route for China to enter the Gulf States with which the bilateral trade of China has reached \$260 billion a year (Chaziza, 2020a, 2020b). China has also invested in the construction projects inside the Bahrain Kingdom, which were worth \$690 million between 2013 and 2019 (*ibid.*) and were aligned to the Bahraini Vision 2030 of diversification of the economy. Likewise, China's BRI also provides the opportunity to visualize the Qatari National Vision 2030 into reality. The mutual partnership between both the China and Qatar is dependent upon Qatar's LNG export to China and the construction projects of Chinese companies inside Qatar. The mutual trade between the two countries stood at \$11.5 billion in 2018 along with the investments of China to build Hamad Port (*ibid.*).

However, in the regional context, the partnership between China and the aforementioned small Gulf States holds little significance because of multiple factors. First of all, none of these states are actively involved in any regional conflict – though Qatar supports Syrian rebels but Turkey holds the major sway over them – and are relatively peaceful. It is evident from the fact that the political crisis in Bahrain after 2011 did not shatter the existing political structure. Unlike the crisis in Syria and Iraq, the political instability in Bahrain largely remained a domestic issue. Additionally, due to their sheer size, these states are neither capable of nor the aspirants of becoming active regional stakeholders. Secondly, all of these states host the US bases and are completely relied upon the security provided by the US. Given their strategic dependency upon the US, their economic partnerships with China are unlikely to translate into political and security domains. Thirdly, the viability of these states for the Maritime Silk Road Project

of China is less due to the presence of much larger economies in the surroundings, namely Saudi Arabia and UAE. All of these factors are vital in realizing the significance of China with the larger Gulf States.

### **5.1. Saudi Arabia**

The traditional relationship between Saudi Arabia and China is focused upon oil-sector. Saudi Arabia has become the biggest supplier of oil to China with the shipment of 1.67 million barrels per day in 2019 (Reuters, 31st January 2020). The increased dependency of China upon Saudi Arabian oil is largely due to two factors. The first one is the trade-war with the US which has cut off US oil exports to China from 16 million barrels in January 2018 to 2.4 million barrels in December 2019 (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2020). The second reason is the imposition of sanctions upon Iran which led China to lessen its oil exports. Due to its huge influence over the OPEC, Saudi Arabia ensures the stable supply of oil to keep the Chinese industries operational. In a reciprocal manner, China is a lucrative option for Saudi Arabia in achieving its vision 2030, based on diversifying the economy.

Since China has opened up to the world and its trade has exponentially increased, its relations with Saudi Arabia have primarily built on energy needs. However, in the recent years, the mutual ties have witnessed the diverse arenas for cooperation. Furthermore, as the Muslims in general and Arabs in specific, face travel bans and ethnic prejudice in the US, many Arab businessmen have started to shift their enterprises to the emerging markets of China, especially in Yiwu – the developing financial center (Marsden, 2017). Additionally, to benefit in a reciprocal manner, Saudi Arabia has come to an understanding with China to develop new metropolitan areas inside Saudi Arabia (Chen and Han, 2019: 12). The ease of trading with and investing in each other's country have been reiterated through lessening the economic

obstructions and devising the structuralized policy. It is evident through the increase in joint investments which went up from \$40 billion to \$700 billion between 2005 and 2015 (*ibid.*). The economic opportunities also facilitated the inter-state travelling between the two countries. China now hosts nearly 1000 Saudi students per year in its universities while Saudi Arabia has observed the 50 percent rise in Chinese nationals who are associated with the real estate, oil and tourism industries inside the kingdom (*ibid.*).

The partnership between China and Saudi Arabia is also vital due to the geostrategic position of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is situated between the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. China has been developing the railway infrastructure to connect the Kingdom with other GCC states. In this regard, the construction of 2700km North-South Railway project and 550 km railway project of connecting the GCC states (Chen et al., 2018), would allow China the direct access from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea while surpassing the choke point of Bab-ul-Mandib. In the similar context, Saudi Arabia has pledged to invest \$10 billion in the oil refinery at Gwadar Port of Pakistan (*Al Arabiya*, 23rd January 2019), which could work as the transit corridor between China and Saudi Arabia while avoiding another choke point of Strait of Malacca for China which is dominated by the US naval ships.

Eventually, while strengthening the economic partnership, both China and Saudi Arabia desire to expand their cooperation in the nuclear domain as well. In order to lessen the domestic utilization of oil, Saudi Arabia is keen on producing the nuclear energy. Despite of its strong alliance, the US is apprehensive in assisting the kingdom citing the proliferation fears. However, China is keen in facilitating the nuclear reactor for Saudi Arabia in the latter's attempt of diversifying its energy resources. In the "1+2+3 cooperation pattern", published in China Arab Policy Paper in 2016, the digit "3" signifies the cooperation in nuclear



and technological sector (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 13th January 2016). This also brings China's influence over Saudi Arabia to a greater extent and signals towards the multi-tiered cooperation between the two states.

## **5.2. United Arab Emirates (UAE)**

Among the Gulf States, UAE is the only country which has significantly diversified its economy into trade, business and real estate sectors. As UAE, especially Dubai, has become the regional rather global centre for investments, trade and businesses, Chinese businessmen also earned the profits. UAE has become the leading state for China in the region with the bilateral trade between the two states was recorded at \$53 billion in 2018 (Mogielnicki, 2019). Majority of the Chinese investments in UAE are directed towards the infrastructural projects due to the lower taxes and cheap prices. This has allowed the Chinese nationals to become the core segment of the UAE population, ranging from 10 percent to 15 percent (*China Daily*, 13th February 2019).

Due to the scale of economic investments, China has designated UAE as the Middle Eastern centre for Chinese endeavours. It is evident by the development of UAE ports by the Chinese shipping company named CASCO, in 2018 (Xinhua, 11th December 2018). In the past years, the mutual economic partnership between China and UAE has further strengthened. Unlike the other Gulf States where China has mainly focused on the oil sector, it has capitalized the non-oil sector of UAE through investing in the Railway and Engineering industries and also has the large presence in Dubai's property market (Luo *et al.*, 2018). The foremost development in the China-UAE relations is the conduct of Chinese businesses in *yuan* – instead of US dollars (Herlevi, 2016). The agreement, first signed in 2012 and subsequently expanded

(*ibid.*), aims at internationalizing the Chinese currency, hence expanding its influence. Nevertheless, through conducting the trade in *yuan*, UAE is also eyeing to become the regional pivot of trading and investments by allowing the investments in various currencies.

In connection with the Maritime Silk Road under BRI, the Dubai Port World (DPW) is keen in developing the ports in the region. The strategic reason is the passing of over 60 percent exports to Asia from the UAE ports (HSBC, 2019). Hence, UAE aims to expand its regional influence through upgrading the regional ports. This would enable the Chinese access in that maritime route and would make UAE the facilitator of BRI project for China. Since the economy of the UAE is mainly dependent upon the ports while China's BRI is also based upon the maritime route, both the states have converged their interests to form an interdependent partnership.

## **6. China's Reconciliation Efforts through Interdependence: Soft and Hard Approaches**

The investments and projects which are currently being carried out by China in the Middle East require security for their completion and sustenance. The security of the projects is not only significant for China but also for the regional states who are eyeing for the thriving partnership with China. As of now, the Middle East has been witnessing instability as regional powers are engaged in multiple conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon, among others. On the contrary, the GCC nations have generally experienced stability both internally and externally due to their oil revenues and security partnerships with the US respectively. Nevertheless, the flow of oil has been under constant threat due to the volatile situation in the Persian Gulf. As the regional rivalries are unfolding between the US and anti-US forces, Iran has been

capitalizing on its advantage over the Persian Gulf through attacking the shipments – notably the British naval vessel (BBC, 20th July 2019).

The military involvement of the Gulf States in the Yemen under the leadership of Saudi Arabia has also exposed them to the security threat. The retaliatory attacks by the Yemeni Houthis have made the Gulf States vulnerable. The most catastrophic of them was the attack on Saudi Arabian oil company, Aramco, which had cut off half the oil production of the kingdom (*Al Jazeera*, 14th September 2019). The growing rift inside Iraq and Syria and the role of regional stakeholders have made the internal conditions fragile. As for the Gulf region, the existence of the US bases has so far proved to be the stabilizing factor for the kingdoms. However, the presence of the US troops could not prevent the attacks in the Persian Gulf and on Saudi Arabia's Aramco. Furthermore, the enthusiastic partnership which Saudi Arabia managed to develop under President Trump is likely to wither away in Biden's administration as the latter is critical of Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen. The US is also pursuing the policy of disengagement in the region which is evident by two factors. The first one is the rapprochement between Israel and the Arab states through the Abraham Accords which is aimed to formulate the anti-Iran bloc. In this way, the US allies would themselves assume the security of the region while the US would limit itself in providing the logistics. The second factor is the withdrawal of US troops from Syria (BBC, 19th October 2019) and the persisting demands of withdrawal by the Iraqi parliament (*Al Jazeera*, 5th January 2020).

China, under such circumstances, is the viable state to initiate the peace process in the region. The Chinese economic adventurism is projected to interconnect the entire region which would make the economies of regional states interdependent. The Maritime Silk Road and the railway infrastructure is deemed to connect various states. In the Persian Gulf, the navigation of Chinese shipments can only be ensured

through envisaging the peace. Furthermore, the families of the Chinese workers who are currently employed in the Middle East have also demanded their security (Dorsey, 2017). Hence, it is imperative for China to lead peace efforts that are most likely to be initiated through two approaches – soft (mediation) and hard (troops deployment).

### **6.1. Mediation**

Mediation is an international practice which seeks to manage or resolve the disputes and conflicts. Any state who leads the mediation process between the two parties needs to be impartial and willing to engage in the given conflict by building the trust. In the modern history of China, it has refrained from interfering in other countries and has always prioritized the “neutral approach” towards the international conflicts. Traditionally, this policy was feasible due to China’s inward-looking stance. Today, as China is increasingly assuming the international role and has made the stakes high through investments and trade, mediation is the new diplomatic approach for China. In the Middle East, China has participated in the mediation processes in the recent past but China’s participation has remained limited and passive. For example, in Libya, China has voiced its support for the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) and pledged for the growing economic partnership with the GNA officials. Nevertheless, China has also maintained its economic ties with the opposition group, led by Libyan National Army’s General Khalifa Haftar. While retaining its stance of non-interference in Libya, China has been supporting the UN-led diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis and at the same time, continuing to foster its economic partnerships with the rival groups in Libya in a “non-aligned” manner (Burton, 2019). In a similar approach to the Yemen Conflict, China has officially supported the non-interference policy and called the international community to respect Yemen’s sovereignty. China

recognises the Hadi Government, based in Saudi Arabia, as the legitimate and internationally recognized government of Yemen while opposes the takeover of Houthis. In this regard, it has also supplied the weapons to Saudi Arabia and UAE which the latter states have used in their Yemen campaign. Nevertheless, being aware of Iran's close association with the Houthis, China has also played a crucial role in conducting the meeting between Houthis and UN special envoy in 2017. It has also voiced its support to UN efforts to conduct the international inquiry over the human rights abuses in Yemen (Ramani, 2019).

Through the case studies of both Libya and Yemen, China's mediation efforts can be termed as oscillating between its traditional diplomatic posture and contemporary economic interests. While China is eager to maintain its "non-interference outlook" and is not willing to engage proactively, it is forced to participate in the conflicts to secure its commercial interests. Hence, this approach is categorized as "Quasi-Mediation" in which the state actor unwillingly engages in the conflicts with the sole aim of securing its own political, economic and diplomatic interests (Sun and Zoubir, 2018). The cautious approach of China is also self-evident through the methodology of "international institutionalism". Instead of becoming an active player in the mediation efforts, China has assumed the role of "participatory" player, i.e. not initiating any mediation process but providing assistance for the global initiatives of mediation like that of UN Peace Processes. Such an approach is aligned with the Chinese policy of "zero-enemy". Unlike the other major powers like the US and Russia, who have failed to devise partnerships with the entire region, China aims to avoid any labelling of "alliance formation" and seeks the cooperation with every player in the Middle East.

Unlike the Western model of mediation, which is driven by the concept of establishing universal value-based system of justice, equality, freedom and democracy, China encourages more communitarian and

collective setup. Instead of unilateral approach of the West, mainly the US, China advocates the mediation and conflict resolution through multi-party mechanism. It is also reflected through the statement of China's special envoy for the Middle East Affairs in which he has reiterated the country's position of promoting the stance of "collective security mechanism" and "multilateralism", in the 16th IISS Manama Dialogue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 7th December 2020). The centrality of multilateralism in China's diplomatic conduct has been previously demonstrated in the "six party talks" to address the North Korea's Nuclear Issue in 2003. By involving Japan and South Korea along with the US, China reiterated its position regarding North Korea's Nuclear Program as not only a global concern but also a regional issue, in which China holds the significant position. The active mediation by China by involving every stakeholder provides conclusive evidence regarding China's unique approach towards conflict management. In the case of the Middle East, the launching of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) signifies the multilateral efforts of China (BRICS Policy Center, 2016). In an attempt to consolidate its cooperation with the regional states, China has not only managed to mature its bilateral partnerships but has also marked its presence in the multilateral institutional framework of Arab League. Arab League constitutes both the Gulf States and Iraq, which is considered to be inclined towards Iran. Hence, it provides the common ground for the regional states to resolve their mutual differences. Similar formation of forum, i.e. Middle East Forum, has been proposed by the Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, in 2020 in an attempt to embrace a broader agenda by providing the platform to non-Arab regional states like Iran and Turkey, to resolve their regional issues (Balasubramanian, 2020). Hence, the China's mediation attempts can be seen as a pragmatic approach rather than a realist or opportunistic behaviour. The relative disengagement of the US

from the region could have been exploited by China by actively promoting itself to the forerunner position. However, China has avoided any direct interference, instead, it has prioritized to manoeuvre diplomatic leverages from the side-lines.

The aforementioned discussion highlighted the Chinese role from being absolutely alien to be partially conducive towards the Middle Eastern issues. Over the years, as Chinese stakes grew larger, China has transformed its political role. Through this trend, it is expected that China would further continue to increase its political engagement in the region. Not only analytically but also rationally, China would require to become a major international player in the region. If China continues to neglect its political responsibility of the region, in which it has the substantial economic stakes and benefits from the energy resources, the rise of China could face the downturn. The contemporary China-Middle East situation is similar to the US-Europe situation in the post-WWII. Had the US left European political and security matters to the European states themselves, the Europe would have experienced the Soviet influence that would have ripped off the economic assistance of the US and eventually dismissing the US status of being a global power. In the similar context, China can neither afford to play its role in the Middle East from the side-lines nor to be the economic power only when the other major players are eyeing to influence the political and security situation of the region. To consolidate itself in the region, China needs to adopt the role what the US has performed in Arab-Israel rapprochement and what Russia has been performing in settling the Syrian quagmire between itself, Syria, Iran and Turkey. Hence, China requires that every state of the region with which it gains benefits, should be in better terms with each other to avoid further deterioration. This can only be carried out if China would assertively present itself in resolving the regional conflicts through either hosting the rival parties or by forming such

organization where the regional adversaries could interact under China's supervision.

## **6.2. Military Deployment**

Another method of ensuring peace in the region is the active military deployment of the Chinese troops. The military cooperation of China with the regional states carries with itself the historical legacy. During the Cold War in 1960s and Sino-Russian split, China was eager to present itself the supporter of “resistance movements” against the “Western Imperialism”. In a practical demonstration of its ideological stance, China became the first non-Arab country to recognize Palestinian Liberation Organization along with the training and arming of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)’s fighters. The revealing statistics have mentioned the supply of arms worth of \$5 million during 1965-70 by China to PLO in their fight against Israel, which China considered as the imperialist instrument (Oppenheimer, 2019). China had also been actively involved in the Dhofar Rebellion of Oman. China had provided training, ideological indoctrination and assistant in military operations to Marxist rebels against the Sultan who had the backing of Britain (Shamsunahar, 2018). However, the Chinese-backed proxies in the Middle East died down as the focused shifted to economic advancement. The economic sustainability would require the energy resources of the Gulf States. Being in opposition to China's Communist Ideology and its support to rebel movements, the relations of China-Arab States were sour. Hence, to improve and repair the damaged relations, China sought to disengage itself from the proxy warfare in the Middle East and limited itself with its economic benefits. To creep the economic advantages, China supplied the weapons to both sides during Iran-Iraq War. In an attempt to balance its relations and due to the oil-rich prospects of both Iran and Iraq, China sold billions of weapons to both these states in order



to maximize its own weapons exports (Byman and Cliff, 1999: 10-13). However, from arming proxies to selling weapons to states, China's military involvement in the Middle East has remained passive without the involvement of its own military troops.

Although China has never deployed its military personnel in the region yet in the recent years, two incidents highlight the possibility of China's military presence in the Middle East. The first incident is the first ever overseas military base of China in Djibouti. Djibouti Military Base is officially to ensure the logistics supply to Chinese shipments across Bab-ul-Mandib. Another instance is the Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region. The strategic convergence of the US-India alliance concerns China over the protection of its sea-lanes towards the Middle East (White, 2020). Both of these developments signify China's concerns in protecting its investments. Hence, in the possible outcome, China is expected to replicate these practices in the Middle East as well. Correspondingly, Chinese security concerns also emerge from the security of its own citizens. China had to carry out the evacuating operations of its citizens in Libya (2011) and Yemen (2015) through the participation of its air force and navy. It is therefore, imperative in the policymaking circles of Beijing to increase the military presence of China in the growing overseas assets.

The military deployment of China in the region could be materialised in two manners. The first approach could be the deployment of "peace-keeping" forces through the floating fleets. This would ensure the security of the commercial cargos of China. The second approach could be the actual deployment of Chinese troops in the region through the permanent military bases. It would allow China to react in response to any threat to its investment projects while discouraging the adversarial actors to create havoc (Sun, 2018). The internationalization of Middle Eastern Security, away from the Americanization, is also motivated by

the joint Sino-Russian Alliance. Following the attacks on oil tankers near Fujaira in 2019 (BBC, 7th June 2019), Russia came up with its plan of “Gulf Security” in United Nations Security Council, which China supported (Cherkaoui, 2020: 11-12). Russian security plan is aimed at consolidating the collective security apparatus, adherence to international law, peace-keeping operations and multilateralism in resolving the Middle East crisis. Chinese support to Russian plan is aimed at replacing or minimizing the US security umbrella in the region. To consolidate the strategic alliance, Iran has also welcomed the Chinese presence in the region (Shariatinia, 2019), to diffuse the fear of any US attack.

The primary concern regarding the military presence of China in the region emerges from the extent of its partnership with the regional states. In the Middle East, the US has been the primary security guarantor of the Arab States. Nevertheless, due to the unconventional policy of the US under President Trump, the Arab Monarchs are now in the quest of another guarantor and China lives up to their merits (Mansour, 2016: 18). Firstly, the Arab States are trying to lure China into their spheres through multilateral measures in order to dampen the China-Iran alliance. Secondly, the Chinese naval presence is also welcomed to channelize the anti-piracy operations in the Arabian Peninsula (Abdul Ghaffar, 2018). Due to the convergence of BRI with the respective visions of Arab States, the security sustainability has become the top priority for both China and Arab States. In the policy paper of China Institute of International Studies, which is linked with the Chinese State, the term “constructive intervention” has been used so as to highlight the “common regional security mechanism” aiming at de-radicalization and anti-terrorism operations while at the same time, coordinating with the great powers within and beyond the region (Liu, 2019). In order to promote the military-to-military cooperation, Chinese policy makers

have also increasingly used the term “strategic fulcrum” to secure the overseas interests of the country. In the similar context, the military diplomacy is vitalized to jointly protect the sea routes along with the BRI projects which involves joint exercises and intelligence operations (Liu, 2017). Through such military engagements, China has presented its “soft military approach” in order to secure its citizens and commercial interests without competing with the US or to fill-in the vacuum.

## **7. Challenges to China Involvement in the Region**

### ***7.1. US-China Geostrategic Competition***

The US has shifted its focus from the Middle Eastern conflicts to the China’s rise at the global level. The entrance of China in the region would tempt the policymakers to redefine the US approach in the region. Previously, the US had to reinstate its military operations in 2014 due to the emergence of ISIS. Chinese political and military involvement in the region could provoke the reengagement of the US, which is otherwise withering away. The US would focus on increasing its fleet as well as troops deployment in conflictual zones like that of Iraq and Northern Syria. China would require to ensure that its engagement in the Middle East remains “soft”, i.e. not aiming at substituting the US role but rather consolidating its own influence. Although the greater Chinese influence in the region would attract the US to counteract yet on the other hand, it could provide the US an impetus to formulate the joint strategy with China to jointly share the Middle Eastern security.

### ***7.2. Chances of Misbalancing***

The recent rapprochement between the US allies – Israel and Arabs – is aimed at countering the Iranian influence in the region. The US has been formulating the bloc of its allies. The Abraham Accords which sealed

the peace deal between two Arab States – UAE and Bahrain – and Israel, signifies the US insistence to strike the defense arrangement between its regional allies and detach itself from the regional chaos. While Arabs and Israel are trying to consolidate the security setup, Iran would eventually rely on China and Russia to thwart US-led bloc. Such a situation is expected to create problems for Chinese Middle Eastern Policy. China has been successful in balancing between the Arab States and Iran. However, the operationalization of US-led bloc would put China in the foreign policy dilemma with regards to the region. Unlike Iran, who shares the similar regional outlook to that of China, Arab States would find it difficult to maintain the equilibrium between the US and China. While China promises the attractive economic opportunities for Arab States, the partnership with the US guarantees the security against the Iranian threat. Under such conditions, China needs to carefully craft its regional policy to maintain the equilibrium between the regional states.

### ***7.3. Dealing with Non-State Actors and Political Factions***

The state-to-state dealings have the traditional legacy; however, Middle East is defined by its fragmented political culture and the rise of non-state actors (both military and non-military). Non-state actors are going to be a major hurdle in the implementation of Chinese policy in the region. The September 2019 deal between Iraq and China has earned praise within the Shi'ite political factions while it has led to the skepticism within the Sunni ranks. The previous result of Sunni marginalization had led to the civil war in Iraq and the subsequent emergence of ISIS. Hence, China would need to deal with every political faction in a possible seating of a “national dialogue”. Similarly, China needs to be cautious in not overwhelmingly support the Assad regime as it might frustrate the opposition factions. The prosperity which the

Chinese investments might bring in Syria must only be materialized after the political reforms. Hence, in both Syria and Iraq, China's mediatory role is significant so as to ensure the unity of these states and safety of its investments.

## **8. Conclusion**

The peace drive in the region has already been initiated by the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the certain Arab States. The major push was provided by the US as it has the strategic partnerships with both Israel and the Arab Monarchies. In the similar sense, China has signed the "comprehensive strategic partnership" with Iran, UAE and Saudi Arabia while fostered strong economic ties with other smaller regional states as well. Chinese investments are promised to bring the economic benefits for the region and would connect the entire region into a single belt. Hence, the geo-economics is expected to change the policy stance of the regional foes to reconsider their mutual relationships. China, being an important economic player, is also keen to safeguard its investments. However, it must be considered that the economic prosperity does not guarantee the regional drive of settling the political and security issues. The Middle East entails religious, political, ethnic and historical conflicts which are embedded in the cognitive framework of its leaders. The expectations from the regional states to settle their mutual issues by themselves is nothing but a credulity. It is to be noticed that every region operates in accordance with the international system and the units, i.e. the states of the region try to attach their interests with that of the major global powers. In the case of the Middle East, the mediatory role of the US has failed to bring peace and stability in the region. The US could not maintain its impartial policy over Palestine conflict, Iran-Saudi conflict as well as Iran-Israel

conflict. Furthermore, the US has focused more on military aid instead of reconstruction as evident from the Iraqi quagmire. Being exhausted of its wars, the US has been receding militarily from the Middle East as well. On the contrary, other major powers like Russia has been stepping up both politically and militarily in the region. China is the only major global power which has the economic leverage yet does not hold the political or military advantage as such. Understandably, China has been focusing on competing the US economic influence across the globe. However, China must rethink its policy of alienation from the political spectrum inside the Middle East. As the US has been creating vacuum, China is in the better position to take up the mediatory role in the region instead of Russia. Although the Russo-Chinese alliance is promising against the US, China cannot afford to depend upon the Russian military to defend Chinese investments in the region. For this China requires to step up itself and assert its political influence over the regional parties. Only then, there is a better chance for China to consolidate its position as well as reconcile between the regional foes.

## Notes

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