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## CHINA IN THE MENA REGION

*ABSTRACT: With China's economy and influence being on the rise, the global status quo is changing. Overcoming past colonialist exploitation, China itself is becoming a colonialist state, as it is more and more apparent in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region. As the United States and other countries lose ground, Chinese investors gain a firm position. China's new One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, the modern resurgence of the Silk Road, aims to expand China's overall influence over Eurasia, Oceania, and Africa, replacing the US economically. However, China's intent is solely economic and relies on stability that is ensured by US troops and UN peacekeepers. The MENA region in particular – consisting of Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, State of Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen – is of great importance to China, as it holds the world's largest oil deposit, and is mostly still underdeveloped, giving way to lucrative investment opportunities for China.*

*As China's presence and influence in the MENA region is increasing, so does the importance of communication: More and more Chinese learn Arabic and vice versa, and more and more universities offer place for foreign students. Furthermore, attitude and openness towards the Chinese has also started to improve.*

*Although current Chinese interests remain within the boundaries of economy, further increased presence in the field of peacekeeping and the fight against terrorism in the future is possible, as the stability China's economic interests rely on are becoming more and more uncertain, one reason being the Chinese domestic economy itself.*

*KEYWORDS: China, MENA, OBOR, One China policy, Western Sahara, strategic resources, effects on world economy, peacekeeping, soft power.*

## HISTORICAL RETROSPECT

The first noteworthy and perhaps the best known trade network, the Silk Road – including both seaborne and overland trade routes – between the Han dynasty (207 BC – 220 AD) China and the Roman Empire, including parts of the Middle East and Egypt, was established in approximately 115 BC, and its importance lasted around the 1450s when safer sea routes were discovered.

Before the 1980's, the presence of the People's Republic of China in the Middle East and Africa was nowhere near that of today. During the Cold War, China was mostly passive towards the Middle East. It was viewed as problematic and not worth the effort, moreover, China did not have the experience necessary to deal with the Middle East to the extent it had for East Asia or the US.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Medeiros, E. S. *China's International Behavior: Activism, Opportunism, and Diversification*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009. 160–161. [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND\\_MG850.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG850.pdf), Accessed on 24 March 2017.

The People's Republic of China's normalisation of diplomatic relations with the Middle East and North Africa started in 1956 with Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, followed by Algeria, Iraq, and Morocco in 1958, Tunisia in 1964, Iran, Kuwait, and Lebanon in 1971, Jordan in 1977, Libya and Oman in 1978, the United Arab Emirates in 1984, Qatar in 1988, Bahrain in 1989, Saudi Arabia in 1990, and Israel in 1992.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>

Today, China's three strategic partners in the Middle East are Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Egypt was the first Middle Eastern country to recognise it, and for decades, Beijing maintained the strongest ties with Cairo in the Middle East – up until the Iraqi-Iranian war in the 1980's, when China became the major supplier of arms and military equipment to Iraq (and as a matter of fact, Iran as well); from then on, oil-rich Iraq replaced Egypt. After and as a consequence of the 1990-1991 Gulf War, Saudi Arabia took over the role of China's most important Middle Eastern partner. Being the last Arab country to recognise the communist government, Saudi Arabia, after 1957, and especially after the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution in China, immensely disliked the actions the People's Republic of China committed against its Muslim minority, the Uighurs in Xinjiang in particular. However, China signing an arms deal with Saudi Arabia turned the tide in Sino-Saudi relations, paving the road for full diplomatic relations in 1990.<sup>6</sup>

The Silk Road's modern reincarnation, the Chinese-proposed "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative, aims to resurrect and further expand it to connect the whole of Eurasia, East Africa (which can be later extended to the whole of Africa), and parts of Oceania both on land and sea.<sup>7</sup> This initiative proves the ever so steady increase of Chinese influence in the world, and the arguably plausible goal of replacing the US as a new economic superpower, described as "the Chinese dream of the Chinese nation's great revival".<sup>8</sup> This new ambition-imbued phrase is originated from Xi Jinping, and since he took the office of general secretary of the Communist Party of China, it quickly became the official embodiment of Chinese national identity.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Data for Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. – "African Member States". China Internet Information Center. <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/focac/183389.htm>, Accessed on 4 April 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Data for Yemen. – "China-Yemen relations". China.org.cn. 21 September 2007. <http://www.china.org.cn/english/video/225354.htm>, Accessed on 4 April 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Data for Iraq. – "Bilateral Relations between China and Iraq". Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Iraq. 11 April 2013. <http://iq.chineseembassy.org/eng/zygx/zygxgk/>, Accessed on 4 April 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Scobell, A. and Nader, A. *China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016. 4. [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1200/RR1229/RAND\\_RR1229.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1229/RAND_RR1229.pdf), Accessed on 24 March 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ma, H. and Chang, I-w. J. "China's Strategic Middle Eastern Languages". Middle East Research and Information Project. 2014. <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer270/chinas-strategic-middle-eastern-languages>, Accessed on 25 April 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Lin, H. "'Yidai yilu' zou ru mitu" ("One Belt, One Road' going astray"). <http://forum.hkej.com/print/130698>, Accessed on 27 March 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Lin, H. "'Yidai yilu' zou ru mitu".

<sup>9</sup> "Xi Jinping and the Chinese dream: The vision of China's new president should serve his people, not a nationalist state". *The Economist*. 4 May 2013. <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21577070-vision-chinas-new-president-should-serve-his-people-not-nationalist-state-xi-jinping>, Accessed on 27 March 2017.

## ECONOMIC INTERESTS

With an ever so high GDP of 11,007.72 billion USD in 2015, which is eight times more than that of Russia, three times more than that of the whole MENA region, and which vies with that of the whole Euro Area,<sup>10</sup> and an official defence budget of 151.5 billion USD in 2017,<sup>11</sup> which is more than that of the MENA countries combined (which was more than 135 billion USD in 2014<sup>12</sup>), China is in a favourable position to maintain and assert its interests in the MENA region with a relative ease, although Russia also tries to gain a foothold in Africa. If China succeeds in realising its One Belt, One Road initiative, it may gain direct access to 86.55% of the total world population, an incredibly vast market.

The reason behind Beijing's attention to this region is manifold. On the one hand, one could argue that the decreasing popularity and thus also decreasing influence of the US in the region implies that others may attempt to secure their "share" as well, hence China's and Russia's increasing presence; however, it is not at all due to mere fortune – China is actively imitating (or trying to imitate) US institutions with the intention of superseding them.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, it is not of China's direct interest that the US withdrew from the region totally, as the US maintains relative order and stability in most of the MENA region, helping business and exempting China to a certain extent from this task. On a further note, the MENA region also serves as the gateway towards Europe and the rest of Africa, making this particular region geopolitically exceptionally essential for China's One Belt, One Road project.

Even more so when considering the huge oil and other resource deposits.<sup>14</sup> The MENA region – being rich in resources and still mostly underdeveloped – provides perfect ground for the more developed countries and their interests. In 2004, Chinese state-owned firm Sinopec reached an agreement that granted them a concession for both exploring and producing natural gas in the Empty Quarter – the largest contiguous desert as well as one of, if not the, most oil-rich site in the world –, from which process US firms were particularly excluded.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of nuclear energy, after China was contracted to build two nuclear power plants in Iran – whose greatest investor, trade partner, and buyer of oil is China, largely due to the sanctions imposed against it<sup>16</sup> –, Russia is working towards taking over from China the role of the provider of nuclear energy in the MENA region: agreements on the building

<sup>10</sup> "China GDP". Trading Economics. 2015. <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/china/gdp>, Accessed on 21 March 2017.

<sup>11</sup> "What does China really spend on its military?". Center for Strategic & International Studies. 2017. <http://chinapower.csis.org/military-spending/>, Accessed on 21 March 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Abbas, T. et al. "Middle East & North Africa Regional Results". Transparency International Defence & Security. 2015. <https://government.defenceindex.org/downloads/docs/GI-MENA-Regional-Results-web.pdf> (p.2), Accessed on 31 March 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Heilmann, S. et al. "China's Shadow Foreign Policy: Parallel Structures Challenge the Established International Order". Mercator Institute for China Studies. 18 October 2014. [http://blog.merics.org/fileadmin/templates/download/china-monitor/China\\_Monitor\\_No\\_18\\_en.pdf](http://blog.merics.org/fileadmin/templates/download/china-monitor/China_Monitor_No_18_en.pdf), Accessed on 5 May 2017.

<sup>14</sup> "Mapping Africa's natural resources". Al Jazeera. 28 October 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/10/mapping-africa-natural-resources-161020075811145.html>, Accessed on 24 March 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Ma and Chang. "China's Strategic Middle Eastern Languages".

<sup>16</sup> Champion, M. "Iran Is Stuck With China to Finance Its Oil Dreams". Bloomberg. 12 October 2016. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-10-12/tired-of-china-s-grip-iran-confronts-a-harsh-oil-market-reality>, Accessed on 1 June 2017.

of nuclear power plants in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey by Russia were reached as of March 2017.<sup>17</sup>

	MENA Countries Sorted by Sum of			
	Import from China		Export to China	
	Top 3 Product	Value (USD)	Top 3 Product	Value (USD)
United Arab Emirates (2014)	Electrical machinery	18,233,019	Vehicles	1,236,703
	Machinery	10,118,133	Plastics	742,547
	Clothes	1,292,663	Machinery	187,664
Saudi Arabia	Electrical machinery	6,034,645	Organic chemicals	3,810,312
	Machinery	4,883,803	Plastics	1,359,389
	Clothes	1,235,896	Vehicles	149,983
Oman (2016)	Machinery	269,499	Oil	10,143,419
	Electrical machinery	195,663	Organic chemicals	403,660
	Articles of iron and steel	148,440	Aluminium	35,360
Iraq (2014)	Articles of iron and steel	6,077,522	no data	
	Railway locomotives	915,563		
	Machinery	692,164		
Qatar	Machinery	956,021	Oil	4,380,982
	Electrical machinery	802,785	Plastics	503,440
	Vehicles	213,885	Vehicles	140,273
Algeria	Electrical machinery	2,049,165	Oil	552,365
	Machinery	1,935,816	Cork	1,955
	Vehicles	879,926	Raw hides and leather	1,938
Israel	Electrical machinery	886,177	Electrical machinery	1,748,293
	Machinery	626,364	Optical apparatus	417,640
	Organic chemicals	437,041	Fertilisers	346,438
Egypt	Electrical machinery	2,068,597	Oil	278,082
	Machinery	1,245,143	Stone, cement	56,605
	Clothes	777,004	Salt, sulphur, lime	19,258
Kuwait (2016)	Electrical machinery	1,320,907	Organic chemicals	251,677
	Machinery	798,191	Plastics	196,244
	Articles of iron and steel	523,713	Vehicles	32,286

<sup>17</sup> "Emerging Nuclear Energy Countries". World Nuclear Association. March 2017. <http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/others/emerging-nuclear-energy-countries.aspx>, Accessed on 25 April 2017.

	MENA Countries Sorted by Sum of			
	Import from China		Export to China	
	Top 3 Product	Value (USD)	Top 3 Product	Value (USD)
Morocco	Electrical machinery	654,206	Ores	108,563
	Machinery	507,102	Copper	52,087
	Coffee, tea, spices	196,172	Fertilisers	15,833
Jordan	Electrical machinery	549,993	Fertilisers	205,824
	Machinery	360,241	Clothes	2,491
	Articles of iron and steel	214,373	Machinery	1,976
Lebanon (2014)	Articles of iron and steel	519,210	Copper	6,318
	Machinery	334,248	Aluminium	2,561
	Electrical machinery	328,407	Plastics	1,845
Tunisia	Electrical machinery	644,528	Plastics	10,977
	Machinery	314,907	Electrical machinery	3,771
	Vehicles	70,930	Machinery	2,410
Bahrain	Electrical machinery	372,585	Organic chemicals	14,690
	Machinery	295,307	Vehicles	8,703
	Furniture	68,408	Machinery	7,064
Yemen	Electrical machinery	131,166	Machinery	2,349
	Machinery	67,574	Plastics	1,138
	Prep. of vegetables and fruits	55,359	Vegetables	1,012
State of Palestine	Electrical machinery	65,376	negligible*	
	Machinery	40,434		
	Ceramics	23,189		
Iran	no data since 2011			
Libya	no data since 2011			
Syria	no data since 2011			

\* State of Palestine's total export value as of 2015 reached a negligible amount of 1 USD in "soap" category. – "Trade Map". International Trade Centre. [http://www.trademap.org/\(X\(1\)S\(arr5ktfvmt1dg33fxwpw1za\)\)/tradestat/Bilateral\\_TS.aspx?nvpm=1|275||156||TOTAL||2|1|1|2|2|1|1|1|1](http://www.trademap.org/(X(1)S(arr5ktfvmt1dg33fxwpw1za))/tradestat/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1|275||156||TOTAL||2|1|1|2|2|1|1|1|1), Accessed on 12 April 2017.

1<sup>st</sup> figure – *All 19 MENA Countries' Top 3 Import and Export Products from/to China (data from 2015 except for where stated otherwise)*.<sup>18</sup>

As seen in the foregoing table, the MENA region is of quite significant economic importance for China. Tendencies show that the value of trade in the region is steadily increasing every year, pointing towards China's increasing influence in the region.

<sup>18</sup> "Trade Map". International Trade Centre. <http://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>, Accessed on 12 April 2017.

Similarly to the One Belt, One Road project, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – proposed by China in 2013 and launched in 2014 – has the objective of supporting the building of infrastructure in countries of the Asia-Pacific region. This initiative – as of 2016 – involves 35 regional, 17 non-regional, 7 prospective regional, and 11 prospective non-regional member states.<sup>19</sup> Both approaches aim at asserting Chinese interests, economic ones in particular, one directly and the other indirectly. This may seem self-contradictory, however, as the objective being stability in the region through economic investments inherently requires stability for the investments to be successful.<sup>20</sup>

A destabilised Middle East and North Africa is an economic loss for China. In contrast to Chinese efforts to secure islands and thus marine territory of strategic value near its coastline, it attempts to avoid conflicts between trade partner countries with as much care and foresight as it is politically possible, as opposed to many Western countries. Within the boundaries of this matter, political statements, official visits, investments, and even contribution to peacekeeping are considered. In the event of the economically harmful destabilisation of this region or an either-or situation, China might be forced to break its own policies and intervene directly.

As for tourism, following the events of the Arab Spring, the number of tourists decreased remarkably in the region. In Egypt, for example, tourism makes up a significant part of the Egyptian GDP – 9.2% in 2014, which declined over time to 7.2% in 2016,<sup>21</sup> following the Russian plane crash of 31<sup>st</sup> October 2015 in the Sinai Peninsula, after which the influx of Russian tourists to Egypt plummeted by 97.7% due to official suspension of Egyptian flights,<sup>22</sup> and overall tourism dropped to 68.4%, causing a loss of 3 billion USD to the sector.<sup>23</sup> This loss in European – because of current terror attacks – as well as Russian tourists now seems to be patched by the increase of Chinese tourists – in 2016, about 180,000 Chinese visited Egypt, a 55.8% increase from 2015.<sup>24</sup>

In the wake of the Arab Spring, which was unintentionally augmented by a massive drought and wheat shortage in China, thus doubling the prices of it, which eventually made the likelihood of protests, civil unrests, riots, military coup d'états, and civil wars increase in wheat-importing countries in the Middle East and North Africa,<sup>25</sup> it is increasingly important to see the correlations in the world and think accordingly. China is a country that

<sup>19</sup> “Members and Prospective Members of the Bank”. Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. 10 February 2017. <https://www.aiib.org/en/about-aiib/governance/members-of-bank/index.html>, Accessed on 10 April 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Su, A. “Let’s not talk politics’: China builds Middle East ties through business”. Al Jazeera America. 20 February 2016. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2016/2/20/china-middle-east-business-politics.html>, Accessed on 10 April 2017.

<sup>21</sup> “Egypt: Travel & Tourism Total Contribution to GDP”. Knoema. <https://knoema.com/atlas/Egypt/topics/Tourism/Travel-and-Tourism-Total-Contribution-to-GDP/Total-Contribution-to-GDP-percent-share>, Accessed on 15 May 2017.

<sup>22</sup> “Russia tu’alliq rihlatiha al-jawwia ila Misr” (“Russia suspends flights to Egypt”). Al Jazeera. 6 November 2015. [goo.gl/kmCdF7](http://goo.gl/kmCdF7), Accessed on 12 May 2017.

<sup>23</sup> “Russia tawjjah suf’at li-s-siaha al-misria... watudammir makasib ‘Misi’” (“Russia slaps Egyptian tourism... and the gains of Messi”). Araby21. 25 February 2017. [goo.gl/70xpJ9](http://goo.gl/70xpJ9), Accessed on 12 May 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Aleem, A. “Egypt hopes Chinese visitors can make up for Russian tourism decline”. Al-Monitor. 6 March 2017. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/egypt-tourism-decline-russia-china.html>, Accessed on 12 May 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Sternberg, T. “Chinese drought, bread and the Arab Spring”. *Applied Geography* 34. 2012. 519–524. [https://www.homeworkmarket.com/sites/default/files/qx/16/02/27/02/20160228203325sternberg\\_2014\\_chinese\\_drought\\_\\_bread\\_and\\_the\\_arab\\_spring\\_\\_1\\_.pdf](https://www.homeworkmarket.com/sites/default/files/qx/16/02/27/02/20160228203325sternberg_2014_chinese_drought__bread_and_the_arab_spring__1_.pdf), Accessed on 12 April 2017.

by itself, having more than one fifth of total world population, is able to affect the whole world in terms of economy.

	Import Value (USD, approx.)	Population	Import Value / Person (USD)
USA	2 307 950 000 000	321 773 631	7 172.59
China	1 681 950 000 000	1 376 048 943	1 222.30
Germany	1 050 020 000 000	80 688 545	13 013.25

2<sup>nd</sup> figure – Top 3 Importer Countries with Import Value, Population, and Import Value per Person (data from 2015).

As of 2015, the world's three biggest importers were the US with 2,307.95 billion USD, China with 1,681.95 billion USD, and Germany with 1,050.02 billion USD;<sup>26</sup> as a comparison, these countries have a population of 321,773,631 (US),<sup>27</sup> 1,376,048,943 (China),<sup>28</sup> and 80,688,545 (Germany).<sup>29</sup> This can be calculated into 7,172.59 USD per person in the US, 1,222.3 USD per person in China, and 13,013.25 USD per person in Germany. This chart implies the fragile nature of globalised world economy, as China by itself has its potential to cause famine, civil wars, and economic crises unintentionally, should China decide to increase its welfare or should another drought happen there. A sudden increase in import of something, and China may leave half the world in lack thereof, making a surge in prices, dearth, and discontent. An unexpected decrease in exports may force producers and exporters to China to go bankrupt.

As China is the world's largest pork importer with more than a quarter of global trade in 2017,<sup>30</sup> if, for instance, China repositioned its priorities and decreased the production of pork while also keeping its needs of it eventually increasing its import, it would cause perceptible difficulties in the world economy not only in the field of pork, but also in other areas, because when more pork is needed, more pigs must be bred, that requires more food for them, which leads to more fields being sown with food for pigs rather than for human consumption, eventually leading to increased grain prices, more people being unable to afford basic types of food, and possibly civil unrests. Furthermore, if – or rather when – China decides to exploit its potential to further increase welfare in the country by increasing wages – which would lead to China losing its role of being a low-wage economic powerhouse –, imports may eventually increase siphoning enormous amounts of products from other parts of the world, which would possibly lead to some sorts of effects mentioned above.

<sup>26</sup> "Leading import countries worldwide in 2015". Statista. 2015. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268184/leading-import-countries-worldwide/>, Accessed on 3 April 2017.

<sup>27</sup> "U.S. Population". Worldometers. <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/us-population/>, Accessed on 3 April 2017.

<sup>28</sup> "China Population". Worldometers. <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/china-population/>, Accessed on 3 April 2017.

<sup>29</sup> "Germany Population". Worldometers. <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/germany-population/>, Accessed on 3 April 2017.

<sup>30</sup> "Livestock and Poultry: World Markets and Trade". United States Department of Agriculture. April 2017. [https://apps.fas.usda.gov/psdonline/circulars/livestock\\_poultry.pdf](https://apps.fas.usda.gov/psdonline/circulars/livestock_poultry.pdf), Accessed on 3 April 2017.

## GEOPOLITICS

With the decline of American and Russian influences in the region, China has the opportunity and readiness to fill in the gap. This can be proven best by the above mentioned “Chinese dream” and the One Belt, One Road initiative, which is a challenger to the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, either of which has the US as their focal point.<sup>31</sup>

From all the areas of the One Belt, One Road project, however, the MENA region may be China’s greater focus in particular. By “obtaining” the area bit by bit through strategic investments, contribution to peacekeeping, and maintaining influence, China potentially aims to secure natural resources vital to the future of or not abundant in China.<sup>32</sup> As Africa is still politically and ethnically unstable – due to the negligent way borders were drawn – space for silent political and economic positioning is given.

Even though the involvement of US troops in the MENA region is good for Chinese business as it provides stability, China’s security and interests may be perceived as jeopardised in its periphery in the long run.<sup>33</sup> The MENA region, in terms of oil, for instance, is the most important region to China: as of 2014, Kuwait (3%), the United Arab Emirates (4%), Iran (9%), Iraq (9%), Oman (10%), and Saudi Arabia (16%) made up 51% of China’s total crude oil imports,<sup>34</sup> and China may not want to have the Middle Eastern valve closed. Because China’s current interests dictate peace seeking and maintenance in order to realise its mercantile prospects, an event of “protecting interests” through military means is highly unlikely.

The current Chinese way of asserting interests, as mentioned above, is not through military or physical might, but rather through economy and also culture. As Western culture – that of Europe and later the US – reached every corner of the world, so does China want to spread its own, hoping to take its turn in shaping the world to its “liking” and interests.

In the region of North Africa and the Middle East, there is plenty of economic extremes: Qatar, for instance, is the world’s wealthiest country in terms of GDP per capita, while Yemen ranks only 194th; Bahrain achieves the 18th place in the world in terms of economic freedom, whilst Iran is only the 171st; Jordan has 1 million barrels of proven oil reserves – Saudi Arabia possesses 265 billion barrels.<sup>35</sup> Economic extremes mean economic opportunities, which China aims to take advantage of and exploit fully. Underdeveloped countries mostly export resources while importing products; they require investment to develop, which is a benefit for the region in the short-to-mid run, while being a long-term benefit for the investor as well. Developing areas are also in need of further financial support as well as mixed trade of resources and products, and well-developed countries mainly require resources and export their products. China’s potential lies in the ability to fulfil the needs of all three types

<sup>31</sup> “Our bulldozers, our rules: China’s foreign policy could reshape a good part of the world economy”. The Economist. 2 June 2016. <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21701505-chinas-foreign-policy-could-reshape-good-part-world-economy-our-bulldozers-our-rules>, Accessed on 27 March 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Basov, V. “China is burning through its natural resources”. Mining.com. 26 April 2015. <http://www.mining.com/china-burning-natural-resources/>, Accessed on 16 May 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Scobell and Nader. “China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon”. 2.

<sup>34</sup> “Breakdown of China’s crude oil imports in 2014, by source country”. Statista. 2014. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/221765/chenese-oil-imports-by-country/>, Accessed 5 May 2017.

<sup>35</sup> “2017 Index of U.S. Military Strength: Middle East”. The Heritage Foundation. 2017. <http://index.heritage.org/military/2017/assessments/operating-environment/middle-east/>, Accessed on 10 April 2017.

of countries in the MENA region and is ready to dominate the North African and Middle Eastern markets.

## SOCIETY

Although the presence of Chinese capital may be beneficial for the MENA region's development, the modern technique of non-direct colonisation through economy might not be well received by the locals in the long run, as it is perceivable in South America and Africa – in 2011 in Zambia, for example, workers' unrest arose over low wages, bad treatment, and poor safety conditions.<sup>36</sup> In 2012, also in Zambia, a Chinese supervisor was killed and another seriously injured over a pay dispute.<sup>37</sup>

For mutual benefit, reciprocal acceptance of one another's culture is required – language learning is one way of achieving it. Due to new prospects in the MENA region, it is more and more promoted in China that students learn Arabic, as it has also been the case with South America and Spanish before, even though it will most likely not exceed the popularity of English, Japanese, Korean, French or German. Historically, the first language of the Middle East to be studied extensively in China was Arabic.<sup>38</sup> Today, the three strategic partners of China in the greater MENA region are Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey – it comes as no surprise, therefore, that the biggest Middle Eastern language programmes in China are Arabic, Persian, and Turkish.<sup>39</sup>

In 1978, 20 academic students from North Africa and 15 from the Middle East studied in China.<sup>40</sup> Since then, the number of Arab students studying in China has been increasing drastically: in 2012, this number exceeded 10,000, a 70% rise since 2010.<sup>41</sup> Saudi Arabia, for example, sponsored 1,500 students studying in Chinese universities,<sup>42</sup> while this number in 2009 was only 400.<sup>43</sup>

The One Belt, One Road initiative has established 500 Confucius Institutes – Chinese cultural institutes – in the world by 2017,<sup>44</sup> and aims to maintain a total number of 1,000 by 2020.<sup>45</sup> Established institutes in the MENA region – total of 15 – include one in Bahrain,

<sup>36</sup> Hotter, A. "Zambia's Sata Faces Test of Mining Mettle". The Wall Street Journal. 20 October 2011. <https://blogs.wsj.com/source/2011/10/20/zambia%e2%80%99s-sata-faces-test-of-mining-mettle/>, Accessed on 24 April 2017.

<sup>37</sup> "Zambian miners kill Chinese supervisor and injure another in pay dispute". The Guardian. 5 August 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/05/zambian-miners-kill-chinese-supervisor>, Accessed on 12 May 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Ma and Chang. "China's Strategic Middle Eastern Languages".

<sup>39</sup> Ma and Chang. "China's Strategic Middle Eastern Languages".

<sup>40</sup> Kanet, R. E. "Soviet Policy toward the Developing World: The Role of Economic Assistance and Trade". Strategic Studies Institute. 1980. [goo.gl/zeI9Ej](http://go.gli/zeI9Ej), Accessed on 18 April 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Du, Y. "Qunian alabo guojia zai Zhongguo liuxuesheng da yiwan duo ren" ("Last year's Arab students in China exceed ten thousand"). Science and Technology Daily. 16 September 2013. [http://digitalpaper.stdaily.com/http\\_www.kjrb.com/kjrb/html/2013-09/16/content\\_224422.htm?div=-1](http://digitalpaper.stdaily.com/http_www.kjrb.com/kjrb/html/2013-09/16/content_224422.htm?div=-1), Accessed on 28 April 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Olimat, M. S. *China and the Middle East: From Silk Road to Arab Spring*. London: Routledge, 2012. 145.

<sup>43</sup> "Alabo xuesheng lai Hua liuxue fangxingwei'ai" ("Arab students studying in China are on the rise"). Xinhuanet. 10 July 2009. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2009-07/10/content\\_11688205.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/society/2009-07/10/content_11688205.htm), Accessed on 28 April 2017.

<sup>44</sup> "About Confucius Institutes". Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban). [http://english.hanban.org/node\\_10971.htm](http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm), Accessed on 28 April 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Pan, L. "Confucius Institute: Promoting language, culture and friendliness". Xihuanet. 2 October 2006. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-10/02/content\\_5521722.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-10/02/content_5521722.htm), Accessed on 28 April 2017.

two in Egypt, two in Iran, two in Israel, two in Jordan, one in Lebanon, three in Morocco, and two in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>46</sup>

The teaching of Chinese language and culture in universities of the Middle East and North Africa is relatively new, but is present. For instance, in Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, the teaching of Chinese had been fully established by 2001, and the university also provides Islamic studies in Chinese, from which the first students to receive a degree graduated in 2006.<sup>47</sup>

Given China's westward ambitions and the relatively big Muslim population in the country, the Chinese government set as an objective to increase the number of speakers of Arabic in China, and as of 2005, the number of Chinese universities teaching Arabic reached 44. Furthermore, there are around 200 Islamic schools that teach Arabic, graduating 4,000 students a year, as well as 100,000 people studying the language in mosques.<sup>48</sup> However, China's Communist Party took a stance against religious extremism while also trying to "sinicise" its ethnic and religious minorities, largely affecting its Muslim minority, which effect is further increased by growing anti-Islam sentiment on the internet.<sup>49</sup>

A survey about China in the Arab world, conducted in 2015, shows that China is the new "preferred" superpower among Arabs, arguably because it is in their eyes what the United States was a century ago: one to send businessmen instead of viceroys as colonialist Europe did.<sup>50</sup> For the question "If there is only one superpower in the world, which country do you want it to be?", China was the most preferred country, achieving better results (40%) than Saudi Arabia, Germany, the United States, Russia, Britain, France, and other countries (combined 60%).<sup>51</sup> For another question, which reads "Ideally, if you could study in any of the following countries, where would you go?", China was also the most favoured destination – the same results were attained with another question concerning living there.<sup>52</sup> This shows that China, despite almost solely being an economic – and in the future, plausibly also a military – superpower on the rise, is also fully deemed as such culturally. Furthermore, whereas about 60% believed that China is a sincere friend of their country, 25% questioned the genuine nature of Sino-Arab relations, and no one denied it.<sup>53</sup>

It is no mere coincidence that China is gaining a firm position in the MENA region, as the autocatalytic nature of power, if, for instance, achieved through economy rather than

<sup>46</sup> "About Confucius Institutes".

<sup>47</sup> "At-ta'rif biqism al-lugha as-sinia" ("The introduction of the Chinese language department"). Al Azhar University. [http://www.azhar.edu.eg/bfac/lang\\_cairo/02\\_11\\_01.html](http://www.azhar.edu.eg/bfac/lang_cairo/02_11_01.html), Accessed on 2 May 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Al-Maliki, A. "44 jami'a sinia ta'allama tullabaha al-lugha al-'arabia" ("44 Chinese universities teach Arabic"). The New Arab. 5 January 2015. [goo.gl/Oo7aly](http://goo.gl/Oo7aly), Accessed on 2 May 2017.

<sup>49</sup> "China's Communist Party hardens rhetoric on Islam". Al Jazeera. 12 March 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/china-communist-party-hardens-rhetoric-islam-170312171857797.html>, Accessed on 1 June 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Alterman, J. B. "China's Soft Power in the Middle East". In McGiffert, C. (ed.), *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: competition and cooperation in the developing world, a report of CSIS smart power initiative*. Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2009. 70. [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/media/csis/pubs/090310\\_chinesesoftpower\\_\\_chap5.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/090310_chinesesoftpower__chap5.pdf), Accessed on 28 April 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Gao, S. "China's Soft Power in the Arab World through Higher Educational Exchange". Thesis. Wellesley College, 2015. 38–39. <http://repository.wellesley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1334&context=thesiscollec>, Accessed on 25 April 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Gao, S. "China's Soft Power in the Arab World through Higher Educational Exchange". 36–38.

<sup>53</sup> Gao, S. "China's Soft Power in the Arab World through Higher Educational Exchange". 39–40.

military, also affects a general affection towards the country in question, which reinforces cultural spread, which further reinforces the status of the country.

Nevertheless, students returning from abroad are often prone to being influenced or employed – often without the knowing of the person in question – as an agent by the foreign country. The survey detailed above also concludes that students returning from China gave a higher rating of China than before going there to study.<sup>54</sup> Confucius Institutes have also been subject of controversy, given their rapid expansion and the fact that teachers and funding are directed from China, and concerns quickly arose over ideological influence, industrial and military espionage,<sup>55</sup> surveillance of Chinese abroad, and undermining Taiwanese influence.<sup>56</sup>

## OFFICIAL STANDPOINTS

In order to maintain and protect Chinese investments and business in the MENA region, China's government is forced to address terrorism as a security issue and take part in global peacekeeping. Currently, China is the second largest supporter of UN peacekeeping in terms of financial contribution (10.29% in 2016),<sup>57</sup> and it is the largest contributor with 8,000 troops to the UN peacekeeping standby force, one fifth of the total of 40,000 peacekeepers sent by 50 nations (as of 2015), while also pledging 100 million USD to the standby force of the African Union as well as 1 billion USD to the establishment of the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund.<sup>58</sup> China deploys hard-to-source yet essential enabler troops – namely medical teams, engineers, and logisticians, whose cost to train and maintain is higher, and who are usually hard to find in developing countries – that, along with the scarcity of potential peacekeeping troops – according to some estimates, only around 210,000 troops –, makes China's contribution to peacekeeping vital and indispensable.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, China's foreign policies suggest that it tries to avoid intervening in conflicts and rather remain passive as much as possible. As non-interventionist as China can be, its vision on terrorism differs from the radical American “war on terror”, yet it does not necessarily affect its readiness to lend military aid, provided the country in question requests it. However, countries like Iraq have openly asked for China's aid, yet they were given only promises of personnel training and other sorts of support.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Gao, S. “China's Soft Power in the Arab World through Higher Educational Exchange”. 31–32.

<sup>55</sup> Pierrebouurg, F. de and Juneau-Katsuya, M. *Nest of Spies: The Startling Truth About Foreign Agents At Work Within Canada's Borders*. Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2010. 160–162.

<sup>56</sup> Starr, D. “Chinese Language Education in Europe: the Confucius Institutes”. *European Journal of Education* 44/1. 2009. 65–82. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2008.01371.x/full>, Accessed 28 April 2017.

<sup>57</sup> “Financing peacekeeping”. United Nations. <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/operations/financing.shtml>, Accessed on 31 March 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Fung, C. J. “China's Troop Contributions to U.N. Peacekeeping”. United States Institute of Peace. 26 July 2016. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/07/chinas-troop-contributions-un-peacekeeping>, Accessed on 28 March 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Fung, C. J.: “China's Troop Contributions to U.N. Peacekeeping”.

<sup>60</sup> Tiezzi, S. “What Is China's Plan for Fighting Global Terrorism?”. *The Diplomat*. 27 November 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/what-is-chinas-plan-for-fighting-global-terrorism/>, Accessed on 28 March 2017.

As it does not recognise the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic as a sovereign state – being de facto occupied by Morocco –, nor does it support the concept of self-determination,<sup>61</sup> in order to appear consistent with its own policies, Beijing might not lend direct political or military support to the Sahrawi cause of independence either, as a Chinese-supported independent Western Sahara may jeopardise the “One China policy” and may lead to the legitimisation and recognition of Taiwan – and perhaps also Tibet – as a sovereign state, which China has been reluctant to do since the end of the Chinese civil war.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, the Sino-Algerian relations in comparison overshadow Morocco’s goals of gaining China’s support for the Western Saharan topic: As a supporter of Western Saharan independence, Algeria’s trade relations with China exceed that of Morocco more than three times in value.<sup>63</sup>

In regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even though China recognised Israel, it has unequivocally supported the Palestinian cause ever since the end of the Chinese Civil War. This support, however, decreased in intensity when new leadership succeeded in the Chinese Communist Party in 1978,<sup>64</sup> after which militant groups were no longer supported by China and dialogue between the two sides was encouraged. Following the Palestinian declaration of independence, China recognised Palestine in 1988<sup>65</sup> and established full diplomatic relations with it afterwards. Further taking of sides in the conflict is implausible due to Beijing’s current non-interventionist foreign policy.

The MENA region’s situation, taking into account the decrease of regional influence of the US, illuminates two possible future courses: Sino-Russian co-operation and Sino-Russian competition. One of the examples of the former includes the commitment of troops to UN peacekeeping.

	Total Commitment to Peacekeeping Missions with		
	Police	Military Personnel	Military Experts
USA	28	32	8
Russia	40	5	54
China	184	2,348	33

3rd figure – *Total US, Russian, and Chinese Contribution of Police, Military Personnel, and Military Experts to UN Peacekeeping Missions (as of 28th February 2017)*.<sup>66</sup>

As displayed in the table, the US committed 32 troops, 28 police, and 8 military experts as opposed to Russia’s contribution of 5 troops, 40 police, and 54 military experts, while

<sup>61</sup> Bennis, S. “The Morocco-China partnership and its impact on Western Sahara”. *The New Arab*. 19 May 2016. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2016/5/19/the-morocco-china-partnership-and-its-impact-on-western-sahara>, Accessed on 28 March 2017.

<sup>62</sup> The leaders and around two million supporters of the anti-communist nationalist Kuomintang – ruling party of the Republic of China –, fleeing from the lost civil war, fled to the island of Taiwan in 1949, and ever since then, the Republic of China has existed as a de facto sovereign state in Taiwan.

<sup>63</sup> Bennis. “The Morocco-China partnership and its impact on Western Sahara”.

<sup>64</sup> “China-Palestine relations; China-Israel relations”. *On the Road to Jerusalem*. <https://ontheroadtojerusalem.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/china-palestine-and-china-israc3a8l-relations4.pdf>, Accessed on 4 April 2017.

<sup>65</sup> “China-Palestine relations; China-Israel relations”.

<sup>66</sup> “Troop and police contributors”. United Nations. 28 February 2017. <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/contributors.shtml>, Accessed on 10 April 2017.

China's commitment was 2,348 troops, 184 police, and 33 military experts in total. Their distribution to UN peacekeeping missions in the MENA region are as follows:

	Contribution to UN Peacekeeping Missions from		
	USA	Russia	China
Western Sahara (MINURSO)	--	16 experts	12 experts
Afghanistan (UNAMA)	--	--	1 policeman
Iraq (UNAMI)	--	--	--
Israel–Syria (UNDOF)	--	--	--
Israel—Lebanon (UNIFIL)	--	--	418 personnel
Middle East (UNTSO)	2 experts	4 experts	4 experts

4<sup>th</sup> figure – US, Russian, and Chinese Contribution per UN Peacekeeping Mission in the Middle East and North Africa (as of 28th February 2017).<sup>67</sup>

The table seen above displays all three country's contribution per UN peacekeeping mission. Firstly, it shows that China is present in the Middle East as well as North Africa not only economically, but also with peacekeeping, contributing to the regional stability needed for Chinese investments to succeed. Secondly, it is also apparent that the US involvement in peacekeeping in the MENA region is somewhat lacking compared to the other two countries, however, its logistical and technical contribution as well as its non-UN military involvement, both in military personnel and equipment – carriers, fighter jets, etc. –, are still significant (all numbers are approximated<sup>68</sup>):

- 15,000 personnel in Kuwait,
- 10,000 of personnel in Qatar,<sup>69</sup>
- 7,000 personnel in Bahrain,
- 5,000 personnel in the United Arab Emirates,
- 5,000 personnel in Iraq (officially below the cap of 3,870),<sup>70</sup>
- 1,500 personnel in Jordan,
- 400 personnel in Saudi Arabia,<sup>71</sup>
- 200 personnel in Oman.

Another example is the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO), an international organisation founded in January 1958 in Cairo, which incorporates 91 member states that are among others China, Russia, and the majority of the MENA region – except for Bahrain, Iran, Israel, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, State of Palestine, and the United Arab

<sup>67</sup> "UN Mission's Contributions by Country". United Nations. 28 February 2017. [http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2017/feb17\\_5.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2017/feb17_5.pdf), Accessed on 10 April 2017.

<sup>68</sup> "2017 Index of U.S. Military Strength: Middle East".

<sup>69</sup> "US Military Presence in Qatar. All What You Need to Know About 'Al Udeid' Airbase". South Front. 31 March 2016. <https://southfront.org/us-military-presence-in-qatar-al-udeid-airbase/>, Accessed on 24 April 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Ryan, M. "The U.S. military has a lot more people in Iraq than it has been saying". The Washington Post. 21 March 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/03/21/the-u-s-military-has-a-lot-more-people-in-iraq-than-it-has-been-saying/?utm\\_term=.5f6f3e8f6b45](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/03/21/the-u-s-military-has-a-lot-more-people-in-iraq-than-it-has-been-saying/?utm_term=.5f6f3e8f6b45), Accessed on 10 April 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Burkeman, O. "America signals withdrawal of troops from Saudi Arabia". The Guardian. 30 April 2003. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/apr/30/usa.iraq>, Accessed on 24 April 2017.

Emirates.<sup>72</sup> This initiative promulgates national liberation and solidarity in Africa and Asia as well as human rights. Its last congress took place in 20th October 2016 in Rabat, Morocco under the slogan “together against terrorism”.<sup>73</sup> This joint platform is an opportunity of Sino-Russian co-operation as well as a means of possible confidence-building in terms of future Africa policies between the two countries. Beijing also seems to support Russia in Syria, as it was obvious during the vote of the Russian-proposed draft resolution in the United Nations Security Council.<sup>74</sup> For an example of the course of competition in the MENA region is, apart from their vying for economic dominance in each country separately, China’s One Belt, One Road initiative. This equivocal situation is present possibly because China is not interested in committing its military to fighting in the Middle East. What it tries to do instead is let other countries secure the area while reaping the economic benefits losing as little resources as possible.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is of global interest that China maintains its great power status and global engagement in order to keep world balance in terms of both security and economic stability. In the instance of it fully joining the global effort of fighting terrorism, China’s potential contribution may well outweigh any other country’s endeavour, allowing it to take the lead in global peacekeeping and security, which is somewhat unlikely considering Beijing’s passive, non-interventionist approach of dealing with foreign affairs and conflicts to fully protect its economic interests. This also forecasts the improbability of standing for one side in conflicts arising between two or more nations, as with, among others, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As for independence struggles, for instance in Western Sahara, China evidently does not support the idea of self-determination, as it would raise questions about its own One China policy.

Imitating US institutions, China may be able to complete its planned One Belt, One Road initiative, and fully utilise it to supersede the “former” superpower and take over its sphere of influence, gaining access to 86.55% of the total population as a market. Being an enormous country both in terms of cultivable land and population, China may be – and has already been, in the case of the Arab Spring – able to both directly and indirectly affect the world’s economy resulting in economic instability, thereby being able to indirectly cause political instability in the form of protests, unrests, civil wars, military coup d’états, etc., merely through changes in domestic economic policies, unforeseeable droughts, and policies concerning Chinese welfare.

For China the Middle Eastern and North African region is of particular interest for its immense oil reserves, economic extremes, relatively underdeveloped states, and for the geographical fact that it connects Asia with Europe and Africa.

China’s soft power, particularly through cultural institutes and the fact that more and more Middle Eastern and North African universities teach Chinese, as well as economic

<sup>72</sup> “Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Organization”. Union of International Associations. <https://www.uia.org/s/or/en/1100062827>, Accessed on 7 April 2017.

<sup>73</sup> “Report on the Activities of the Permanent Secretariat of the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization in 2016”. Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Organization. 2016. [http://www.aapsorg.org/images/issue/reports/ReportEn\\_2016.pdf](http://www.aapsorg.org/images/issue/reports/ReportEn_2016.pdf), Accessed on 7 April 2017.

<sup>74</sup> “7785<sup>th</sup> meeting”. United Nations Security Council. 8 October 2016. 12. [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_pv\\_7785.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_7785.pdf), Accessed on 7 April 2017.

achievements provide China with an increasing number of supporters in the MENA region. Surveys show that the opinion about China is favourable, the majority of people deem China to be the next or already the current superpower, and more and more Arab students want to go to study in China.

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