

China-centric Economic Order in Asia: Growing Chinese Presence in the Middle East

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Abstract

This study examines the Middle Eastern aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the increasing cooperation between certain Arab countries and China. In recent years, it has become apparent that in the midst of changing regional dynamism in the Middle East, China has become a key player in the region, not to mention that the Chinese presence can make significantly contribute to the recovery of Middle Eastern countries from the recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. China has increased its presence in the Middle East region over the past few years, and pays special attention to the countries of the Arabian Gulf; in addition, this region accounts for a non-negligible share of Chinese oil imports and is the main supplier of LNG. Because of all these, China established close ties with various Arab states, which are of enormous importance to China in meeting its growing energy needs. In the view of this article, the increase in Chinese influence could lead to significant economic growth in the Middle East, while also reducing the former dominance of the US in the region. This study presents the

increasingly intensive trade and economic cooperation between China and certain countries in the Middle East through concrete examples.

Keywords: *Asia, China, Eurasia, Middle East, Belt and Road Initiative, Silk Road*

1. Introduction

The discussion of this topic is highly relevant, as the relationship between China and the Middle East is becoming increasingly important, both in the field of economy and trade, and in bilateral and multilateral relations. The aim of the study is to present the cooperation between different countries in the Middle East and China and to highlight its importance. We use a comparative method and examine the extent and quality of the BRI for the countries studied. However, due to size constraints, the study is unable to report all BRI target countries in the Middle East, so we will take a closer look at three groups. The first group is made up of rich Arab monarchies (such as the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia), the second is the states of great geopolitical importance (Iran, Iraq and Turkey), and the third is Egypt, an African Arab country that has increased its cooperation with China in unprecedented ways in recent years and became a new hub for China's Middle East policy. Israel is discussed separately because of its delicate geographical location as well as its geopolitical position that sets it apart from other countries in the region, but it is definitely worth taking a close look at the country as it is very important for the BRI and one of the largest proportions of Chinese investment arrives here among the countries in the Middle East.

The geopolitics of the Middle East is changing rapidly and competition between key players is intensifying. The region covers three

continents: Asia, Africa and Europe, giving it great geopolitical significance. The importance of the Middle East is well illustrated by the fact that its neighbouring area includes the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Black Sea, among others. Four extremely important waterways also pass through it: the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab al-Mandeb, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. The Middle East is the world's largest oil supplier and has the largest oil and gas reserves.

The Middle East also plays an important role in the emerging new world order, thanks in part to its geopolitical location and its abundance of raw materials, making it an unavoidable factor in many ways. China's role as a key economic and political player in the region could be extremely important.

2. The Emergence of a New Eurasian-centered World Order

The finding that the world's economic focus is shifting eastward is becoming more and more a reality. We have seen examples of this situation before in history, suffices to mention the Silk Road, which connected the economies of Asia and Europe through centuries, and which flourished the settlements along the route. We could also mention the Baghdad-based Abbasid Empire (750-1258), which in its heyday was one of the world's leading economic power and sold in its markets (*aswaq*) goods imported from Europe, China, India or even Russia, among others, and which has led to a vibrant and fruitful trade relationship between Europe and Asia (Stanley, 2008).

The dynamic strengthening of China's economic and political role and importance in recent years calls the world order into question of Western dominance that has existed for many centuries (Eszterhai, 2019). International economic and political life has been organized along the US-centric world order in the last century. However, there are now

clear signs of a crisis and weakening of American hegemony, some of which have been strongly felt for more than a decade. These crisis phenomena can basically be grouped around four factors (Varga, 2017):

- global power shift;
- questioning regional power status quo;
- crisis of liberal international institutions and norms, emergence of new institutions;
- the crisis of legitimacy of the liberal world order in the Western world.

Changes in global power relations to the detriment of the West and the United States are linked to Asia, the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), including, above all, the economic rise of China, the 2008 global economic crisis and the changing international military balance (Varga, 2017). The above has resulted in a weakening of the U.S. power advantage.

So American dominance is weakening and, following a paradigm shift, witnessing the emergence of a new Eurasian-centered power structure within China can function as a chief. Asian countries, in particular, have a significant impact on world trade, but also play an important role in the diplomatic arena, through their supply of cheap and skilled labor, their internal innovations and their large-scale investments in sustainable development.

3. The Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a complex multi-country geopolitical-strategic plan launched by China in 2013 that combines political, economic and defense goals. Additionally, program also means the reconstruction and extension of the ancient Silk Road.

The project has come under a lot of criticism and attack in recent years, with many Western scholars and researchers portraying “the Belt and Road Initiative” as a geopolitical plan and drawing the attention of world politicians to the geopolitical dangers of China-led economic cooperation (Moldicz, 2021a: 119). In contrast, Chinese communication paints a completely different picture of the initiative, as they believe that the BRI was created to allow countries to cooperate and develop with each other, working together, helping each other to create a better future. In the opening speech of the BRICS summit in Xiamen, China, in September 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that “the Belt and Road Initiative” can by no means be seen as a geopolitical tool, but rather as a platform for cooperation (Horváth, 2020a: 205).

China wants to develop a special system of relations with different countries, in which many people recognize China's leading role, enjoying significant independence in return, and in a political and economical sense, a situation that is acceptable to all and promotes common development. But in contrast to the old vassal system, where there was no doubt about China's cultural superiority, in the 21st century, only the economy would be the connecting link between sovereign states (Klemensits, 2018).

The Belt and Road Initiative contributes to increasing exports, expanding domestic production, ensuring access to vital natural resources, and thus promoting domestic economic growth and development. The BRI is a major plan to promote and encourage international trade and relations to enhance China's economic and political power (Liu, 2017). China is opening up new markets for Chinese goods, which is increasing demand for its products and preventing overproduction.

Connectivity can be extremely important for the BRI, which is in the common interest of the participants to promote. Examining the land routes, we can basically talk about three different routes. The first one connects the northwest of China with Europe, through Central Asia and Russia. The second route starts in China, passing through Central and West Asia to the Mediterranean coast. The third one connects southwest China with the Indian Ocean region through the Indochina Peninsula. The three routes can be divided into six further economic corridors, which are not only transport routes connecting endpoints, but also have a much more complex economic geographical content. In contrast to the old Silk Road, it is an economic integration that helps the urbanization of the area, the interconnection of production chains and the rise of economic centers (Klemensits, 2018).

4. Middle Eastern Aspects of the BRI

China has expanded its ties with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions through an initiative launched by President Xi Jinping, a flagship project that provides the world's largest platform for economic cooperation. Collaboration within the BRI covers five main areas, including policy coordination, infrastructure network connectivity, trade and economic cooperation, financial integration, and finally people-to-people connection. To date, more than 100 countries have signed agreements on BRI-related projects, and it is estimated that China will spend more than US\$1 trillion on the program by 2027 (Wang and Yousef, 2019: 1).

4.1. Multi-dimensional Partnership: Trade, Network, Economy and Cultural Relations

Since 2013,¹ Beijing has gradually built a multi-dimensional global partnership network involving great powers, neighboring countries, developing countries and regional organizations. These layered partnerships are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. China's participation in the Middle East is a key element of its global partnership network (Horváth, 2020b: 630-635). These relations, which are present in the eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf and the Red Sea, fall into four broad categories according to their importance. The first includes a comprehensive strategic partnership with Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The second is about an innovative, comprehensive partnership with Israel and a strategic cooperative relationship with Turkey. In the third category there is a strategic partnership with medium-sized countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar. The fourth relates to smaller states: Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen (Chaziza, 2020a: 21).

Governments in the Middle East generally welcome the partnership with Beijing because they say they are treated as equals, not as vassals or colonial territories, and, of course, their material benefits also come from it. China strongly rejects interference in the internal affairs of other states. Moreover, it seeks to establish an equal partnership in its international relations, which is why Beijing also maintains good relations with opposing parties (such as Iran and Saudi Arabia). It has succeeded in achieving this, because its partnerships do no harm or neither provoke third parties (Sun, 2019).

Economic relations between China and the nations of the Middle East have strengthened, including finance and investment, which complement the increasingly powerful trade component. Not surprisingly, interests have consequently become much more complex.

Chinese leaders actually consider the Middle East to be of strategic importance, while politicians in the latter area are increasingly looking to the East when their long-term interests are in mind. The BRI creates more opportunities for cooperation, and the China-Middle East relationship becomes a fundamental geopolitical axis in understanding Eurasian international affairs (Chaziza, 2020a: 18).

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese workers in the desert areas and coasts of the Middle East are working with professionals and workers together in those countries. They keep the pace of construction together in a number of projects, from notable buildings to energy projects or other infrastructure development businesses. These activities are taking shape as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, providing hope in otherwise turbulent times and strengthening ties between China and the Middle East.

However, the Middle East is also considered to be one of the most critical regions from China's point of view, as mentioned earlier, it is located at the crossroads of three important continents, Europe, Africa and Asia, and the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. This region is also located at the crossroads of large oil fields and oil routes, which are of significant importance to China in meeting its growing energy needs. The states of the Middle East are, in fact, China's bases in terms of resources and a gateway to other markets in the international world. As a result, being mentioned earlier, China has begun to build and deepen economic, strategic and diplomatic relations with the region. These investments are not only in China's interests, but also in helping Middle Eastern states interested in improving and developing their economies to support their country's standard of social stability.

It is important to mention that, in strategic terms, there are also four crucial sea straits in the Middle East, namely the Bosphorus, the

Dardanelles, the Bab al-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz, through which a lot of China’s trade passes. This region also plays a key role in security coordination, economic cooperation and cultural exchanges under the auspices of the BRI project. In addition to this, the fact that the critical region accounts for more than 40% of China’s oil imports and is also one of the largest providers of liquefied natural gas (20%, but experts say it could rise to 30% over the next ten years) (Kayani, 2021). Being aware of all these, we can say that China is heavily dependent on energy transports from this area. More than half of its crude oil imports come from the Middle East.

Table 1 Chinese Investments in the Middle East (in US\$)

<i>Middle Eastern Countries</i>	<i>Amount Invested by China in the Last Ten Years</i>
United Arab Emirates	\$ 7.790 billion
Bahrain	\$ 1.4 billion
Kuwait	\$ 650 million
Qatar	\$ 100 million
Saudi Arabia	\$ 6.030 billion
Iran	\$ 950 million
Iraq	\$ 4.220 billion
Turkey	\$ 5.040 billion
Egypt	\$ 4.200 billion
Israel	\$ 8.590 billion

Note: Amount for Qatar is for 2009-2021.

Sources: AEI, 2021; Chaziza, 2020c; own compilation.

China has become the Gulf countries’ largest trading partner, with trade between them now exceeding \$260 billion a year and projected to reach \$350 billion over the next decade (Chaziza, 2020a). Besides that,

China has invested large sums of money in the Middle East over the past ten years, which is clearly contributing to the region's prosperity. Chinese investment is found not only in richer Arab states, but also in poorer countries, sometimes with fewer raw materials. In the compilation in Table 1, we examine ten countries that are closely related to Chinese investment and whose relations with China will be discussed in more detail later.

Cultural values are also important factors that can influence economic growth, international trade, marketing, finance, and politics. A deep and thorough understanding of cultural values is essential for success. If there are large cultural differences, misunderstandings are more likely to occur, resulting in unintentional abuses and stressful situations between partner countries, and business activities can incur much higher costs, which can reduce the chances of a relationship succeeding, and may impede compliance with contracts. In addition, cultural differences can reduce the volume of trade and the level of cooperation (Blomkvist and Drogendijk, 2013). If the cultural values of each country are similar, there is a greater chance of foreign investment. If countries with hard-to-reconcile cultural backgrounds want to do business, they need a lot of time, resources and effort to bridge the gap.

Countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative have different ethnic groups, cultures, customs, communication styles, behaviors, and ways of thinking that fundamentally determine the nature of relationships. It is a fact that, through cultural exchange, multinational cooperation can be strengthened in all aspects. Because of all this, China has launched a number of programs² in the Middle East to overcome cultural differences, which mainly contribute to the spread of the Chinese language and culture.

4.2. The Oil-rich Gulf Countries: The United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) can play an essential role in China's economic expansion in the Middle East. In 2019, the two countries signed a historic trade agreement worth \$3.4 billion as part of the aforementioned BR-Initiative. Within this framework, the port of Jabal Ali is used to transport Chinese products worldwide (*Gulf News*, 12th October 2020), making the UAE a center for land and sea trade. Today, China is the largest trading partner of the United Arab Emirates, and the Arab country serves as a kind of gateway to Chinese exports to the Middle East.

The UAE's Chinese Ambassador to China, Ali Obaid Al Dhaheri, has previously said the relationship between the UAE and China has become a model for global cooperation. According to the ambassador, the two countries' comprehensive strategic partnerships include an ever-widening range of cooperation, including renewable energy, logistics, infrastructure, and next-generation joint projects and initiatives such as artificial intelligence. The volume of trade between the two parties exceeds \$50 billion, and the goal is for the same indicator to reach \$200 billion by 2030 (UAE MOFAIC, 2021).

As already mentioned, China has significantly increased its economic, strategic, and diplomatic involvement in the Middle East over the past decade, but this is especially true for the United Arab Emirates and, within that, the Emirate of Dubai. Today, China is the UAE's largest trading partner and the latter serves as a kind of gateway to Chinese exports to the Middle East. The same is true for the Emirate of Dubai, as China has been Dubai's largest trading partner for years. The volume of trade between the two reached 66.4 billion dirhams (about \$18 billion) in 2019.

In the early 1990s, up to 2,000 Chinese emigrants worked and lived in the UAE. Most of them were employees of embassies and consulates, as well as employees of state-owned oil companies. The rapid growth of the Chinese population in the region over the past two decades has surprised many. In 2018, an estimated 270,000 Chinese emigrants lived in Dubai alone. The Chinese presence has become arguably visible, and the number of Chinese emigrants is now large enough to influence local business decision-making. There are currently more than 5,900 Chinese companies present in Dubai and the number of investors is approaching 19,000 (*Khaleej Times*, 29th May 2019).

It is also important to talk about the strengthening of cultural relations between the United Arab Emirates and China, which also contributes greatly to the development of trade relations between the two countries. If we look specifically at the Middle East, we can observe that China has launched or is supporting a number of programs in the Middle East that focus specifically on teaching Chinese language and culture. The Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to China, Ni Jian, said the “One Hundred Schools” program of the Emirates has made great progress thanks to joint efforts, with 118 schools launching Chinese language courses. In the United Arab Emirates, more than 30,000 students study Chinese, who play a significant role in promoting mutual understanding and friendship between the two peoples. The case of the United Arab Emirates is by no means unique in the Middle East, as many other countries (such as Egypt, Iraq, Iran, etc.) have launched similar programs with Chinese assistance, and it is also important to mention that many Chinese students study at an international university in an Arab country.

Relations between China and *Qatar* have strengthened significantly in recent times. The relationship between the two countries has shown continuous and smooth bilateral development in the political, economic and cultural fields. Cooperation in trade, energy and other areas is also significant and has actively contributed to the strengthening of the two economies. China's efforts to formalize strategic partnerships with Qatar include seven main areas of cooperation (Chaziza, 2020b):

- policy coordination;
- connectivity;
- trade and investment;
- energy cooperation;
- financial cooperation;
- military relations;
- tourism;
- cultural relations.

We are witnessing great changes in Qatar, as evidenced by the creation of the “Qatar National Vision 2030” (QNV2030), a development plan launched in October 2008 by the General Secretariat of the Qatar State Development Plans. It aims to transform Qatar into a developed society by 2030 capable of achieving sustainable development. The plan relies on four central pillars: economic, social, human and environmental development (General Secretariat for Development Planning, Qatar, 2008). There are also plans for the country to develop closer bilateral relations at the international level and to play a more active role in regional policy. The cornerstone of Qatar's vision for human development strategy is better education and health care, as well as the development of increased cultural awareness. The economic and strategic interests of China and Qatar can be linked,

namely the cooperation between QNV2030 and the development of the BRI overlap at certain points. There are aspirations between the two sides that want to develop a unified development strategy from which both countries can benefit. From an economic point of view, the QNV2030 is very similar to the development concept represented by the BRI, primarily in terms of striving for economic, human, social, cultural and environmental development. As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also said, Qatar needs to be involved in the implementation of the China Silk Road initiative as the BRI offers opportunities for joint cooperation with QNV2030 (*CCTV.com*, 12th May 2016).

QNV 2030 and China's Belt and Road vision have embarked on a common path of economic development, and their cooperation strategy offers new opportunities for both parties. As a result, the realization of the BRI will give new impetus to Doha's economic transformation (Chaziza, 2020b).

Recently, we have witnessed progress in *Saudi-Chinese* economic relations in the areas of trade, investment and other cooperation, so it is not surprising that a Saudi-Chinese-Singapore alliance has been set up to invest 3 billion riyals (\$800 million) in the Saudi market. The investment will focus on infrastructure development, businesses and the agricultural sector.

In addition, Saudi Arabia and China aim to set up a joint scholarship program to make it easier for Saudi youth to work in Chinese companies and to be able to capitalize on their expertise in the United Kingdom. The opportunities, provided by the Saudi government, motivate Chinese companies to invest and bring the latest modern technologies to market, as well as to provide training programs for young people in many fields. China wants to focus mostly on agriculture, especially poultry and sheep farming, new feed production projects, and support for the Crown Prince of Saudi Green Initiative.

In addition, Saudi Arabia was China's largest supplier of crude oil for the eighth consecutive month. China's Saudi oil imports reached 7.2 million tons in June 2021, equivalent to 1.75 million barrels per day (*Al Arabiya*, 21st July 2021).

The People's Republic of China's friendly cooperative relations with *Bahrain* cover four main areas in the spirit of cooperation within the BRI (Kingdom of Bahrain, 2008):

- political coordination,
- connectivity,
- trade and investment; and
- connections between people.

Bahrain has strategic geopolitical value for China in terms of its new Silk Road strategy compared to other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. First, the Kingdom is the gateway to the Gulf and one of the most important Gulf countries along the new Silk Road, allowing it to serve as a transport hub for the region. The island is surrounded by several large oil fields in the Middle East and has a prominent position among the shipping routes in the Persian Gulf. Bahrain is at a crossroads of China's new Silk Road strategy – an important link in trade between the Arabs and China, as well as in the Asian, African and European worlds, and also in terms of investment, science and cultural exchanges.

Bahrain is one of the most modern and dynamic countries in the Middle East's highest level business environment. There are several aspects which make the Kingdom an ideal access point for Chinese companies. For example, its open and liberal lifestyle, unique market access, world-class regulatory environment, highly competitive tax system combined with the lowest operating expenses, high quality of life and technologically literate population (*Asharq Al Awsat*, 19th

November 2018). The above are definitely attractive to Chinese companies and they are happy to invest in a country with such a favorable tax system and a high level of development.

The two countries have embarked on a common path of economic development. Moreover, their intensive cooperation offers new opportunities for both partners. In July 2018, Bahrain and China signed a memorandum of understanding for the joint development of the BRI.

Opening a new chapter in relations between China and *Kuwait*, the leaders of these countries jointly announced the establishment of a strategic partnership in 2018. Subsequently, China expressed its intention to continue to strengthen mutual trust with Kuwait and was interested in deepening the strategic partnership between the two countries. I would like to emphasize that Kuwait is the first Gulf Arab State which established diplomatic relations with China. Furthermore it is also the first state in West Asia which signed cooperation documents with China within the framework of the BRI.

The BRI is highly compatible with Kuwait's Vision 2035 National Development Plan, which aims to change Kuwait's oil-based economic structure and transform the region into a commercial and financial center by 2035 (*Global Times*, 22nd March 2021).

In 2020, the volume of bilateral trade between China and Kuwait reached \$14.3 billion, making China still Kuwait's largest exporter and largest non-oil trading partner (*ibid.*).

In addition, we feel that there has really been major progress in terms of cultural relations, as China is expected to open a Chinese cultural center in Kuwait later this year, which could further encourage mutual understanding between the two peoples.

4.3. The Three Neighbors with Important Geopolitical Significance: Iran, Iraq, and Turkey

Iran is an extremely important state for China, which is why the latter aims to forge close ties with the Islamic Republic in order to expand its energy supply and reduce energy dependence on Saudi Arabia. Cooperation with Iran is also considered significant to ease the potential risks of maritime transport through the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has recently threatened to close the strait, which could potentially raise oil prices and disrupt energy supplies. That is why Beijing is seeking to deepen bilateral relations with Tehran. In addition, Beijing hopes that one day Iranian oil will be able to cross the mainland to China, thereby reducing its dependence on shipping and the risks involved (Kayani, 2021).

2021 was a significant year for Iran and China, inasmuch as they signed a twenty-five-year cooperation agreement. The Iranian government is convinced that a long-term agreement will be very effective in promoting the deepening of Chinese-Iranian relations. Not all details of the deal are public, but according to the settlement, China will invest \$400 billion in the region in 25 years in return for a continuous and highly discounted supply of oil. Chinese investment will need to be made in areas such as the banking, telecommunications, port, rail, health, and IT sectors. Besides that, the agreement calls for military cooperation between the two countries (Duggal, 2021). From Beijing's perspective, the agreement is part of an infrastructure project known as the New Silk Road. China is the Islamic Republic of Iran's largest trading partner, despite official figures showing a slight decline in the volume of trade between the two countries following the 2018 U.S. sanctions against Tehran. Trade between the two countries in the first five months of 2021 was \$ 5.5 billion (*Tehran Times*, 28th June 2021).

The BRI also covers *Iraq* and has further strengthened Iraq-China relations following the alleviation of the COVID-19 epidemic. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said China is open to consolidating friendship with Iraq and deepening mutual trust. One of the primary aspects of this in the recent period has been the resumption of air services between the two countries. The Iraqi Ministry of Transportation announced this spring that flights between Iraq and China will resume. The parties agreed to implement all health conditions approved by the two countries for the safety of travelers. In the initial period, it was decided to operate a direct flight on a weekly basis. The Iraqi Ministry of Transport has said that air cargo flights are also being relaunched as they play a key role in increasing trade between the two countries and are working to launch more flights in the future to meet the needs of more passengers (*Yawm7*, 3rd April 2021).

The Chinese-Iraqi cooperation can be illustrated with another example. A Chinese company has recently won a contract for a larger volume of gas work. According to the announcement of the Iraqi Ministry of Oil, China's "Sinopec" has won the right to develop the Mansuriya gas field in Iraq near the Iraqi-Iranian border (*Iraq Oil Report*, 20th April 2021). Last year, Iraq terminated a contract with a group led by the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) to develop the Mansuriya area and decided to entrust international energy companies with the completion of the work.

In previous years, *Turkish*-Chinese relations in the fields of economy, trade, tourism and transport have improved significantly. Since the last decade, their relationships have grown to a level of strategic collaboration. The beneficial relationship is also indicated by the fact that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has visited China four times as Prime Minister: in 2012, 2015, 2017 and 2019. The extent of trade between China and Turkey in 2020 was around \$ 24 billion.

This is mainly due to the growing volume of Turkish agricultural and livestock products exported to China. But it should also be borne in mind that large Chinese smartphone manufacturers such as Xiaomi, Oppo and Vivo have made direct investments in Turkey (Anadolu Agency, 25th March 2021).

There has also been significant development in terms of tourism, with more than 426,000 Chinese tourists visiting Turkey in 2019. Although the pandemic led to a decline in the number of Chinese tourists in 2020, their number is expected to reach the one million in the coming years (*ibid.*).

Thanks to the Belt and Road Initiative, bilateral relations have also improved. Turkey has completed the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project. The first export train to China on this route arrived on December 19, 2020 in the Chinese city of Xian.

4.4. A New Hub for China's Middle East Policy: Egypt

Together with its international competitors, China will join the competition to take part in mega-projects and infrastructure developments currently underway in *Egypt*, while President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi seeks to modernize and transform the most populous country in the Middle East. Egypt is a relatively stable country compared to other states in the region and has been made more attractive to foreign investors, including China, thanks to the government's recent efforts. Egypt has now become a hub for China's Middle East policy, so it is not surprising that the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) is building the business district of Egypt's new administrative center.

It also needs to be stressed that China's economic role in Egypt is not a new concept. For instance, the aforementioned China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) has been operating in

Egypt for more than three decades and has previously built a number of notable buildings in the country, including the International Conference Center in Cairo. There are currently more than 1,500 Chinese companies registered in Egypt, many of which have consolidated their position before the uprisings called the Arab Spring (*Ahram Online*, 9th January 2020).

China's business presence in Egypt is concentrated in industrial, free trade and financial zones. Since the late 2000s, Egypt has operated as a regional manufacturing center for Chinese companies. This is not surprising given that the Suez Canal is China's primary transportation route to its largest market, Europe. As a result, China is the biggest investor in the Suez Canal Corridor, an industrial zone of four sections and six ports.

Overall, over the past few years, Chinese-Egyptian economic cooperation has expanded and reached new heights.

4.5. Where China Invests the Most: Israel

The relationship between *Israel* and China is difficult to separate from the relationship between China and the United States. It is well known that the U.S. has long been Israel's number one ally, but Americans are increasingly concerned about the growing Chinese influence in Israel recently. CIA director William Burns expressed concern this summer about Chinese investment in the Israeli technology industry (*The Times of Israel*, 19th August 2021), and Americans have warned Israel against Chinese investment. What is certain is that in the future, Sino-Israeli relations could result in a point of friction between Israel and the United States and this could upset existing relations throughout the Middle East. That is also the point where we must add that the competition in the field of technology between the US and China is one of the key areas of contest between the two powers (Moldicz, 2021b: 1-2.).

Despite US warnings, economic relations between China and Israel are booming, and over the last years in Israel, Beijing has become a major force in the construction industry. In November 2016, five Chinese construction giants won an Israeli government tender for residential construction and other construction work. After several years of fruitless negotiations in January 2017, an Israeli government delegation signed a final agreement with the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and the Chinese Business Association to import thousands of Chinese construction workers into Israel. Unlike the contracts signed with Eastern European countries, the agreement with the Chinese government stipulates that the Chinese authorities are responsible for selecting workers sent to Israel through special companies set up for this purpose. On the occasion, former Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon said: “After more than 18 months of effort, I am pleased that our delegation has signed an agreement to bring thousands of Chinese workers to Israel to act as a kind of catalyst to solve the housing crisis” (*Globes*, 4th January 2017).

And why is Chinese involvement in Israeli construction significant? The Israeli housing market has suffered from labor shortages, slowness and high resource costs in recent years. On the other hand, the agreement with China brings innovative technologies and expert staff, which is in line with the vision of Israel in the future.

5. Weaknesses of Cooperation between China and the MENA Region

As the U.S. presence in the MENA region shrinks, the regional security order has shifted from a U.S.-led unipolar security framework to a multipolar order where different actors are fighting for influence. This includes countries such as Russia and Iran, as well as other actors such

as Turkey and the Gulf countries. Increased geopolitical tensions and competitions within MENA pose a challenge for China in terms of achieving its region-wide economic goals, while occupying only a marginal position in regional debates. Ongoing proxy wars and other conflicts threaten the economic benefits of China–MENA cooperation.

In line with the ever-changing regional context, China needs to adjust and rethink its regional policy and role. It may also be a source of conflict that China's vision of a regional security architecture in the Middle East runs counter to the priorities of the Gulf states over the Iranian issue. China supports Iran's role in any security architecture in the Middle East, in contrast to Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This reflects China's commitment to multilateralism, non-interference and neutrality. Aware of these challenges, serious questions arise as to how long the policy of avoiding Chinese interference in local conditions can be maintained.

However, non-intervention does not mean that China is doing nothing. China has significant economic and security cooperation with countries around the world. It finances and trains military forces for institutions such as the African Union. China's relations with African countries may provide a model for future relations between China and the Middle East, especially in the area of growing security relations.

6. China's Contribution to Overcoming the Pandemic and Recovering from the Economic Recession Caused by the Restrictions in the Middle East

China has made a major contribution to overcoming the coronavirus crisis in the Middle East (a process that has not yet been completed), but before this is explained in detail, it is worth reviewing the devastation COVID-19 has done to the countries we are examining.

In the first months of the pandemic, the Middle East quickly became the second most affected region in the world after China (Chaziza, 2020a: 5-6), and there were confirmed cases in all Middle Eastern countries. The vulnerable population, especially the poor of them, have suffered even more from the situation, as they have low access to health care and have fewer savings. As a result, not only has there been a health crisis, but also a social and financial crisis.

The vast majority of the countries in the region have closed schools and universities, postponed football matches, canceled worldwide cultural and sporting events (such as the Qatar Grand Prix), and suspended all commercial flights. In addition, bars and cafes could not be opened, community prayers and traditional cultural events were canceled, and religious sites were closed (Chaziza, 2020a: 5-6).

Due to its geographical location and the central importance of the Eurasian trade networks, various infectious diseases have spread frequently and at a rapid pace in the Middle East. The COVID-19 pandemic is not the first coronavirus epidemic to affect this region. The first was the so-called MERS virus, which first appeared in Saudi Arabia in 2012 and has since spread to several other countries in the Arabian Peninsula.

But what is the reason why the Middle East is so exposed to various viruses and their rapid spread? The answer can be found in the cultural customs of Islamic countries, as mass migration of people is common in these places, where it is not usual for them to make pilgrimages from one country to another. This can happen for religious reasons, when sacred places belonging to Islam and its various denominations are visited and often hundreds of thousands or even millions of people are in a relatively narrow area. Habits like these strongly favor the spread of various pathogens and viruses. Of course, not only for religious reasons, but also for economic and security reasons, the mass migration of people

began. It is enough to think of situations of instability caused by various wars or terrorist organizations, which make a significant contribution to migration both domestically and abroad.

Governments in the Middle East are trying to curb COVID-19 with measures that limit social contact and human relations as much as possible. As in other parts of the world, the main fear is an increase in severe cases to a level that will make local health systems inoperable. It can be said that the measures work in some countries, but the health care systems of poorer countries without raw materials are much more affected by the pandemic than the richer Arab states. Not to mention that recovering from the COVID-19 recession has already taken much longer and it takes a sacrifice. This is why we can differentiate between raw material-rich and less resource-rich Middle Eastern countries in terms of dealing the negative effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

As mentioned, various countries in the Middle East, including the rich oil states of the Persian Gulf, have begun to take strict measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus. These countries can rely on their advanced health systems, which are effective not only in the region but also globally and are freely and easily accessible to all citizens. As a result, they are likely to be able to manage COVID-19 from a health perspective in the long term, given the measures taken to limit the severe social contact during the crisis. Nevertheless, these countries also continue to have a high risk of infection among communities of foreign workers, many of whom have self-assertion problems and have difficulty accessing health care, and living in conditions where social distance is not even possible.

However, despite the advanced supply system, the coronavirus epidemic is severely affecting one of the most important industries in the Middle East, the oil sector. Many countries in the region rely heavily on oil and gas revenues, so declining prices for oil-related products are

expected to be the most significant economic channel through which the effects of the pandemic can be felt strongly. However, it should not be overlooked that the depletion of foreign exchange reserves in recent years and uncertainty about future oil prices have forced resource-rich Arab states to restrain their economic policies, which has been accompanied by rationalization and cost-cutting measures. Gulf states are increasingly seeking to avoid their deep dependence on oil revenues through rationalization, diversification of revenue sources, and acceptance of the principles of the modern economy (Chaziza, 2020a: 10).

Another serious problem caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is the decline in travel and tourism, which threatens the countries of the Middle East in several ways. The tourism sector has provided a large slice of government revenue, and as the Gulf region is a major transit hub for passengers from Europe to Asia, canceled or restricted flights have severe local impacts. Although the United Arab Emirates, including Dubai, has announced a slow pace, but the process of economic consolidation has begun. Dubai seems to be starting to find itself, helped by a drastic easing of travel restrictions, as well as the fact that the emirate owns one of the busiest airports in the world. In addition, it is not negligible that the United Arab Emirates is leading one of the fastest vaccination programs in the world. However, not all countries are as fortunate as the Emirates. States living on tourism, such as Egypt, may have experienced severe revenue losses due to its downturn following the pandemic, but Saudi Arabia has also been hit hard by religious tourism, while Turkey has also been hit hard by the decline in general tourism.

Shortly after China was able to curb the COVID-19 pandemic within its borders, its central and local governments responded effectively to the needs of Middle Eastern countries by sending

significant medical care and personnel to the region. Chinese government agencies, companies and individuals have also facilitated the transfer of health care and scientific knowledge in various forms. Gulf governments have valued China's foreign aid. Unlike the United States, China functions as a reliable and generous partner in the region.

The time since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has shown that ties between China and the Middle East have become even closer. We examine this statement from the perspective of health cooperation, which, of course, also has an impact on economic relations. China has provided significant assistance to various countries in the Middle East. This assistance also included the provision of medical equipment, virologists and human resources (doctors, nurses), as well as the transport and donation of large quantities of the vaccines they manufacture.

An example of the latter statement is that in the spring of this year, China provided 90,000 doses of coronavirus vaccine (Sinopharm) to Lebanon. The Chinese authorities sent the vaccine as a gift to the Lebanese government and army. The Lebanese Minister of Health, Dr. Hamad Hassan, expressed his country's gratitude and appreciation for China for donating Lebanon with this large consignment of vaccines. He said this generous donation would allow them to counter the pandemic that infects many people and cause many deaths. Moreover, he emphasised that the Sinopharm vaccine is safe and proven to be effective in fighting the coronavirus, adding that the vaccine was developed a product of great Chinese medicine (*Yawm7*, 6th April 2021).

However, Lebanon was not the only country to which China sent a larger consignment of vaccines or help professionals. China was the first to send a team of experts to Iraq following the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic and provide the country with equipment and vaccines. Not to mention the fact that they helped to build a DNA

laboratory. China has repeatedly stated in recent times that it is ready to provide all assistance to Iraq in the fight against the epidemic (*The People's Daily Arabic*, 15th March 2021). During the pandemic, China also shipped medical supplies to Egypt, which included medical masks, protective equipment, gloves, medical instruments such as temperature and pressure measuring devices. Egyptian Health Minister Dr. Hala Zayed thanked China for its continued support during the COVID-19 epidemic. The Minister said: "Thank you to the People's Republic of China, the political leadership, the government and the people for their continued and unlimited support to Egypt during the coronavirus pandemic." She added that China supports Egyptian doctors and also helps with the vaccine developed by Sinopharm (*The People's Daily Arabic*, 9th April 2021).

7. Conclusion

The study makes it clear that the Gulf countries are important partners for China and play a significant role in the successful implementation of the BRI, thanks to their geostrategic location, significant energy reserves and quick and stable regional economic growth, supported by consumer goods expansion and the rapid growth of the commodity market. It is clear that China could be the main supplier to these markets as well as the main purchaser of various energy sources.

However, it should not be concluded from all this that the Middle Eastern countries described in this study will only and exclusively cooperate with China in the future. These states have an extensive network of contacts and partnerships, but it is true that the BRI is a long-term project of great importance for all parties, which can help the Middle Eastern countries to diversify their economies and clearly fit into the short- and long-term visions of the target countries.

It is important to mention that China's health assistance to the countries of the Middle East is closely linked to the possible rapid recovery of the economies of the various Arab countries, because if a country is past the global health crisis as soon as possible, the faster it can restart its own economy.

For China, the Middle East is already an area of strategic importance today, while politicians in Arab countries as well as Iran, Turkey and Israel have recognized the possibility that it is worth looking to the East if they want to advance their long-term interests.

If we want to simplify the relationship between China and the Middle East, we can say that it is a fruitful connection for both parties, as China has extremely important trade routes and channels in this region and covers part of its energy supply from this area, while the BRI makes a significant contribution to the long-term and continuous development of the countries of the Middle East. This is also indicated by the fact that Middle Eastern governments generally welcome the partnership with Beijing because they do not see them as another representative of the imperialist forces of previous centuries, but as equal business partners.

Over the past ten years, Beijing has gradually built a multidimensional global partnership network with certain Arab countries, as well as Turkey, Iran and Israel, and the cooperation between China and these countries will definitely contribute to the fading of the US-centric world order and pave the way for the emergence of a power structure with a Eurasian center.

Notes

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1. The Chinese Government adopted the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – originally translated as One Belt One Road (OBOR) – in 2013.
2. More about this can be read in the next section (4.2.)

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