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Executive Summary

In recent years, and even more so in recent months, China has been accelerating a regional process in the Middle East designed to convert its economic influence into political and possibly military power. There are indications that Beijing is engaged in a process designed to leverage its economic-political strengths to establish a certain military presence in the region, as part of a systematic plan to challenge the United States' position as the regional alliance system's preeminent superpower.

China is accomplishing all of this without having to assume the American military burden in the region, and with few actual risks.

The fact that the United States has attained energy independence (though it is not immune to the global energy market influence) and is no longer dependent on Middle Eastern oil imports, whereas China is heavily reliant on such imports, is also a factor in China's involvement in the region. In the meantime, Iran has established an alternative economy that allows it to export energy to China while circumventing sanctions against it.

Sunni Arab countries' fear of America's lack of commitment to their security and the US-led regional agenda drives them into Chinese arms as part of their desire for a de-escalation mechanism with Iran, mediated by China.

China's expanding presence in the Middle East poses a current and especially future challenge to America's position as a dominating force in the region.

The purpose of the report is to present and analyze the regional situation and China's strategy in the Middle East. The report explores the process of establishing Chinese influence in a number of case studies: Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and finally Israel. The report also examines American responses to Chinese activity in the region.

In terms of political influence in the region, China is posing a growing challenge to the United States, particularly among pragmatic Sunni-Arab nations, which were previously firmly in the pro-American camp.

These countries (especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), driven by tensions between them and Washington, have increased cooperation with China. These tensions reflect their growing concern about the American commitment to their security.

The Wall Street Journal recently reported (August 25, 2023) that Saudi Arabia is exploring a Chinese proposal to construct a nuclear power plant. This could be a move to put pressure on the US to adhere to Saudi proposals for receiving, from the US, a civilian nuclear program, as part of ongoing US – Saudi - Israeli negotiations aimed at establishing a three-way deal that would include normalization between Riyadh and Jerusalem. Saudi Arabia's objective is to build a complete nuclear fuel cycle in collaboration with the US, but if the US refuses, the Saudis will look to China for at least receiving nuclear power plants. While that's not the same thing as a full fuel cycle, it still acts as a leverage against the US.

Cooperation with China serves as leverage against the US, encouraging Washington to invest more in the regional security architecture that it leads. If the US does not act, the Chinese option allows Sunni states to hedge risks, while enhancing the status of China as a rising alternative force.

These trends have significant consequences for Israel:

At the strategic-regional level, Israel's ability to project force and deterrence is heavily influenced by America's position in the region. As the standing of the United States rises or declines, so will the status of Washington's closest ally in the region, Israel.

In recent months, we have seen an increase in the number of statements made by senior officials and leaders of the radical Shi'ite axis on this subject.

In April 2023, for example, an IRGC spokesperson stated that "the United States is not in a position in the region to support Israel."ⁱ

Furthermore, Israel will need to develop an updated policy that outlines courses of action and responses to China's moves in the region. Because the American alliance is so critical for Israel's military capabilities and geopolitical position, any Israeli move toward China should be conducted with the goal of preserving the alliance with the US in mind as the primary and leading consideration, before any other.

This is founded on the understanding that, in the new era of superpower competition, Israel does not have the ability to adopt a stance of sitting on the fence. The price Israel would pay for such a position is prohibitively expensive. Israel must explicitly express its support for the US-led alliance of Western democracies.

As such, Israel has limited options for maintaining a dialogue channel and commercial connections with China. At the same time, Israel has an excellent opportunity to expand military cooperation with CENTCOM (US Army Central Command), which it joined in 2021, while also aiming to "re-recruit" pragmatic Arab governments to the pro-American camp and assist the US in returning them to their traditional course.

A Regional Situation Description and the Chinese Strategy

Sunni Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, lost an alarming degree of faith in America's presence and commitment to their security in the face of Iranian-Shiite Axis threats.ⁱⁱ As part of the global conflict between the superpowers, China, which recognizes the fissures in the American alliance structure, is systematically seeking to unbind these relations and challenge the United States for the ability to influence the regional order, as part of the global competition between the superpowers.

China's influence and economic presence in the Middle East have developed and enhanced throughout the years.

Oil imports are a significant component of Chinese economic and infrastructure activity in the region. As of May 2023, Saudi Arabia is regarded as the second largest supplier of oil to China (after Russia), with the possibility for additional expansion in this trade. Iran, Iraq, and Oman are next on the list. The UAE is ranked sixth. **In sum, more than half of China's imported oil in 2022 came from Middle Eastern countries.**



In the photo: Chinese President Xi visiting Saudi Arabia, December 2022

In 2021, Saudi Arabia exported oil to China totaling about \$57 billion, and imported Chinese goods totaling about \$3.30 billion.ⁱⁱⁱ In comparison, that year Saudi Arabia supplied about \$2 billion of oil to the U.S. In 2022, Saudi Arabia exported almost \$65 billion of oil to China.

Iran, Saudi Arabia's key regional adversary, is the third-largest oil exporter to China, trailing only Saudi Arabia and Russia.^{iv} Iraq is also a key supplier of oil to China, exporting \$39 billion in oil in 2022. After the United States, China is the world's second-largest consumer of oil.

CHINESE OIL IMPORTS FROM SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAQ IN 2022



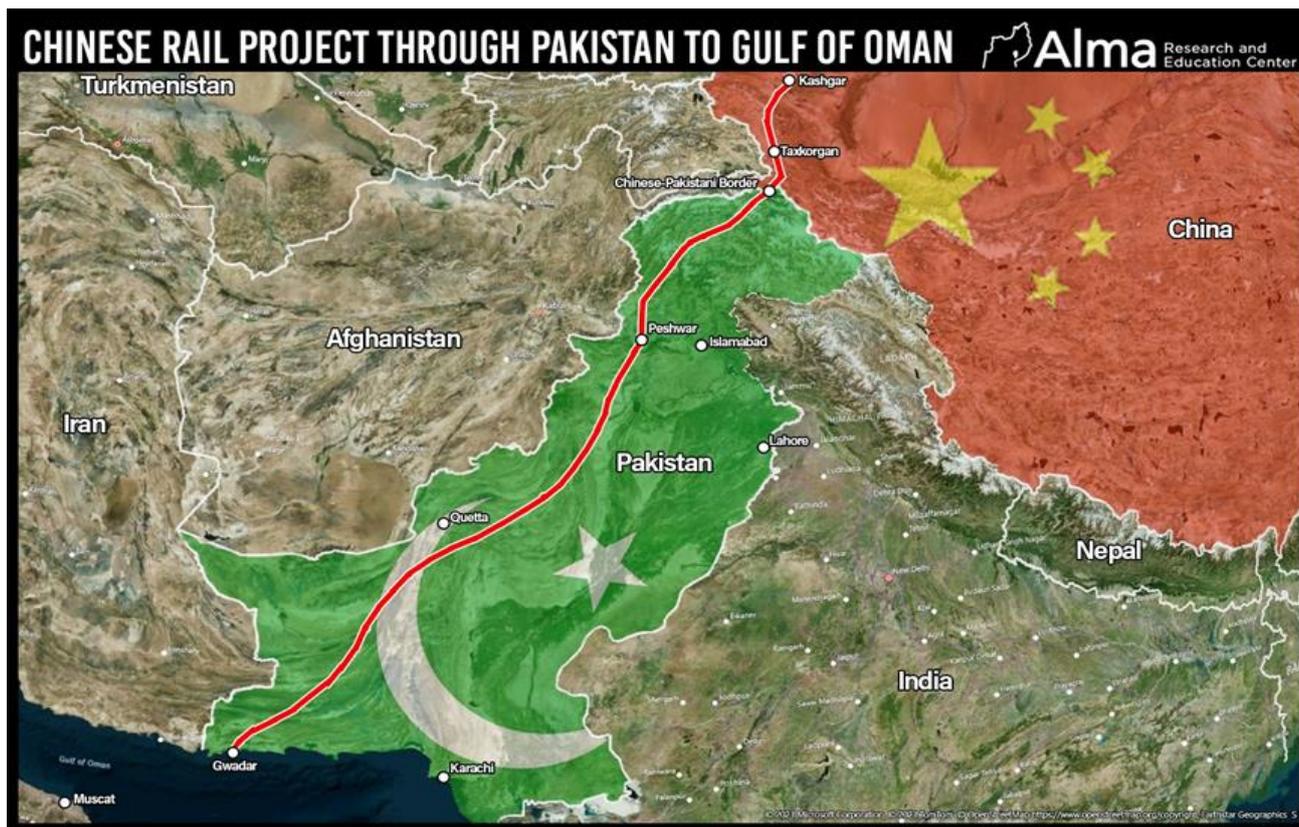
Figures from United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade

Alma

The Middle East supplies nearly 40% of the world's oil and 35% of natural gas, making it a key anchor in the stability of the global economy, with maritime areas in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea being major arteries for oil and gas trade.

In addition, about 10% of the world's total trade passes through the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandab, the Suez Canal, and near the shores of the Gulf states, and about 20% of the world's oil passes off the coast of Iran, making the region particularly sensitive due to Iran's ability to undermine global economic stability, which it has already threatened to do. All of these have a major impact on China's economy.

It is possible that as a result, China is planning a huge project with Pakistan to build a railway from China to the Arabian Sea/Persian Gulf at a cost of \$58 billion. This railway will neutralize China's dependence on shipping lanes in the Persian Gulf and allow China a significant foothold in a major area of the world's shipping routes.

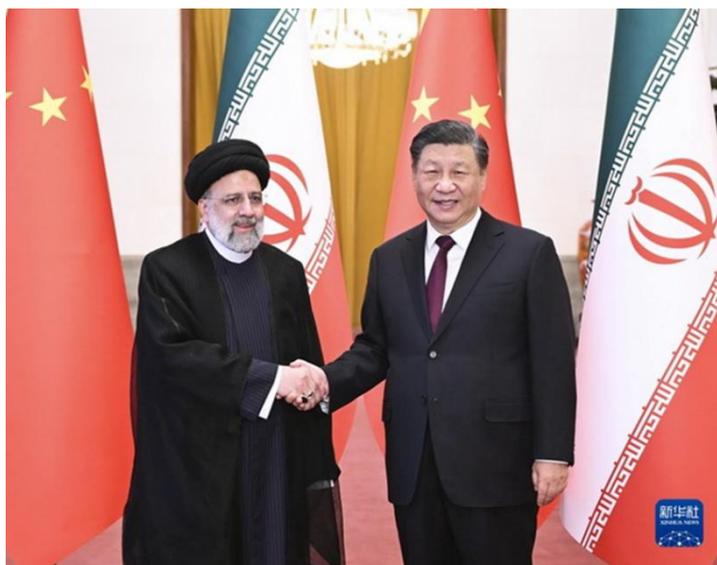


Over the years, and according to a systematic plan, China has deepened its economic-infrastructure cooperation in the region. China is doing so as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) led by President Xi Jinping. This is an initiative designed to raise Beijing's strategic influence throughout the world and safeguard its economic growth. Economic infrastructure involvement is also part of achieving China's goal of becoming the most important trading partner for most Middle Eastern countries.

The goal of China's Belt and Road program is to connect 65 percent of the world's population through international trade networks, with China at the center of the networks, giving China a global influence unprecedented in its history.

To this end, China is active in a number of key regional infrastructure programs, such as the construction of the railway line between Iran and China, seaports in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and South Yemen, reconstruction programs in Syria, the construction of the administrative capital in Cairo, and more.

In total, 21 Arab countries participated in China's Belt and Road Program, with large-scale Chinese investments in many of them, and with two-thirds of Chinese exports to Europe and Africa passing through infrastructure built by the Gulf states with the help of Chinese investment and companies. Iran manages its participation in the program through bilateral agreements with China. Turkey is promoting its own vision of connecting rail lines from Turkey to Central Asia, but it is not yet clear if this vision, known as the "Middle Corridor" will fit in with China's Belt and Road plan, despite positive rhetoric on the subject from both countries.^v



In the photo: Iran's high-ranking President Raisi's visit to Beijing, February 2023.

In addition to the Belt and Road Initiative, through which China is gaining a foothold in the region, President Xi has announced three more initiatives over the past two years designed to further challenge the US-led world order and incorporate lessons learned from failures into the Belt and Road Initiative.

The three initiatives are the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). They could, according to the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), "contribute to Beijing's efforts to undermine Washington's alliances in the world and in the region, which underlie Israel's security doctrine, empty universal norms, and values, and harm Israel's relations with the United States and its allies."

The goal of the GDI is to shape the global development agenda in accordance with a Chinese agenda, while the GSI is structured to serve as an alternative for - and challenge to - the global American security concept. The GCI is intended, according to the Chinese president, to break the myth that "Modernization is equivalent to Westernization" – regarding both Western values and financial systems.

In March 2021, China and Iran signed a 25-year strategic agreement, which constituted a strong Iranian signal to the U.S. regarding its ability to circumvent U.S. sanctions with China's help. The agreement strengthened China's economic relations with Iran, which for some time has promised Beijing cheap Iranian oil in exchange for supplying cheap Chinese goods to the Iranian market. The agreement also guaranteed Iran access to cheap Chinese civilian technology, and about \$400 billion in Chinese investment in Iran's oil, gas, and petrochemical industries. Even if not all of the clauses of the agreement are implemented, the agreement expresses the common interest of China and Iran in building bilateral economic relations that bypass American influence and sanctions.

At the same time, China has not neglected its relations with Riyadh, offering Saudi Arabia cooperation in defense deals without restricting the use of equipment (as opposed to the American equipment that Saudi Arabia purchases, which is limited under American conditions for use, and on which Saudi Arabia is completely dependent on for most of its military force buildup at this time).

China's growing involvement in the Middle East, in the economic infrastructure aspects, enables China to gradually and systematically begin to identify and widen fissures and flaws that exist between the United States and the countries of the region.

The United States maintains extensive trade relations with GCC countries (a political and economic body that incorporates Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar) that includes a variety of products, investments, chemicals, minerals, technology, and defense exports. Because of U.S. energy independence, U.S. imports of petroleum products have declined significantly from the Middle East — accounting for only about 8% of all U.S. oil today, and the U.S. has recently become an oil exporter itself.

It can be said that the American fracking industry decreased the US's reliance on energy imports but also indirectly contributed to China's ability to compete with the US for influence in the Middle East.

Still, a jolt in maritime transportation arteries or regional stability can cause a shock to global energy prices and the global economy, and the US is in no way immune to those effects. Therefore, the United States still has a clear interest in maintaining a superpower military presence in the region, and in building deterrence against the radical Shiite axis headed by Iran, which, as an overarching goal, is working to sow instability and destruction in the service of Iranian hegemony and export the Islamic Revolution to the Middle East and the world.

In light of this, the US maintains its Middle East military command, Central Command (CENTCOM), a major air base in Qatar, from where it operates air power on a regular basis, and the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, from where it employs a significant naval force, patrols the region, and maintains maritime cooperation with regional allies. Israel moved into CENTCOM's area of responsibility in 2021.

America's adversaries, Beijing and Moscow, see this military presence in the region as an American strategic advantage. In recent years, they have tried to counter this advantage by conducting joint naval exercises with Iran, on a much smaller scale, to try to project power themselves.^{vi}

At this point, China cannot compete with the US as a military alternative in the Middle East. However, as the study will demonstrate below, this does not preclude China from progressively increasing its military presence in the region.

Since 2008, the U.S. has reduced its military presence in the Middle East by 85%.^{vii} Much of this reduction stems from the desire of the United States to free itself from wars perceived as endless in the Middle Eastern and Afghan quagmires, and from the desire for a new American strategic focus on China in the Pacific, as a prioritized arena and diverting resources and attention to this arena. Russia's war in Ukraine has only accelerated this disengagement from the Middle East by the US.

The United States is more interested in showing its support for American allies in the Far East – South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Thus, the US has left relatively small forces in Bahrain, Syria, Iraq, and Qatar in the Middle East, with small naval forces temporarily demonstrating a presence in the region.

However, it is important to emphasize that the US still has more than 34,000 military personnel deployed throughout the Middle East, access to a significant number of bases, the right to fly its air force in the airspace of a large number of countries, and air superiority (which has been compromised to some extent by Iranian missile and drone capabilities). China has not remained indifferent to the reduction of the American ranking in the region.

Over the years, U.S. relations with its Arab allies have been based on a common interest in deterring the threat posed by the Iranian-Shiite axis, acting for regional stability, and preventing Iranian nuclear breakout. In our assessment, this common interest still exists, but the Arab allies' belief in the American commitment to it has been significantly undermined, which has helped open the door to growing Chinese influence.

The US continues to maintain a military, air, sea, and, to a limited extent, land presence, and sells systems and weapons to its Arab allies in large quantities. The US provides about 80 percent of Saudi Arabia's military capabilities. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt purchase fighter jets and air-to-ground bombs, air defense systems, and more from the United States. Despite the recent developments described above, the United States is still vital to these countries, not only as a defensive force against Iran, but also as a major supplier of their military capabilities.

However, there are growing tensions between the Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia and the United States. The harsh criticism by the Democratic administration of the human rights situation in the Saudi kingdom and the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the widespread perception that the US is no longer committed to the task of deterring Iran and is only trying to "buy time" with an attempt to renew the nuclear agreement that no longer exists, the urgent strategic focus on the Chinese threat in the Far East and Russia in Europe (Ukraine), has caused growing fissures in the Sunni - American alliance system in the region.

Recently, China has taken advantage of these fissures more intensely, in a course of action that costs Beijing little but brings many dividends, while leaving the management of the expensive, difficult, and dangerous regional security situation to the United States.

China is currently engaged in the implementation of a systematic strategic plan that is structured on the establishment of three distinct stages:

1. Deepening the economic-infrastructureal leverage in all countries in the region.
2. Converting this force into political power, while challenging the status of the United States, but without taking upon itself the burden of American military activity in the region.
3. Selective construction of a military foothold.

THE CHINESE SYSTEMATIC STRATEGY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST:

1. Deepening the economic and infrastructureal levers in many countries of the region.
2. Converting this into political power while challenging the US presence, but without taking on the burden of US military actions
3. Selective construction of a military foothold



Alma Research and Education Center

The Saudi Case Study

The agreement to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, made possible by Chinese mediation and signed in March 2023, surprised many and acted as a wake-up call for Beijing's rising political power and the wavering political power of the United States.

The agreement allows Saudi Arabia to open new lines of communication for de-escalation with its bitter Shiite rival (“keep my friends close and my enemies closer”), and is a continuation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's learning curve regarding the limits of his country's military power, after he approved a ceasefire agreement with the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, without them disarming, leaving large parts of Yemen – about 25 percent of the country, in Houthi hands, while the Saudi-backed Yemeni government holds 55%, and separatist forces hold another 20%.^{viii}

The Saudi-Iranian agreement also reflects Saudi Arabia's blatant lack of confidence in the U.S. ability to deter and contain Iran. The agreement constitutes a hedge risk on Riyadh's part, both in terms of managing tensions with its Iranian rival and in terms of its dependence on the United States as the leading superpower in the region.

China, which identified these tensions quickly and distinctly, acted to leverage its relations with Saudi Arabia, which are built, first and foremost, on economic infrastructure cooperation.

In December 2022, Chinese President Xi was received with royal splendor and warmth by Saudi King Salman and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed. The visit included a series of bilateral meetings and a number of meetings with other heads of state organized by the Saudi royal family, which included Egypt, Jordan, and other GCC countries.

According to Dr. Oded Eran, a senior researcher at the INSS, although the political, economic, and security presence of the United States in the Gulf is many times greater than that of China, President Xi's visit marked an increase in his country's involvement in the region, which until now was considered part of the global strategic framework of the United States.^{ix}

The resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran is further evidence of the growing strength of Chinese influence in a region where China purchases a significant amount of oil.

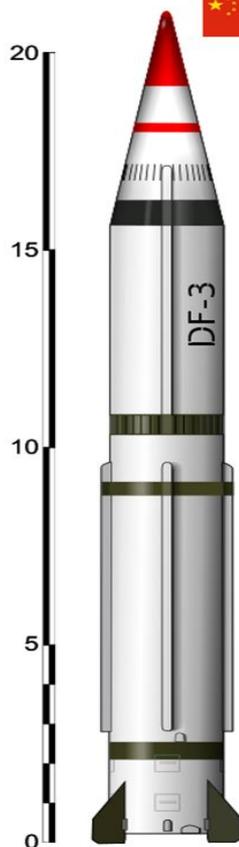
In terms of Saudi imports as well, China exported about \$30.3 billion of goods and services to Saudi Arabia in 2021, and there is an even more significant potential, strategically, for the sale of Chinese military equipment in the future.

As early as 1988, Saudi Arabia purchased its first DF-3 missiles from China but never used them.^x Over the years, this precedent allowed China to return to exercising "soft power" through defense deals. In December 2021, CNN reported, based on American intelligence assessments, that China had begun assisting Saudi Arabia to build precision ballistic missiles on its soil.

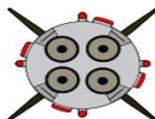
The Saudi need to acquire long-range surface-to-surface missiles stems solely from the threat from Iran, and the Saudi feeling that it has no one to rely on but itself.



**CHINESE-MADE SAUDI-OPERATED
DF-3A MEDIUM-RANGE
BALLISTIC MISSILE**



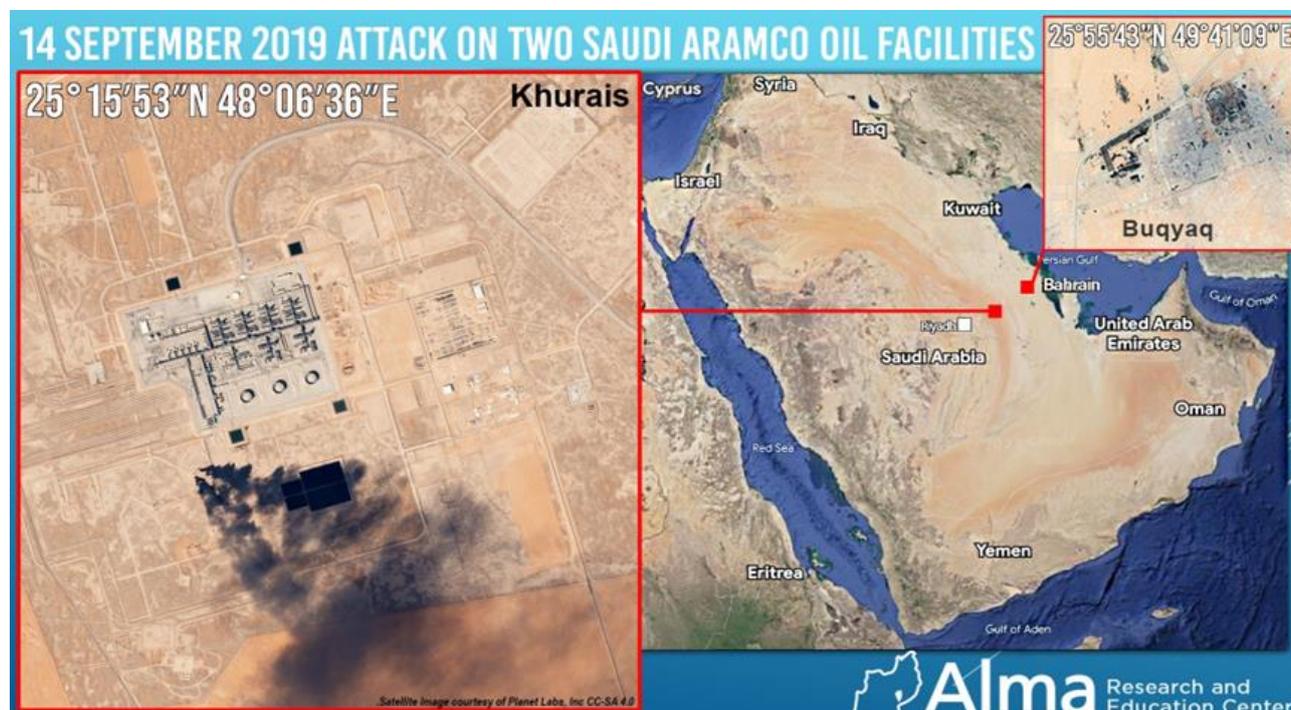
- Length: 24 m
- Accuracy: 1,000 m
- Configuration: Single Stage
- Engine: Liquid Fuel
- Operational range: 4,000 km
- Deployment: Launch Pad
- Warhead: Nuclear capable, or a single 2,150 kg warhead
- Guidance system: Astro-inertial



DF3 illustration courtesy of Heriberto Arribas Abato



A formative event that reinforced this perception in Saudi understanding took place in September 2019, when dozens of attack drones, including the Shahed 136, and according to various reports, a number of cruise missiles attacked Saudi oil production facilities in the Abqaiq and Khurais fields of Aramco.



Although the Iranian proxies, the Houthis, claimed responsibility for the attack and presented it as part of their war against Saudi Arabia, Saudi and American assessments at the time indicated that the attack originated directly from Iranian territory, which was verified over time. The attack caused a temporary drop of 50 percent of Saudi Arabia's oil production capacity or 5 percent of the world's total ability to supply oil. But more importantly, the attack demonstrated a significant level of deterrence on the part of Iran, proving its ability to paralyze Saudi Arabia at will – all without any American military response.

According to Dr. Eric Mandel, founder and head of The Middle East Political and Information Network:

“Based on my conversations with Saudi officials in Saudi Arabia and Washington, Riyadh is looking to survive and thrive in the new Middle East, where America is perceived to be withdrawing from the region and unwilling to use force, and China has strategically decided to fill much of the void. In this context, China was able to mediate a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose rivalry dates to the schism between Shiite and Sunni Islam. How long a rapprochement will last will be determined by how long their interests are maintained.

The Saudis historically relied on the U.S., but since 2019, when the Trump administration failed to respond to the Iranian attack on Saudi oil facilities, the Saudis have reevaluated their relationships and alignments. The Saudis told me that China is their biggest fossil fuel client for the foreseeable future and that their approach will be more balanced between the superpower rivals.

Saudi Arabia now believes it is in a stronger position to make requests of the United States, knowing the administration is looking to reengage in the region and move the Saudis back towards America. In this context, MBS wants a U.S. defense pact to hedge against Iran, advanced American weaponry curtailed due to Congress' animosity, and a Saudi-controlled nuclear program. This is supposedly being packaged as part of a normalization deal with Israel, in which they would demand that Israel acquiesce to a Palestinian State, even if anarchy reigns in the West Bank and Gaza, while Iran gains more control there.

Congress is united on tougher actions against China. It must decide whether to punish or embrace Saudi Arabia for moving closer to America's primary adversary in the 21st century. The Biden administration is lobbying Congress, especially Democrats who are highly critical of the Saudis, to accept concessions to the Saudis if they will move towards Israel and hopefully away from China.

Meanwhile, Iran is a stone's throw from a nuclear weapon, and the Biden administration continues to pursue a "less for less" nuclear deal with Iran. The Saudis are watching closely, as are the Chinese."

In a recent tweet, FDD's CEO, Mark Dubowitz, stated: "On my recent trip to Saudi, every official mentioned Trump's failure to respond to the Iranian attack on Aramco. The attack occurred on September 14, 2019. Trump killed Suleimani on January 3, 2020, 4 months later. Had Trump said we would respond at a time and place of our choosing... had Trump included the Aramco attack as one of the justifications for killing Suleimani, American security guarantees would have been seen as serious, the Saudi hedge with China and deal with Iran may not have occurred and Riyadh would not be demanding such a high price for Israel normalization. Instead, Trump told the Saudis they're on their own — and they took him seriously. Smart geopolitics is about messaging to both enemies and friends that actions have consequences.""^{xi}

"If Trump had included the attack on Aramco as a justification for killing Soleimani, the American security promises would have been perceived as serious, the Saudi relationship with China and the agreement with Iran might not have taken place, and Riyadh would not have asked for such a high price for normalization with Israel," he wrote.

These tensions were also evident during President Biden's brief and aloof visit to the Saudi kingdom in August 2022. Shortly after the visit, the Saudis blatantly ignored Washington's request to increase the pace of their oil supplies to overcome the rise in global oil prices, which have stemmed from the war in Ukraine and the disruption in Russian oil exports.

China recognized these tensions and worked to undermine the alliance that was already precarious.



In the photo: Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia, August 2022

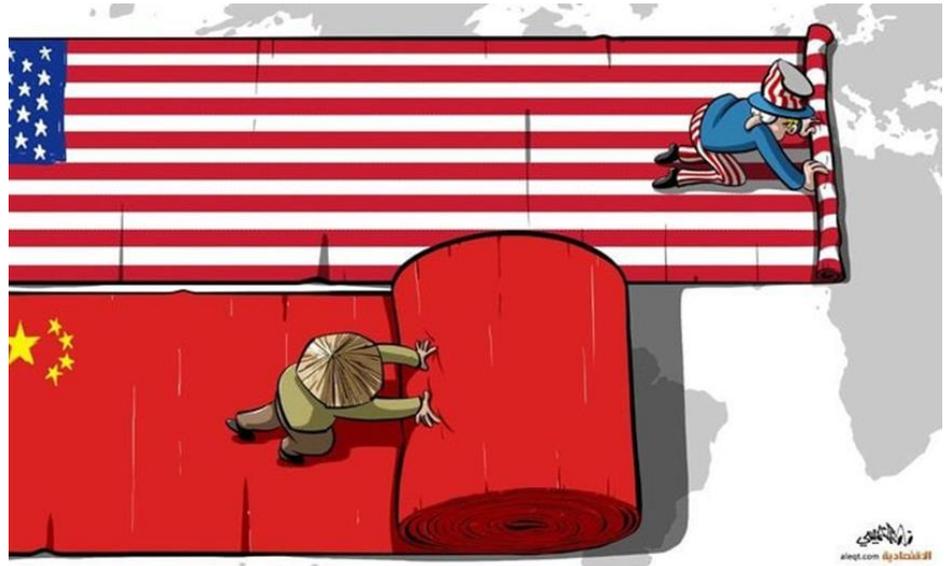
During an 'onslaught of smiles,' accompanied by a plan to deepen the knowledge of Chinese culture and Chinese holidays among the residents of the Saudi kingdom, Beijing worked behind the scenes to mediate between Tehran and Riyadh, and within a relatively short time brought about a significant political achievement when the move matured into a normalization agreement between the two rival countries.

There is a spectrum of interpretations about the true significance of this normalization agreement, which ended 7 years of severing relations. [See our report about "The Iran-Saudi Arabia Agreement: Background, Considerations, and Significances" from May 2023.](#)

On one side of the spectrum, some see the agreement as a possibility of ending a very significant rivalry in the Middle East that would promote stability and bring Iran closer to its Arab neighbors. This naïve perspective ignores the fact that the interests and basic historical identity of the two countries are still in a head-on conflict and that the sides have acknowledged a more sophisticated way to manage the conflict between them for now.

In any case, China emerged as the biggest beneficiary of the event, due to its strengthening status as a superpower operating in the Middle East to promote stability, and its ability to achieve accomplishments that the United States was unable to achieve. Washington had no choice but to welcome the result with some forced lip service.

In the photo: A caricature by Fahd Al-Khamisi, an in-house cartoonist for the Saudi economic newspaper Al Eqtisadiah. The cartoon shows that "Uncle Sam" (symbolizing the United States) has run out of cloth of the small American flag, compared to the amount of cloth of the large Chinese flag (From [Noam Bannett's Twitter account](#))



Before the Chinese intervention, Iran and Saudi Arabia had been negotiating in secret with Omani mediation for years without making any headway.

So, what's changed? While Saudi Arabia was waging a regional cold war with Iran, the new global cold war between the U.S. and China was increasing.^{xii}

As the United States builds its presence in the Pacific theater, China has seen an opportunity to improve its position in a region once exclusive to the American superpower – the Middle East. And this is the first relevant context.

The second factor is the authentic Chinese interest in contributing to regional stability and calming the tensions between Riyadh and Tehran in order to ensure the stability of oil supplies to China.

Riyadh gains economically as well. The Saudis, who are significant oil suppliers to China, can keep oil in Chinese storage facilities in order to ship to East Asia and beyond more swiftly. This reduces both logistics and costs.

The Chinese aim to support Saudi Arabia's own production capability of ballistic missiles is a classic illustration of China's capacity to promote economic interest and political interests and to use those as a springboard for wielding military influence.

After the Saudi leadership was disappointed with the performance of the Saudi Air Force, despite the large investment in the air force's capabilities, which proved to be lacking during its war against the Houthis in Yemen, Saudi Arabia began to refocus on missile systems.

Ostensibly, there is a contradiction between China's desire to stabilize the Iranian-Saudi conflict and its assistance to the Saudi kingdom in armaments and assistance to Iran (between 2010 and 2019, China exported \$166 million of weapons to Iran – 19 percent of Chinese defense exports to the Middle East).^{xiii}

But all of this is part of China's strategic strategy of transforming its economic status into political and military influence without jeopardizing regional security.

China is hoping that it can use its expanding influence over the Saudis to avoid confrontation with Iran while also assisting Saudi Arabia in building strength. China does not see the world in black-and-white terms, but rather in terms of "both and both."

In 2020, reports emerged that China assisted Saudi Arabia in launching a nuclear program by assisting Saudi Arabia in constructing a center for yellowcake isolation (a concentrated powder of uranium created through filtering).

According to numerous reports, as of May 2023, China is negotiating fresh arms sales with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Military Industries (SAMI) is in talks with China North Industries Group Corporation (Norinco), a Chinese state-owned defense business, to purchase weapons such as air defense systems and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

Weapons included in the potential deal are the Sky Saker FX80 observation and attack UAV and the CR500 vertical take-off and landing drone (VTOL), Cruise Dragon 5 and 10 loitering munitions, and the HQ-17AE short-range air defense system (SHORAD).



Above: CR500 UAV



Above: HQ-17AE short-range air defense system (SHORAD).

The Iranian Case Study

Iran is a source of oil at a "discount" price to China, due to Tehran's critical need to continue exporting energy while it is under American sanctions and faces severe economic challenges at home.

After Russia and Saudi Arabia, Iran is the third largest supplier of oil to China. The oil price discount Iran is offering China is intended to persuade Beijing to agree to buy oil under sanctions while taking a risk. Therefore, China is the biggest beneficiary of the American sanctions on Iran.^{xiv}

According to media reports, in order to circumvent the sanctions, China uses a barter system. Iranian oil is exported in exchange for Chinese products such as automobiles and auto parts, medicines, food products, and various types of machinery. Cheap Chinese products have been flooding the Iranian market for years.

On the basis of Iran's heavy economic dependence on it, China is building political influence over Iran, and there is also military cooperation between China and Iran, which concerns the United States because of the potential inherent in developing into a future military alliance.

Iran and China have a common interest in challenging the status and presence of the United States in the Middle East, as part of China's global plan to be a superpower alternative. While Iran wants to see the U.S. leave the region completely, China wants to at least weaken U.S. standing in the Middle East. Therefore, there is a basis for a common interest between China and Iran that is sufficient in this context for geostrategic cooperation.

In March 2021, China and Iran signed a strategic cooperation agreement that combined all three components of Chinese power in the Middle East – economic, political, and military.

According to the agreement, China and Iran will cooperate on economic, political, and military issues, and Iran will become part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. China has agreed to invest about \$400 billion in Iran's oil, gas, and petrochemical industries. Even if only part of this sum is invested, it is critical oxygen for the Iranian regime.

In doing so, China becomes Iran's largest trading partner, throwing it an economic lifeline that gives Beijing considerable leverage in the region.

According to the agreement, China will also provide Iran with technology for espionage and intelligence gathering.

Ultimately, the agreement allows China to strengthen its influence over Iran, alongside the channels of cooperation that already exist – even if not all the clauses of the agreement are implemented.

In addition, China can use the agreement to pressure Saudi Arabia to agree to future deals between China and Saudi Arabia.

This activity also echoes China's interest in expanding military exports to Tehran. This export began in the early 80s, during the Iran-Iraq War, and has not stopped since, although Iranian purchases of Chinese weapons have declined significantly in recent years. However, the potential for an increase in these sales exists, especially in light of the fact that the UN missile embargo on Iran is set to expire this year.

In the 1980s, China exported rockets, planes, tanks, and air defense systems to Iran, most of them based on Soviet equipment created under license on Chinese soil.^{xv}

After the end of the war with Iraq, Iran became interested in Chinese-made coast-to-sea cruise missiles. Iran acquired know-how and manufacturing infrastructure from China, including the production of air defense systems, and during the 90s to mid-2000s, it created coast-to-sea missiles based on the Chinese C801 and C802 cruise missiles. Hezbollah has a version of a coast-to-sea missile based on the Chinese C802.^{xvi}



Iran smuggled these weapons into the hands of Hezbollah, which used them in the Second Lebanon War (July 2006) to attack an Israeli naval ship (4 crew members were killed).

[Watch a video of the missile launch.](#)

Between 2010 and 2019, China exported \$166 million worth of military equipment to Iran, or 19 percent of Chinese defense exports to the Middle East. These exports almost stopped after the nuclear agreement in 2015. However, Chinese shell companies are a significant part of Iran's ability to import weapons or smuggle weapons.

At the bilateral level, there has been growing cooperation between the Iranian Navy and its Chinese counterpart since their first joint military exercise in 2014.

In 2016, the two countries signed an agreement to strengthen cooperation on a variety of military issues, such as training and counter-terrorism operations.

In 2017, Iran and China conducted a four-day naval exercise involving warships in the Persian Gulf. Since then, they have conducted a number of additional exercises, some with Russian participation.

This activity indicates that the developing cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia, from China's perspective, does not contradict the developing relations with Iran. In both cases, economic, political, and military cooperation includes the supply of advanced weapons to two rival countries. In contrast to dividing the map of the region between the Arab-Sunni and Iranian-Shiite blocs, China sees the entire Middle East as a single bloc that constitutes a strategic opportunity for economic benefit, influence, and building a presence.

Case Study: UAE

China-UAE relations are also based primarily on energy exports to China. In March 2023, China purchased liquefied natural gas from the Gulf state for the first time. This development joins oil and gas sales to China. Sales are increasing from year to year (even though the UAE exports more oil to Japan).

At the infrastructure level, a Chinese state-owned company has owned 8% of the UAE national oil company since 2017, reflecting an Emirati desire to increase energy exports to China, and indeed this growth trend has occurred over the years.

The UAE has purchased a number of UAVs from China in recent years, which apparently helped persuade the US to sell it 18 advanced UAVs.

The UAE's most significant role in the Chinese vision is the construction of a Chinese logistics base, presumably a naval base, outside Abu Dhabi.^{xvii}

The Chinese logistics base project in Abu Dhabi is of considerable concern to the United States for a number of reasons. The fact that the Emiratis agreed to the establishment of the base against the wishes of the United States is the first indicator of a weakening American alliance with a country in the region. This was despite massive arms agreements in which the United States sold military equipment to the small Gulf state.

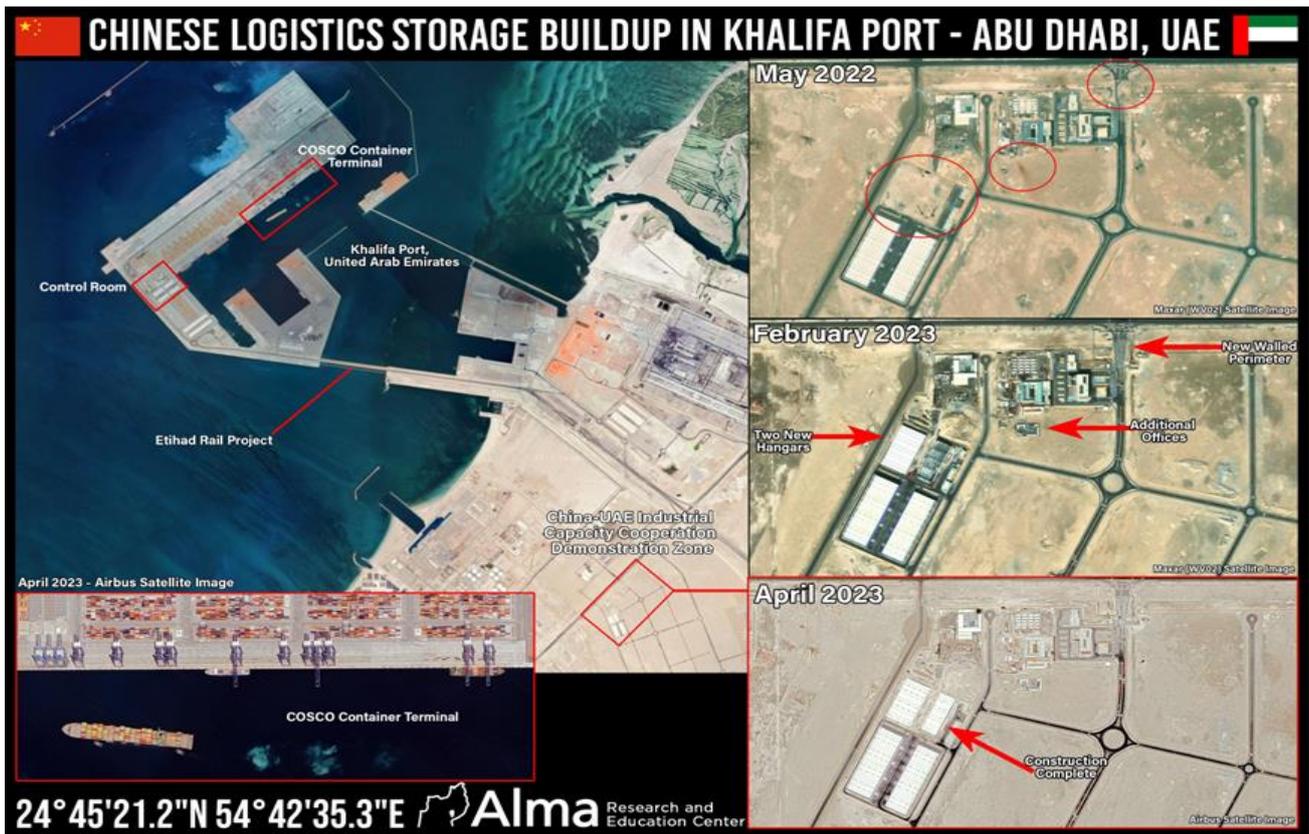
In 2021, according to media reports, construction at the Chinese logistics base in Abu Dhabi was halted due to American pressure. However, according to a Washington Post report in April 2023, construction has now resumed and is under close U.S. intelligence.

The logistics base is one part of a larger Chinese plan to build a global network of bases alongside ports in the Middle East, and other parts of the world such as Africa and Asia.

The base is part of a plan by the Chinese Army (PLA) to establish 10 logistics centers and 5 international bases outside China by 2030. This initiative is referred to in PLA as "Project 141."

It can be concluded that the UAE's agreement to establish the base stems from its assessment that China is a rising power in the region while US power is weakening.

It is possible that the Chinese context (and the thaw in UAE-Iran relations) also influenced the UAE's withdrawal in March 2023 from the naval coalition established by the US. This coalition was established in light of the tension with Iran and the Iranian attack on merchant ships in the Persian Gulf (drone attacks and physical seizure of ships).



Case Study: Egypt

In January 2023, the new Chinese foreign minister, Qin Gang, concluded a tour of Africa. Egypt was one of the five nations visited. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Abu Al-Wright (an Egyptian diplomat) met separately with the Chinese minister in Cairo.^{xviii}

The timing of the visit was interesting since it came at a time when Egypt's economy was in a severe crisis, and the Egyptian currency was in a tailspin.

As usual, economic relations must first be examined in order to understand the nature of the bilateral relations in question. In 2021, China exported \$18.1 billion worth of goods to the Egyptian market, with transmission equipment accounting for the largest exports. Egypt exported \$314 million worth of goods to China, mainly fuel and gas, which increased by 21 percent in 2022.

China relies heavily on the Suez Canal, as it is the nation that sends the most commercial ships through the canal to the rest of the globe. The canal connects Chinese and European markets by sea. In Egypt, where the tourism industry is a key economic pillar, it is also important to note that the sizeable annual influx of Chinese tourists.

The above constitutes the background for large-scale Chinese investments in Egypt. Investments such as the construction of a \$59 billion business district near Cairo, which is being carried out by a Chinese state-owned company, and partly financed through Egyptian purchases of Chinese bonds at considerable interest rates. This Chinese investment has raised concerns among Egyptian critics that Egyptian President el-Sisi is putting his country at risk of falling into "Chinese debt," which would significantly increase China's influence over Egypt.

As part of President Xi's Belt and Road Initiative, China has also invested billions of dollars in the Suez Canal Economic Zone. Beijing has constructed the China-Egypt Economic-Trade Cooperation Zone, also known as TEDA CITY, within this economic zone, which consists of ports and industrial zones. In this zone, Chinese-owned businesses export their goods to Europe, the Middle East, and China.

Reports published in 2022 that an Egyptian company was negotiating military-industrial agreements with a Chinese company were not surprising in light of these ties. According to media reports, the same Chinese company, Poly Technologies, purchased shares in an Egyptian company that had been awarded a contract to supply armored vehicles to the Egyptian military two years earlier.

As of May 2023, Egypt and China appear to be negotiating the purchase of the Chengdu J-10 multi-role fighter.^{xix} It is a medium-weight all-weather jet capable of carrying fourth-generation air-to-air missiles such as the PL-10 and PL-15, with ranges beyond optical range.

China once again identified fissures in the alliance system among a large and important Sunni Arab state, and on the basis of trade relations, strategic investment, and the Belt and Road Initiative, began to offer Egypt military capabilities, despite the fact that Egypt is considered a staunch American ally. All of this increases China's influence in Egypt.



Above: Chengdu J-10.

Case Study: Syria

In 2022, China signed an agreement with Syria on its inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative. The signature highlights China's growing interest in Syria.^{xx}

As part of the global network of land and sea trade that connects Asia to the rest of the world, the addition of Syria could increase China's regional influence.

The agreement signed between China and Syria in Damascus in 2022 helped the Assad regime to surpass its diplomatic, Arab, and international isolation (which officially ended in May 2023 with the Arab League's decision to accept Syria back as a full member of the Arab League).

According to the Middle East Institute, cooperation with China offers Assad the chance to increase his investment potential.

China's interest in Syria, which has endured a civil war for more than a decade with hundreds of thousands of civilians killed and millions of refugees, is motivated by geostrategic considerations rather than net economic motives.

Unconfirmed media reports from 2022 claimed that Chinese military advisers had arrived in Syria to train Syrian military officers.

In 2022, China also signed an agreement to export advanced communications equipment to Syria to help the Syrian regime rebuild communications infrastructure in areas severely damaged during the war years. There are reports, which have not yet been verified, about Chinese intentions to rebuild military facilities in Syria.



Above: The Military College's graduation ceremony (October 06, 2022) in Homs, Syria. A symbolic picture of representatives of the Shiite axis and "friends." One of the main friends – the Chinese military representative – sits in the front row on the right.

China, like Russia, has a history of vetoing UN Security Council resolutions that would impose sanctions on Syria for its use of chemical weapons.

Several reports indicate that Beijing and Damascus collaborated on intelligence regarding Muslim Uyghurs in China, following the recruitment of a number of Uyghurs into Syria to fight against Assad.

According to the Chinese ambassador to Syria, Syria's participation in the Belt and Road program will be the most influential contribution to the rehabilitation of the Syrian economy – a claim that Iran and Russia, which view themselves as the primary patrons in Syria, will undoubtedly perceive as competition in the game of influence in Syria in general and the economic context in particular.

China is unlikely to enjoy a significant return on investment in Syria, given the state of the Syrian economy, which casts doubt on Syria's ability to repay loans to China. In light of this, the Middle East Institute assessed that the consideration of geostrategic influence is the only factor guiding China's activity in this devastated country.

Such Sino-Syrian cooperation is likely to cause particularly high tension with Russia, which is already in competition for influence with Iran in Syria. As evidence, in 2022, the Russian media criticized the Chinese move in Syria.

China's state-run Xinhua News Agency published a photo of the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Chinese ambassador to Syria and the Syrian Red Crescent Administration to deliver shipments of rice for ongoing humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people. Each shipment contained 4,000 tons of rice. Four such shipments arrived in 2021 and more in 2022. In addition, vaccines and other equipment were delivered to fight Covid.^{xxi}

In addition, in 2022, the Syrian government signed a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese ambassador to Syria to join the Chinese Influence Initiative, which intends to invest about \$1 trillion over several years in countries in the Middle East and Africa.^{xxii}

In February 2023, China sent 30 million yuan (\$4.5 million) in emergency aid to those affected by the earthquake a few days after it occurred.^{xxiii}

In July 2023, the Chinese Embassy in Damascus held a festive event marking the 96th anniversary of the establishment of The People's Liberation Army (PLA). The Syrian defense minister spoke at the event and said there were similarities between the Chinese and Syrian armies. The Syrian defense minister expressed his hope for the continued strengthening of military and economic ties between the countries as China is a military and technological power.^{xxiv}

Chinese involvement in Syria necessitates Israeli alertness due to the potential influence on Syrian military capabilities in the future.

Case Study: Lebanon

Beyond the rhetorical level, China does not appear to have made a particularly active effort to invest in Lebanon's infrastructure or intervene in the country's never-ending political and security crises. China seems to perceive Lebanon as a dead-end country.

According to various reports, Chinese investors have visited Lebanon multiple times in recent years to assess the status of the economy and study specific investments in energy networks and highway development. There was a report in 2019 concerning China's desire to operate a railway line between Beirut and Tripoli in northern Lebanon, however, the project's status is unknown at this time.

As a result, China's exports to Lebanon are restricted, with communications equipment, electric transformers, and tires leading the way in terms of volume. However, Chinese exports to Lebanon climbed by around 10% each year between 1995 and 2021, ranging from \$141 million in 1995 to \$1.53 billion in 2021. According to reports, Chinese commodities account for almost 40% of Lebanese imports.^{xxv xxvi}

A pro-Hezbollah publication claimed in 2021 that China, as part of its massive regional influence project, promised the Lebanese government funding and the construction of several massive infrastructure projects, such as the construction of power plants. According to reports, China did not request financial guarantees from the Lebanese government due to its dearth of funds. However, the Lebanese government rejected the Chinese offering due to concerns about the reaction of the US.^{xxvii}

Case Study: Iraq

The escalating rivalry between the United States and China has also impacted Iraq. Due to its geostrategic location and trade through the Persian Gulf, Iraq is a crucial stop on the road map of China's Belt and Road Initiative.^{xxviii}

In addition, China imports large quantities of crude oil from Iraq. In 2022, it imported nearly \$40 billion of Iraqi oil.

The significant energy trade between Iraq and China forms the strategic basis of bilateral relations between the two countries and explains why China attributes great importance to Iraqi stability – in order to ensure the continued supply of oil from the country to Beijing's oil-hungry economy.

After the Islamic State was defeated in Iraq, the government in Baghdad began looking for investors to build infrastructure in the various provinces. In 2020, Iraq formally invited Chinese companies to invest in a variety of sectors. This order included the construction of residential buildings, the construction of energy infrastructure, and agriculture.

That same year, Chinese companies agreed to participate in a program to build 8 million homes across Iraq. Through this soft power, in contrast to the bloody US military intervention, China is establishing a foothold and influence in Iraq without the burden of fighting ISIS, which the US undertook, or the costly previous invasion (both in loss of soldiers and economic cost) to topple Saddam Hussein's regime in 2002.

Chinese companies, which were forced to leave Iraq after the U.S. invasion, are now operating in Iraq on a growing scale.

In 2019, China and Iraq officially signed the "Oil for Construction" program. Baghdad promises to supply China with ten thousand barrels of oil a day in exchange for the building of infrastructure. China is building airports in Iraq, power plants designed to handle half of Iraq's electricity needs, about 1,000 schools, and more.

So far, China has not yet converted its economic and political power in Iraq into any military dimension, and it is doubtful that it will see a need to do so.

Case Study: Israel

China's economic involvement in Israel has increased over the past decade, as Chinese companies have invested in a variety of Israeli high-tech companies, investments that peaked in 2018, but since then it seems that they have begun to moderate and even decline, according to findings by the INSS.^{xxix} China's priorities appear to be changing. What seems to be a change in the investment climate in Israel vis-à-vis Chinese corporations as a result of heavy and severe political pressure from the United States. In general, Chinese state-owned companies invest mainly in Israeli infrastructure, while private companies and capital funds concentrate on the Israeli high-tech industry.

The issue of Chinese investments in Israel has raised potential concerns related to security in the United States, despite the fact that Chinese investments account for less than ten percent of foreign capital investments in Israel, far behind investments from the United States and Europe.

The American criticism focuses not on the actual investment and its scope, but on the fact that some of the investments are in security-sensitive technological fields. Every American administration since the Obama administration has issued warnings to Israel regarding Chinese investments in a number of areas. Israel is in no position to ignore these warnings because of its heavy dependence on its alliance with the United States.

In 2022, trade between Israel and China reached \$21.08 billion, compared with \$1.07 billion in 2001.

The presence of a Chinese company in managing Haifa's new private port from 2021, for a 25-year contract, while another Chinese company was building the private Ashdod port, contributed to diplomatic tensions between Jerusalem and Washington. In 2021, the new port managed by China's state-owned Shanghai International Port Group officially began operations, after the company won the tender in 2015.^{xxx}

The proximity of Haifa Port to the Haifa naval base has apparently sparked American concerns about regular visits to Haifa Port by ships from the US Sixth Fleet.

It was also heavy American pressure that led the Israeli Ministry of Communications to disqualify Huawei as the builder of the 5G cellular infrastructure in Israel. As a result of American pressure, the tender was limited to Israeli companies only.

China's largest investment in Israel is in companies in the fields of medical technologies, biotechnology, biochemistry, and Israeli pharmaceuticals. This is followed by investments in software development and IT companies. Among other things, this activity is aimed at acquiring technological know-how that will address some of China's current or potential problems in the medical and pharmaceutical industries, such as an aging population and geriatric diseases.

Finally, Israel does not have the luxury of sitting on the fence because of its reliance on the US in matters of military procurement, diplomatic support, regional power projection, and American economic-military aid packages, which amount to \$3.9 billion per year. When the US is such an important component of Israel's security, the benefit of attractive commercial partnerships with China is lost in cases of direct conflict between these interests.

On the other hand, Israel can also explain to the US that no American company has offered to manage the new Israeli ports. Either way, the US remains concerned about the possibility of Chinese espionage and intelligence gathering at Haifa Port.

Navy assault ships and submarines are anchored at the Haifa base. The Israeli Navy has devised methods to conceal sensitive capabilities from outside observers, but this does not appear to satisfy US concerns.



In the photo: "The Bay Port" in Haifa, built by a Chinese company. Screenshot from [SIPG video](#).

American Reactions in the Region

Given the intensity of the trend indicated above, the United States appears to be taking steps to strengthen its deterrent power in the region. While the immediate reason for these activities is Iran's provocative behavior, as well as Russian provocations in Syria, it can also be concluded that the US is concerned about the widening fissures in its image among its allies, as well as China's exploitation of these weaknesses.

It is critical to emphasize that, despite the United States' prioritization of the Pacific and Far East theaters, Washington can send naval, air, and land forces to the Middle East and deploy a very significant strike force, both in quality and quantity, that China is unable to deploy in the region.

As a result, after the Iranian Revolutionary Guards seized an oil tanker sailing through the Strait of Hormuz on May 3, just as it was leaving the port of Dubai, and after Iran seized another tanker in the same area on April 27, the US Department of Defense announced a series of moves to strengthen what it called American defense policy in the Arabian Gulf.

These steps include the deployment of warships and fighter jets to the area. This comes roughly a month after the US sent a nuclear submarine to the Gulf armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles capable of attacking deep strategic targets in Iran. Furthermore, the United States has extended the presence of the aircraft carrier George W. Bush and its task force in the region.

The United States declared that it will not allow foreign or regional countries to imperil freedom of navigation in the Middle East, including the geographical area of the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb. The United States sent warships to the Persian Gulf in August 2023, including the USS Bataan, which includes thousands of Marines.

The mention of a foreign power in the American announcement, along with regional threats, could have been aimed directly at China as a superpower, despite the fact that China did not interfere with regional navigation at any point, but does hold joint exercises with Iran, which is considered a regional power.

These American measures are inextricably linked to the American concern that China will continue to exploit the prevalent notion that the US is less dedicated to regional security and more focused on the Chinese threat in the Far East.

Perhaps this is a strategic irony: America's strong desire to prioritize the Far East arena creates an opening for a rival Far Eastern power (China) to expand its footing in the Middle East. The US finds itself once again returning to the old lesson, according to which there is no vacuum in the Middle East.

Summary

In accordance with an orderly and well-organized doctrine, China is consolidating its position in the Middle East by converting significant economic trade with the countries of the region and building critical infrastructure, into political leverage and, in some cases, converting this power into military presence and influence.

While the US is focused on the Far East arena and prioritizes it over maintaining its deterrent power in the Middle East, China is making a kind of reversal move, skillfully exploiting the growing fissures between the US and its Arab allies to deepen its presence further.

The risk that China is taking in these moves is minimal, while China's profit is very large in the economic and geostrategic spheres.

However, Beijing may find that the Middle East can also suck it into undesirable situations. Along with China's desire to shape the Middle East, China is also interested in stabilizing the Middle East out of economic-energy interests. Therefore, it is working to calm tensions between the Iranian-Shiite axis and the Arab-Sunni camp. The likelihood that these efforts will succeed in the long run is not high, given Iran's hegemonic ambitions and its ideology of exporting the Islamic Revolution.

Then, when Iran may be involved in military confrontations, whether against Israel, against Sunni states, or against the United States, China's limits of power may be revealed to the whole world. China will also have to make uncomfortable decisions in these situations when Iran sees it as an ally and will expect help in one form or another.

And back to our days. As far as Israel is concerned, the "Chinese trends" in the Middle East ultimately work against Israeli interests and strengthen Iranian interests. The stronger America's position is in the Middle East, the more this power will affect its closest ally, Israel. The more the trend is reversed, the more Israel will be perceived by its enemies and Sunni allies as standing alone against the radical Shiite axis headed by Iran.

However, Israel has limited influence over American policy and the degree of American engagement in the region. Finally, as the smaller ally in these interactions, Israel should respect the United States' natural right to define its own strategic priorities and "work with what is."

Israel's significant dependence on the alliance with the United States, which far exceeds the Sunni states' dependence on the United States, suggests that Jerusalem does not have the privilege of flirting with China and hinting to Washington, as Saudi Arabia did, that there are alternatives to the American superpower. In the Israeli case, there is simply no such alternative.

Although Israel can cooperate with China in a controlled manner on the economic level, this cooperation must not deviate from the red lines set by the United States.

Beyond local economic interests, Israel and China do not have many common interests, and the Chinese regime does not share values with democratic Israel.

There is nothing to prevent China from continuing to back Syria or Iran in the UN Security Council, voting against Israel to appease the Iranian oil supplier, or strengthening the Assad regime. Just as China sees no contradiction in arming Saudi Arabia with surface-to-surface missiles aimed at Iran, while strengthening military relations with Iran, China will not hesitate to continue offering Israel economic cooperation, attractive investments within Israel, and investment in Israeli high-tech, while cooperating with Jerusalem's bitter enemies.

As a result, Israel must refrain from viewing China solely in economic terms and instead work to maintain its alliance with the US while also encouraging the Americans not to rush out of the Middle East, as this would benefit not only Iran but also America's great power rival, China.

At the start of a new Cold War between the United States and China in the twenty-first century, the Chinese story in the Middle East has only just begun, and Israel will have to have a clear strategic policy in order to conduct itself.

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