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# China's Leverage in the Middle East: Current Realities and Prospects

**Jihad Al-Mallah**

Researcher on Middle Eastern Affairs

**JULY 2021**

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## Introduction

Whenever the thinking of working in marketing and public relations in any factory or company pops into the minds of Chinese businessmen, they immediately pick trademarks that are proportionate to Western style and trends.

In terms of format, such trademarks are likely to be recognized much more by the other half of the population of the world, while, the Western style trademarks, in substance convey a message says: "We give you whatever you wish of either names or goods.

In fact, there is only about 56 km. separates Sūzhōu from Ningbo (south of Shanghai). While Washington is still asleep at night, and the other hemisphere of globe is also doing so, hundreds of factories in the port of Ningbo-Zhoushan, south on the East China Sea, pour hundreds of thousands of tons daily, exporting from the busiest port in the world, more than one billion tons of goods annually (1).

Such a scene in Ningbo, and others, have made many changes. Over the last three decades, the "China's Ascent" was one of the basic terms in the contexts related to the political science and international relations, in its various forms, research, journalism, and others. But in the recent few years, this term has begun to fade and it has often referred to less scientific contexts, for a fundamental reason, which is that the aforementioned rise is no longer a matter of doubt but reality, and debates have shifted to the extent of the inevitable superiority of China, and how this superiority will be reflected on the political, economic and military map of the world.

Obviously, the Chinese economic arms reached all parts of the world in general, and of course to the Middle East region in particular, which has witnessed over the past few years, a Chinese economic presence, in a large number of sectors. So, how did the "Chinese-Middle East" relations develop? What stage has it reached? What leverage did Beijing think it gained as a result? What are the prospects for relations, and thus what are the prospects for Chinese influence in the region?

(1) Si, Katherine. «Ningbo-Zhoushan Posts Cargo Volume of 1,12bn Tonnes in 2019.» Seatrade Maritime, 17 Jan. 2020. [www.seatrade-maritime.com/ports-logistics/ningbo-zhoushan-posts-cargo-volume112-bn-tonnes2019-](http://www.seatrade-maritime.com/ports-logistics/ningbo-zhoushan-posts-cargo-volume112-bn-tonnes2019-).



## First: Developments in trade and investment relations

Historically, China did not show that passion for expansion in the world, nor has it aspired to obtain distant colonies, as was the case with the Europeans. It was just a matter of striving to send Chinese goods everywhere, through all possible ways.

China maintained this approach for most of the 20th century, as it sought political neutrality and distanced itself from hot spots, such as the Middle East, in which, until the final years of the Cold War (1991-1945), Chinese involvement did not go beyond some modest trade relations.

By the 1980s, however, the PRC was more interested in gaining influence and expanding its presence in the Middle East—partly to compete with the United States and Soviet Union and partly in support of its efforts to gain greater international recognition at the expense of the rival Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan ( 2 ).

In 1956, Egypt and Syria became the first two countries in the region to establish diplomatic relations with China. However, the real breakthrough occurred in the 1970s, following the PRC's admission into the United Nations and Beijing's assumption of the United Nations Security Council seat held by Taipei. Iran, Kuwait, and Lebanon all switched recognition from the ROC to the PRC in 1971, followed eventually by Jordan (1977) and Libya and Oman (1978). A second wave of Middle East diplomatic successes occurred between the mid-1980s and early 1990s. The United Arab Emirates normalized relations with the PRC in 1984, followed by Qatar in 1988, Bahrain in 1989, Saudi Arabia in 1990, and Israel in 1992 ( 3 ).

( 2 ) Scobell, Andrew, and Alireza Nader. *China in the Middle East: the Wary Dragon*. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif., 2016, p. 4.

( 3 ) Scobell, p. 4.



Increasingly, with the end of the Cold War, the Chinese role has been rising in the Middle East, focusing almost entirely on the economy. And after being viewed by Beijing as a secondary region, the Middle East has become more prominent in China's national security calculations, becoming a vital source of oil, and a primary destination for Chinese goods and investments.

In parallel with the development of trade relations, China has followed a cautious policy towards the Middle East states, as it has not taken a position in support of any party over the others, like a merchant who remains neutral so that his trade is not affected. Whenever Beijing sides with Arab issues in the UN-Security Council, this matter is to serve its commercial interests in the region.

With the beginning of the new millennium, Chinese factories and companies began to invade the Middle East markets, with various types of goods, like industrial, agricultural and medical equipment to auto parts to household and electrical appliances, and other traditional and modern goods that attract traders.

In that period, it was the merchants of the region who went to China, to buy goods, based on the previous experiences of their counterparts, and depending on general knowledge about the prices and types of goods. Many merchants were using the newly emerging Internet in the Middle East, to communicate via e-mails with Chinese factories and companies, to make deals and buy goods or to organize visits to Chinese cities, including, for example, the southern city of "Guangzhou" (4).

The wave of commercial flights from the Middle East to China has been accompanied by a gradual development in the movement of aircraft from Middle Eastern cities to China, leading to the organization of direct long-haul flights between some Arab cities and Chinese ones.

(4) The capital of Guangdong Province, northwest of Hong Kong, is one of the major Chinese cities.



Anyway, it could be said that China entered the Middle East commercially without making major marketing and advertising efforts, or pursuing a policy of sending official or private delegations, as it relied heavily on advertising through the merchants themselves who visited PRC. It was thus the merchants of the Middle East who went to the China's factories and annual fairs, and brought its merchandise that swept the region. All the factories in China were doing was focusing on increasing and developing production.

Paradoxically, the "Silk Road", which was popular for centuries, relied on merchants from other countries, who came to China in search of goods, while the Chinese people rarely walked on that road ( 5 ).

Perhaps the important factor, which made Chinese trade with the world advanced, is that China gradually improved its own reputation given it used to produce shoddy products, alternatively, it maintained the option of producing cheap goods, but at advanced qualities. Admittedly, it has been imitating global goods, but as time passes it has its own goods and attractive products in all fields.

One of the factors attracting merchants is that Chinese factories allow, on a large scale, to adopt any brand name invented by merchants, to be marketed in their countries, which opened the way towards building strong and long-term relationships between merchants and the factories they deal with.

In recent years, Chinese factories have begun to manufacture heavy equipment and precision components by own, after importing them from Japan and South Korea, including key parts in electrical and medical-tech.

In addition, many international companies are now manufacturing their goods in China, where these companies are not only looking for cheap, but also skilled labor, as well as raw materials. And if the international brands manufactured in China are not considered Chinese, but they give the country an important reputation, and greater popularity at the global level, in addition to that its industry inside China contributes to the development of the industrial sector, and attracts huge funds and investments, and also lead to operating production lines, ports and all sectors which is related to industry and export.

( 5 ) Alterman, John B. «China, the United States, and the Middle East.» The Red Star and the Crescent: China and the Middle East, edited by James Reardon-Anderson, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 58-37, p. 41.



In parallel to the above, China has worked to develop its human resources to serve its commercial expansion around the world, as many of Chinese young people study international trade, or equivalent academic courses, while learning foreign languages, especially English, in order to build the capabilities of dealing with the world commercially, and marketing Chinese products and investments. It is noteworthy that many marketing and public relations employees in Chinese companies and factories use Western style nicknames to communicate with world traders, including Middle Eastern merchants, instead of their Chinese real names, which are difficult to be understood by nationals from a wide range of countries.



## China Rush

In recent years, China has taken a consistent approach in developing its trade relations with the countries of the world, including the countries of the Middle East, as it has been advancing steadily step by step, albeit slowly at times.

Moreover, in the context of this progress, and after China had focused on attracting and receiving merchants, it is now the one who takes the initiative sending Chinese official and private delegations, publishing advertisements in countries around the world, including the countries of the Middle East. This approach enabled China to launch developed relations with those countries, which gradually moved from exporting goods and importing oil, to making investments and then establishing diplomacy and military relations.

Based on this approach, for several years, China has become a major trading partner for the countries of the region, and its investment projects have become the center of attention and an important source of production for these countries. Chinese investments and contracts in the Arab countries (the Middle East and North Africa minus the Horn of Africa) increased from \$ 2.51 billion in 2005, to \$ 57.59 billion in 2010, to 115.41\$ billion in 2015, and then to \$ 196.93 billion in 2020.

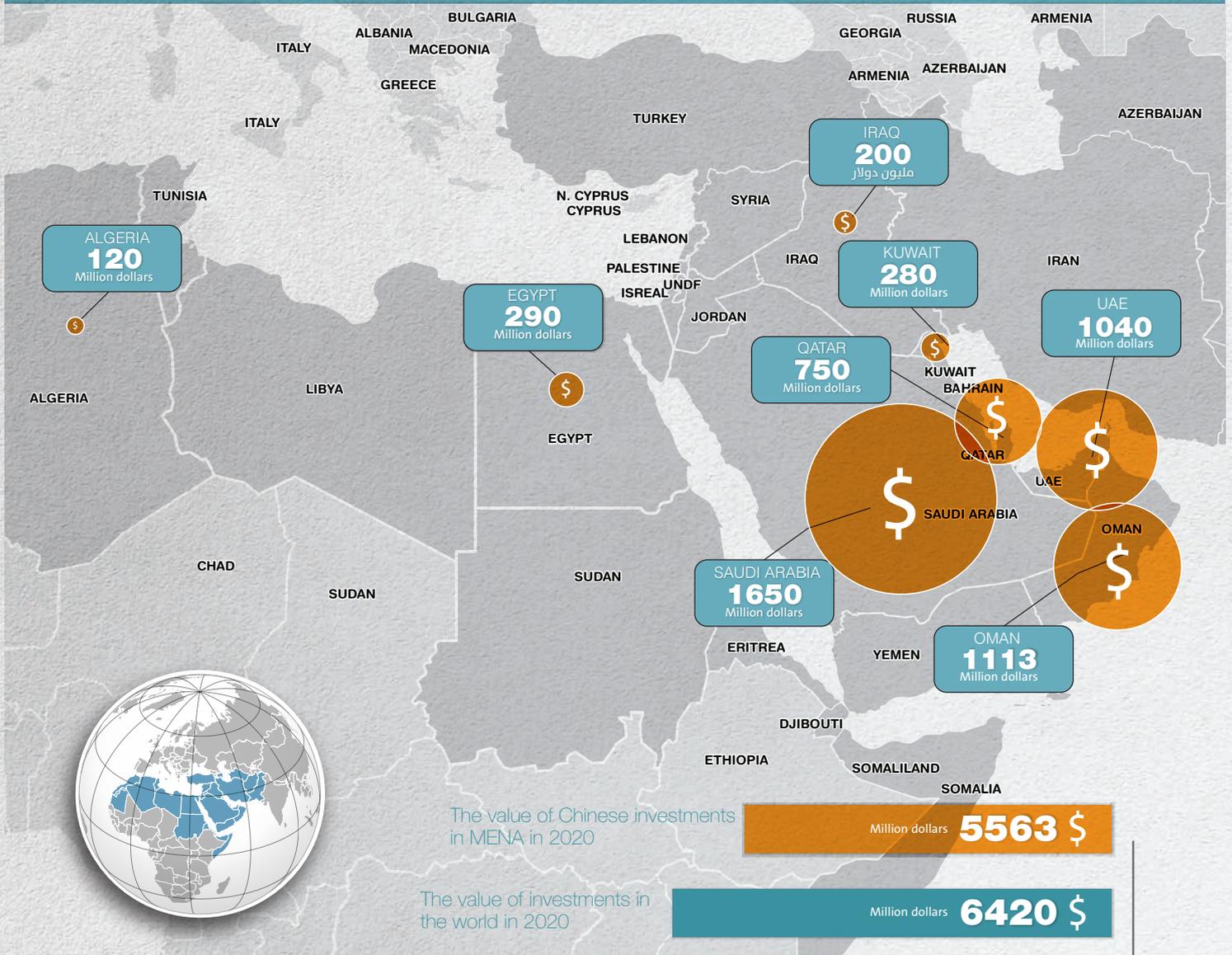
Chinese investments and contracts in the Middle East, which vary from oil and gas (the largest) to – respectively - energy, airports, railways, roads, and others, increased by 22.37\$ billion in 2018, bringing that increase to 5.82\$ billion in 2020, due to the COVID19- “Coronavirus” epidemic and its great effects on China and the entire world (6). The infrastructure projects in the Middle East, which were outsourced to Chinese contractors, valued at 13.8\$ billion in 2014, and \$ 24.9 billion in 2018 (7).

(6) China Global Investment Tracker - AEI. [www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/](http://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/).

(7) «Oil and Gas Projects Led by Chinese Contractors in the Middle East Stand at US75,3\$bn.» GlobalData.

# Figure 1

## Mapping Chinese investments in MENA countries in 2020



Source:  
American Enterprise Institute for  
Public Policy Research, China  
Global Investment Tracker

The percentage of investments in the  
MENA in 2020 with Chinese investments  
in all the world of the same year

In a look at 2019, that is, before the outbreak of COVID19- “Coronavirus” epidemic, data issued by the PRC Ministry of Commerce showed that the volume of trade between China and the Arab countries reached 266.4 billion US dollars, an increase of %9 on a year-on-year basis.

Chinese imports from Arab countries amounted to 146\$ billion in 2019, an increase of %4.8 year-on-year. In the same period, Chinese exports to Arab countries amounted to 120.4\$ billion, an increase of 14.7 percent on an annual basis. The data showed that Chinese direct investments in all Arab countries amounted to 1.42 billion US dollars in 2019, an increase of %18.8. ( 8 )

In November 2019, oil and gas projects implemented by Chinese companies in the Middle East and North Africa amounted to 75.3\$ billion ( 9 ).

Saudi Arabia has the largest the volume of investment relations with China amongst Arab countries, where the value of investments and contracts between 2005 and 2020, valued at \$ 39.86 billion, followed by the UAE with \$ 34.7 billion, then Algeria with \$ 23.85 billion, Iraq with \$ 23.78 billion, then Egypt with \$ 23 billion.

In parallel, the value of Chinese investments and contracts in Iran amounted to 26.56\$ billion between 2005 and 2020. Last March, China and Iran signed a -25year strategic partnership agreement, leaks indicated the agreement allows Beijing to buy Iranian oil, in defiance of US sanctions on Tehran. In return, Iran allows China to invest across the country ( 10 ).

( 8 ) Trade volume between China and Arab countries in 2019 amounted to 266,4\$ billion, Xinhua Agency, May 2020 ,5, [http://arabic.news.cn/05/05-2020/c\\_139031604.htm](http://arabic.news.cn/05/05-2020/c_139031604.htm)

( 9 ) «Oil and Gas Projects Led by Chinese Contractors in the Middle East Stand at US75,3\$bn.» GlobalData.

( 10 ) Bowen, Jeremy. Has Iran become China's gateway to strengthening its influence in the Middle East? BBC Arabic, April 2021 ,1, [www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast56589117-](http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast56589117-)



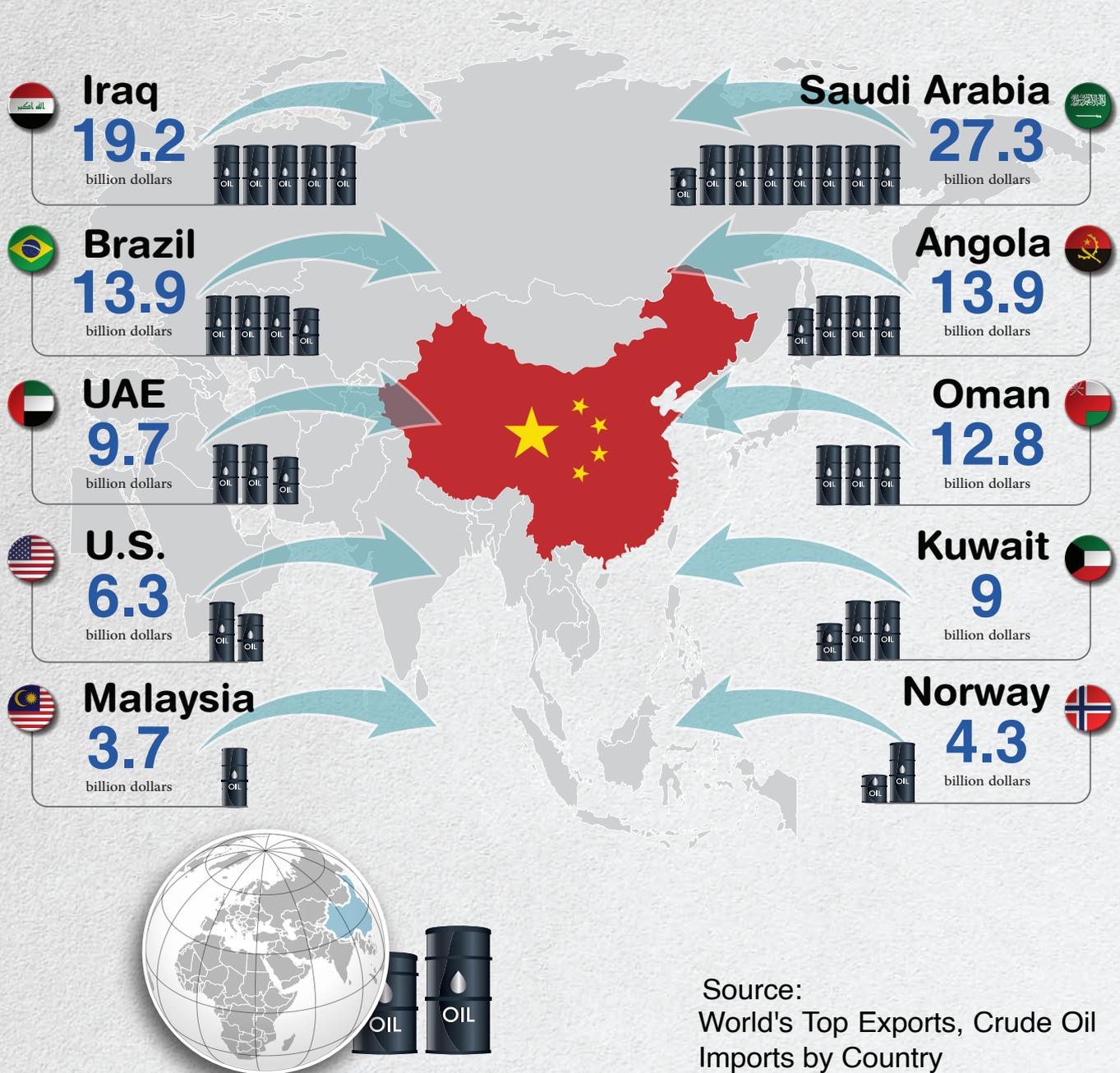
China's demand for energy sources is rising, while the Middle East region has two-thirds of the world's proven oil reserves and advanced infrastructure for oil transportation and refining. As of 2015, China became the world's largest importer of crude oil, half of which came from the Middle East. <sup>(11)</sup> In 2019, China imported %16.8 of its total crude oil imports from Saudi Arabia alone. <sup>(12)</sup>

(11) Scobell, Andrew. «China's Search for Security in the Greater Middle East.» *The Red Star and the Crescent: China and the Middle East*, edited by James Reardon-Anderson, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 36-13, p. 13.

(12) Workman, Daniel. »Top 15 Crude Oil Suppliers to China.« *World's Top Exports*, 2 Dec. 2020, [www.worldstopexports.com/top-15-crude-oil-suppliers-to-china/](http://www.worldstopexports.com/top-15-crude-oil-suppliers-to-china/).

# Figure 2

## Top Ten Crude Oil Suppliers to China in 2020





The GCC countries are among China's fastest growing partners, but not only because of the increasing import of oil by China, but also because of the many types of goods that China exports to the Gulf states. Chinese investments in the Gulf states were concentrated in the sectors of energy, real estate and infrastructure development (13).

China cooperates with the Gulf GCC states through investment funds. For example, in 2015, the UAE and China established a strategic investment fund of 10\$ billion between the Abu Dhabi Investment Group "Mubadala" and the China Development Bank (14).

On March 2021 ,28, the UAE and China launched the joint project " "Life Sciences and Vaccine Manufacturing". According to the announcement, the first line of manufacturing and production of the "COVID19-" vaccine was inaugurated in the UAE between the UAE's G42 Group and the Chinese CNBG Sinopharm Group.

"The UAE and China today inaugurated a new chapter in their historic and distinguished relations, under the title 'Strategic Partnership for Humanity', said "Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation during the launch of the project with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi in Abu Dhabi. In turn, Peng Xiao, the CEO of the UAE "G42" Group, which oversaw Phase 3 trials of the Sinopharm vaccine in the UAE, said the initiative would "revolutionise the life sciences industry in the region over the coming years" (15).

About 200,000 Chinese nationals live in the UAE, constituting %2.11 of the country's total population (16).

(13) Yahya, Maha. «How Has China's Role in the Middle East Evolved?». Carnegie Middle East Center, [carnegie-mec.org/26/09/2019/how-has-china-s-role-in-middle-east-evolved-pub79930-](https://carnegie-mec.org/26/09/2019/how-has-china-s-role-in-middle-east-evolved-pub79930-).

(14) «Oil and Gas Projects Led by Chinese Contractors in the Middle East Stand at US75,3\$bn.» GlobalData.

(15) "Abdullah bin Zayed and the Chinese FM launch the 'Life Sciences and Vaccine Manufacturing in the UAE' project." Emirates News Agency (WAM), March 2021 ,28, [wam.ae/ar/details/1395302922203](https://wam.ae/ar/details/1395302922203)

(16) GMI Blogger. «UNITED ARAB EMIRATES POPULATION STATISTICS (2021).» Official GMI Blog, 3 June 2021 [www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-population-statistics/](https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-population-statistics/).



Among them are those who serve customers in Africa and Europe, and some of them prefer to do trade with China in the UAE instead of traveling there (17). It is worthy to note that with the increase in Chinese goods in the UAE, major expansions have been made in recent years to "Dragon Mart", a commercial mall for Chinese goods, on the outskirts of Dubai (18).

Further, the Chinese government provides tens of \$USbns as annual aids in the form of loans and grants in many Middle Eastern countries, which makes China a partner in development and charitable work, especially in economically unstable countries. In the summer of 2018, at a meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in Beijing, China pledged US23\$bn in loans and development aid to the region. This identified the UAE's Khalifa Port, Oman's Duqm, Saudi Arabia's Jizan, and Egypt's Port Said and Ain Sokhna as key projects that China will develop in association with the BRI in the Middle East. (19)

It should be noted that China is the largest foreign investor in the world, as its total investments abroad since 2005 exceeded two thousand billion \$US. In 2020, activity abroad declined due to COVID19- "Coronavirus" epidemic, but the numbers are expected to return to a steady increase.

The rise in the volume of trade is not only with the Middle East, but is part of a significant rise with many regions of the world. Chinese trade with Central Asia, for example, rose to 46\$ billion in 2012, from 527\$ million in 1992 (20).

(17) Alterman, John B. «China, the United States, and the Middle East.» *The Red Star and the Crescent: China and the Middle East*, edited by James Reardon-Anderson, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 58-37, p. 42.

(18) Scott, Andrew. «Nakheel Triples Retail Space in Dragon Mart with Opening of Extension.» *The National*, 10 Nov. 2015, [www.thenationalnews.com/business/nakheel-triples-retail-space-in-dragon-mart-with-opening-of-extension1,29913-](http://www.thenationalnews.com/business/nakheel-triples-retail-space-in-dragon-mart-with-opening-of-extension1,29913-).

(19) «Oil and Gas Projects Led by Chinese Contractors in the Middle East Stand at US75,3\$bn.» *GlobalData*.

(20) «The Great Well of China.» *The Economist*, 20 June 2015, [www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/18/06/2015/the-great-well-of-china](http://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/18/06/2015/the-great-well-of-china).



## The Belt and Road Initiative

China is the largest exporter of goods in the world, and has always been looking for ways to make its own markets more accessible by the Middle East, Africa, Europe and America. For this purpose, it has established industrial cities and factories in many countries in the Middle East, to be close to export destinations.

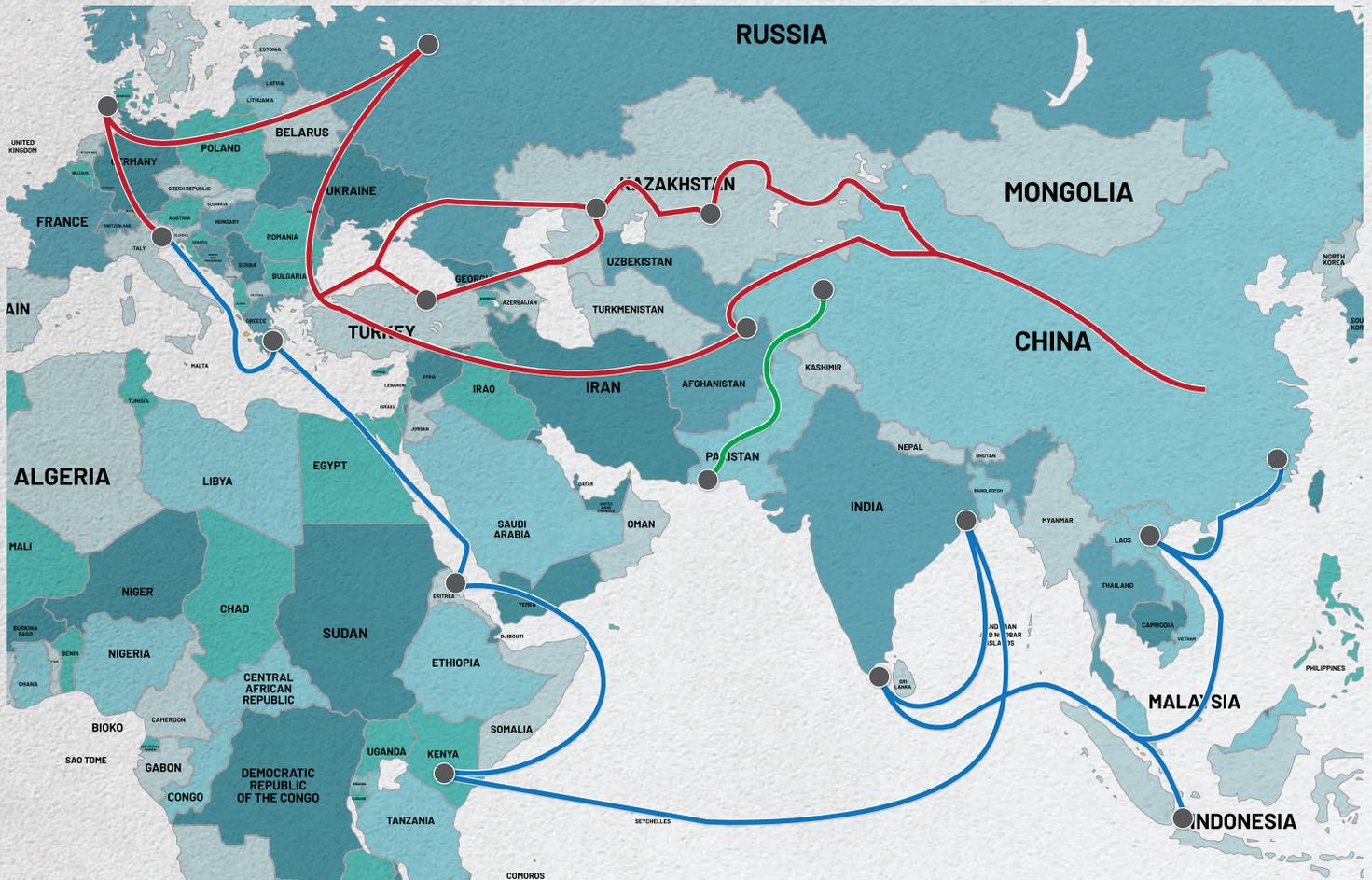
China, which is still expanding at the four points of the compass and flooding global markets with its commodities, is no longer satisfied with the traditional sea and air routes, but has moved, in recent years, to the stage of opening highways through a transportation project inspired by the ancient "Silk Road".

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the "Belt and Road" initiative (also known as "One Belt, One Road"), to connect China with the world, through the largest infrastructure project in history. This initiative, which was built on the ruins of the ancient "Silk Road", aims to connect Asia with Africa and Europe, through sea and land transportation networks, to increase trade and promote economic growth.

Traditionally, the "Silk Road"/ Silk Route is a historical road that used to extend from Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), the ancient capital of China, to Europe through Central Asia and the Middle East, and through which goods, most famously silk, were transported, and it continued to flourish for many centuries.

# Figure 3

## The Belt and Road Initiative's path



Economic Corridor connected China, Central Asia and West Asia ————  
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor ————  
Maritime Silk Road ————



The new "Silk Road", for which billions of US dollars in investments have been allocated, includes many countries from Europe to Central Asia, and aims to build new railways, energy pipelines, marine roads and highways in Eurasia, and make logistics services more rapid.

This road crosses three overland tracks. The first links China with Europe through Central Asia, while the second extends from China to Central and Western Asia and the Arabian Gulf region, all the way to the Mediterranean, while the third path runs from China to Southeast Asia, then South Asia, and the Indian Ocean.

Last December, the export train traveled between Turkey and China, from Istanbul to the city of Xi'an, and the journey took 12 days. The train traveled 8,693 kilometers through Georgia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to China. And of course, this train connects China to Europe, via Turkey.

It should be noted that the shipment of goods by land, in organized and regular railroads, may be more attractive, due to the factor of speed, which is what merchants are looking for. If trains are less able than ships to accommodate large containers, it is possible to use smaller containers, but with a larger number.

Chinese companies and factories plan to take advantage of the new Silk Road to reach the Middle East markets in a broader and faster way, which would move trade relations between China and the countries of the region, and thus the Chinese presence in them, to higher levels in the coming years.

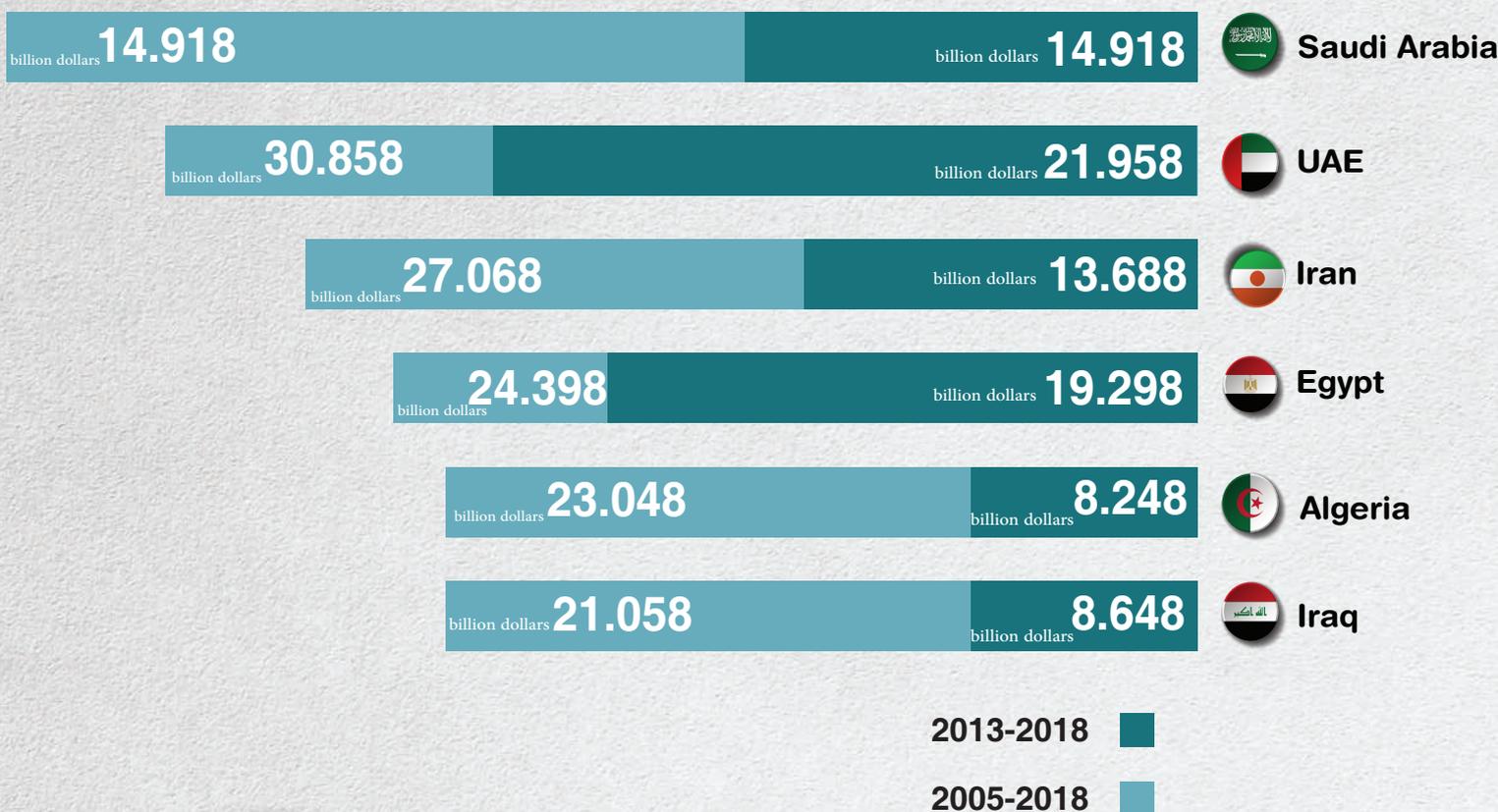
In his speech at the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum, in June 2014, the Chinese President explained his country's strategy called "1 + 2 + 3", which is a comprehensive strategy aimed at developing "China-Arab" economic relations in the fields of energy, trade and investments, in addition to three high and new tech fields of nuclear energy, space satellite and new energy as new breakthroughs.

The "1 + 2 + 3" strategy is linked to the potential and opportunities that the "Silk Road" will provide, with a focus on geoeconomics rather than geopolitical considerations (21).

(21) Sun, Degang. China's Soft Military Presence in the Middle East. MEI@11, 75 March 2015, [www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-soft-military-presence-middle-east](http://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-soft-military-presence-middle-east)

## Figure 4

### Comparing China's Investments in MENA Countries Before and After the Belt and Road Initiative



Average Annual Growth Rate (AAGR) after the Initiative

**39%**

Source:  
China's Global Investments Are Declining Everywhere Except for One Region, Foreign Policy, 16/5/2019



## Second: Chinese military expansion

In the wake of the escalation of its trade and investment relations with the countries of the Middle East, China began to gain a soft military presence in a number of these countries. In fact, if this military presence is due, in particular, to the need to protect commercial and investment interests, then it cannot depart from the consistent Chinese approach to slowly and gradually progress, towards higher ranks, in the relationship with the Middle East, and thus in influence within the countries of the region in general.

China's military expansion is politically feasible due to Beijing's strong record of adherence to the principles of non-alignment, (22) respect for international boundaries, and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs, according to observers. Of course, it cannot be compared to the American presence in the region, as the United States has several military bases, in which thousands of soldiers reside, and which contain advanced equipment and weapons.

Furthermore, since elements of the Chinese navy were dispatched to Somali waters in 2008, China has launched joint anti-piracy exercises and naval visits to neighboring countries and regions in an effort to exercise military diplomacy. It has also built interim technical service stops in Djibouti, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan (23).

The gradual Chinese development, at the level of military presence in the region, resulted in the first military base of Beijing in the Arab world, specifically in Djibouti. Coinciding with the 90th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army, on August 2017 ,1, Beijing inaugurated that military base, which is China's first military base outside its borders.

( 22 ) Sun, Degang. China's Soft Military Presence in the Middle East. MEI@11 ,75 March 2015  
[www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-soft-military-presence-middle-east](http://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-soft-military-presence-middle-east)

( 23 ) Sun, Degang. China's Soft Military Presence in the Middle East. MEI@11 ,75 March 2015,  
[www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-soft-military-presence-middle-east](http://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-soft-military-presence-middle-east)



In 2016, China began planning the construction of the base, for use in supplying naval forces ships that participate in peacekeeping and relief missions off the coasts of Yemen and Somalia, declaring that it is nothing but a logistic base, knowing that Chinese President Xi Jinping is overseeing a program to modernize the army includes developing the capabilities of the army to operate far from the country's borders. (24)

In line with the Chinese military expansion, the Russian endeavors to establish a naval base in Sudan, which began with the regime of Omar al-Bashir, have resulted in an agreement to establish a base in Port Sudan, which will be a major foothold for the Kremlin in the Red Sea, and its first base in the Continent of Africa. Under this agreement, the ship "Admiral Grigorovich" arrived at the port last February, to be the first Russian ship to dock in the port, in the new Russian history.

Port Sudan, which is located 675 km northeast of the capital, Khartoum, and due to the recent crises, it has been brought to the forefront, and been a key port for Russia, which found it as an opportunity to expand outside the Mediterranean, at the coasts that had experienced previously the military presence of Moscow, before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The "Russian-Sudanese" agreement, which will extend over 25 years, which was announced on December 8 and aims to "support peace and stability in the region", allows Moscow to simultaneously send four ships and 300 personnel to the base to be established, in the capital of the Red Sea State, the city that is considered a main gateway to Sudan and Africa. Besides, the agreement also gives Moscow the right to use Sudanese airports to transport weapons, ammunition and equipment, to support the military base in Port Sudan. This greatly alleviates the need for long journeys and traversing geopolitical fjords.

The Russian military event, in fact, creates an uproar about the "Russian - American" competition in the region and the world, as Port Sudan has become a new focus for this competition, after Sudan was removed from the US list of terrorism. But indeed, the reality of the scene, despite its importance, is greater

(24) China opens the first international military base in Djibouti. Reuters, 1 August 2017.  
[www.reuters.com/article/china-djibouti-na-4idARAKBN1AH3W9](http://www.reuters.com/article/china-djibouti-na-4idARAKBN1AH3W9)



than the traditional US-Russian rivalry. Moscow, through its presence in Port Sudan, will be close to Beijing's base in Djibouti.

Thus, the importance of the Russian base, which is not a large one, and of course smaller than the military base in the Syrian city of Tartus in the eastern Mediterranean, lies not only in being Russia's first base in Africa, but also because it makes the arms of the "Chinese-Russian" alliance extend together in a strategic area. It is important on the borders of Africa, near the Bab al-Mandab strait, through which about 700 billion dollars of global trade pass annually, and millions of barrels of oil daily.

The Red Sea, and through the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which connects the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean, passing through the Red Sea, has always been a historical geopolitical destination from Alexander the Great to Napoleon, to our time. Consequently, the close cooperation between the Chinese and Russian powers in this region will have important geopolitical effects, especially since Beijing has always stressed that the comprehensive strategic cooperation with Moscow must be deepened internationally, which Russia also confirms.

Likely, the significant political changes that are taking place in East Africa, specifically in Sudan and Ethiopia, tempt economic, military investment and consequently the political investment, especially since the southern region of the Red Sea has more complicated state, witnessing many disturbances, whether in western Yemen or eastern Eritrea, to the Bab al-Mandab region in Somalia. All of this would be a matter of serious concern for the United States and its allies, starting with economic files in the region, through global trade, and, of course, to security and military issues.

The "Russian-Chinese-American" military competition will make the Red Sea a "mined area" military site in terms of geopolitics, especially since in political science, military presence does not mean merely a logistical presence, but rather gives a political impetus, encouraging intervention in all affairs. Right now, each of Russia and China are there, and military bases, when established, do not end except with major events, as happened with the Soviet Union collapse.



## Third: China-US Conflict

The "China-US" conflict is now a fact of life in many parts around the world, either to be open or inner. If this conflict is not similar to the "American-Soviet" one during the Cold War, as the latter was dominated by declared armed struggle, which almost led to a third world war as well as the arming of allied regimes in each of the two alliances, but the China-US conflict is no less fierce behind the scenes. Especially with the economic and security competition between the two countries, and the mounting American fears of China, on several fronts.

The difference between the Cold War and the "China-US" conflict is that one of the two sides of the latter conflict, specifically Beijing, does not speak out and does not defy forcefully, but rather slowly and with soft power move towards its development and expansion in the regions all over the world. Herein lies the problem of the United States, whose officials do not agree on a unified approach to China.

Undoubtedly, referring to this matter there is an endless debate in Washington between intelligence men and politicians, and between successive administrations, about who is more dangerous to the United States, Russia or China, with a great tendency to consider China to be the most dangerous competitor, as it is developing comprehensively, in the fields of economy, technology and arms as its influence expands in the world.

The non-stop Chinese development makes the problem of the relationship between Washington and Beijing more complex, as the ideological conflict between capitalism and communism has become a secondary idea, not what feed the US officials warnings from China, or what leads Chinese officials in their responses to US actions in general.

The United States is concerned about China, the second most powerful economy, that extracts many economic roles from the United States, and likely it



will remove US from the top economic power in the world by 2028, after the American economy was five times larger than the Chinese economy in 2005.

The problem with China is that as it expands globally, it finds itself dependent more and more on regions of the world in which it has little influence, and needs to expand into a system that has been influenced by others for decades.

In particular, as China expands, it finds itself in contact with the United States, which is neither a clear competitor nor a clear adversary (25).

One of the theaters of the "American-Chinese" conflict is the Middle East, where China is constantly expanding in trade and investment relations, accompanied by a slight but steady military expansion, which worries the United States, as it has the strongest influence in the region, especially in the Gulf states.

American influence, for sure, differs from Chinese one in the Middle East, whether in size, or in motives, taking into consideration that the United States has a history of relationship with countries in the region that stretches back decades, and the presence of a main pillar that always pulls Washington towards the Middle East, which is Israel.

Despite China began years ago with narrow interests, it has greatly developed its relations with Washington's allies, as well as with US archenemy Iran, according to the figures we presented earlier, which poses a threat to the interests and influence of the United States. Washington is facing a Chinese strategy that focuses on importing oil from the region, and at the same time on exporting large and complex investments. Therefore, it differs from Washington's approach to Arab oil, and how it has worked to benefit from it over the past decades.

In the same context, some observers attribute China's growing interest in the Middle East to the fact that Beijing is reacting to the US policy of rebalancing in Asia, which was announced by the Obama-led administration in 2012 (26). That administration has made rebalancing in Asia a priority in its foreign policy and has worked to strengthen defense alliances and military cooperation with countries in the region, amid the growing military power of China.

(25) Alterman, John B. «China, the United States, and the Middle East.» *The Red Star and the Crescent: China and the Middle East*, edited by James Reardon-Anderson, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 58-37, p. 37.

(26) Scobell, Andrew, and Alireza Nader. *China in the Middle East: the Wary Dragon*. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif., 2016, p. 1.



## Following in the footsteps of Africa

The competition between China and the United States in the Middle East is very similar to what happened and is still happening in Africa, between Beijing and Washington too, where the struggle for influence rages on the continent. In order to understand the difference between the American and the Chinese strategies, it is useful to go over some facts, given that Arab African countries represent a part of Africa as a continent.

Africa, the second largest exporter of crude oil after the Middle East, is one of the richest continents in the world in terms of the volume of natural resources and precious raw materials, and it owns %10 of global reserves of oil, %8 of natural gas reserves, in addition to that it produces %80 of world's platinum, more than %40 of its diamonds, and %20 of its gold and cobalt.

China has opened up a reciprocal relationship with Africa based upon: China to take raw materials and to provide growth in turn. Beijing has stressed on many occasions that it is interested in enhancing Africa's own development capacity. Consequently, any city would show signals of security, stability, and the possibility of investment, China immediately rushes to dump such a promising city with Chinese products and commercial and development projects.



On the way from the ports of southern China to the Indian Ocean, there are unbroken line of ships queuing, as some of them cross Bab al-Mandeb, others land on the southern coast, or cross the Cape of Good Hope to the east, then overland to dozens of countries, which makes China the largest trading partner for Africa.

The United States, too, has its way to Africa, across the Atlantic. But the most powerful country in the world differs in how to treat Africa from China. The difference is in the strategy. Washington takes multiple paths, range from politics, military to economics, while Beijing has one track, which is the economy one, with a step-by-step military growth.

The Chinese "invasion" of Africa baffling the United States for years. In 2011, former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton expressed, in rhetorical terms that are closer to poetry than to politics, when she stressed, during her visit to Zambia, the need to "invest in peoples" and that investors should not undermine the good governance and natural wealth of African countries (27). In contrast, China's silent investments in Zambia amounted to 3.15\$ billion between 2005 and 2011 (28), with thousands of job opportunities being created.

However, with Republican President Donald Trump, America's appeal in Africa has been much lesser. When he was running for president, and after his vitriolic mockery of refugees, Muslims and Arabs, Trump opened fire on Africans, saying that they "need to be recolonized for another hundred years because they know nothing of leadership and independence," describing them as "lazy, stupid, glutton for food, obsessed with sex and violence." people (29).

Of course, the escalating role of China in Africa, not only can give clearer dimensions to the escalating Chinese role in the Middle East, but is likely to give that role a greater extent, given the economic and geopolitical overlap of the Middle East and Africa regions.

(27) "China ridicules Clinton's claims that Chinese influence in Africa may lead to neo-colonialism."  
"BBC Arabic, June 2011, 4, [https://www.bbc.com/arabic/worldnews/110614/06/2011\\_clinton\\_africa\\_china](https://www.bbc.com/arabic/worldnews/110614/06/2011_clinton_africa_china)

(28) China Global Investment Tracker - AEI. [www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/](http://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/).

(29) "Trump: Africans need a return to colonial rule." Al Jazeera Net, February 14, 2016,  
<https://bit.ly/3xRx2a5>



On the other hand, some observers may see that the comparison between Chinese influence in both the Middle East and Africa is not very fair, as the countries of the Middle East have great interests with the West, and an economic relation with the global system, including the banking system, unlike many African countries that will not suffer the loss of key interests with the West in exchange for its fruitful relations with China.

## Fourth: Expectations of the development of Chinese influence

In fact, in considering the international relations and the paths of formation and expansion of the leverage of major countries, expectations that give more sense and applicable analysis are based on the pattern that the target state has always followed, and the events, statistics and figures that accompany this pattern, and their regularity in specific frameworks.

In the case of Chinese relations with the Middle East states, and the consequent Chinese influence in the region, it is difficult to make any predictions for the future, based on the consistent approach in the development of those relations, including all kinds of trade and investment ties. The question that must be put forward: To what extent can those relations develop between China and the Middle East, and thus Chinese influence in the region?

Nevertheless, in the foreseeable future, it does not seem that there are clear reasons that will make the gradual rise in the volume of trade and investment relations stop, except in temporary exceptional cases, as happened with the spread of COVID19- “Corona” epidemic in 2020, something that applied to global activity as a whole, and not to Chinese activity in the Middle East, which soon was refreshed after few countries have succeeded in reversing the epidemic due to vaccination campaigns.

As a result, within the framework of stable development, which did not bend down in the previous decades, it is expected that the Chinese presence in the Middle East will gradually increase, which means that it is deepening the process of networking with the public and private sectors in the countries of the region.

Of course, the development in trade relations, the volume of investments and the expansion of networking relations with the countries of the region, would gradually develop into more Chinese influence, first economically, then political and military leverage.



If the Chinese soft military power was created in the region, to protect commercial and investment interests, then it is expected that China will go on in such an approach, especially with the expansion of its network of relations and frameworks in various countries of the region, with the possibility of developing cooperation in military industries and joint exercises, or Chinese military industries on the territories of the Middle East.

All of the above indicates the possibility of increasing Chinese influence in the Middle East significantly, in the near future.

The escalating trend of the Middle East geostrategic role for China is illustrated in the Chinese analysts' use of the term "Greater Middle East", which includes, in addition to the traditional Middle East, parts of Central and South Asia (30).

On the other hand, China may try to stick to its historical approach, through a policy of non-alignment, non-interference, and of course not clashing with any other influence, as in the case of American leverage in the Middle East. It is true that China is a strong country, but it does not act in the Middle East according to this fact (31), as it tries to avoid everything that hinders its trade and investments. A researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, "Ying Gang," says that even if China becomes a superpower, with an economy comparable to that of the United States, "it will not play a major role in the Middle East." (32)

This very view is supported by the current facts, from which it can be concluded that China is still cautious in the Middle East, where, according to observers, it exercises something similar to heavy weight in the economy, light weight in diplomacy, and featherweight in the military.

(30) Scobell, Andrew, «China's Search for Security in the Greater Middle East.» *The Red Star and the Crescent: China and the Middle East*, edited by James Reardon-Anderson, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp.36-13, p. 33.

(31) SCHENKER, DAVID. «China's Middle East Footprint.» *Los Angeles Times*, 26 Apr. 2013 [www.latimes.com/opinion/la-xpm-2013-apr-26-la-oe-0426-schenker-china-middle-east-20130426-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/opinion/la-xpm-2013-apr-26-la-oe-0426-schenker-china-middle-east-20130426-story.html).

(32) Wong, Edward, and Chris Buckley. «China Dips a Toe into Middle East Peace.» *The New York Times*, 8 May 2013, [www.nytimes.com/09/05/2013/world/asia/china-dips-a-toe-into-mideast-diplomacy.html](http://www.nytimes.com/09/05/2013/world/asia/china-dips-a-toe-into-mideast-diplomacy.html).



## Conclusion

What does China really want? Which view will reflect the reality?

Would the Chinese influence step up in the Middle East, or China will not play a significant role in the Middle East in the future?

Surely, Beijing, through its state-owned companies or its private ones, will not hesitate to continue expanding its relations with both the public and private sectors in the countries of the region, while trade relations are expected to escalate gradually, as happened in the recent years, according to what we previously mentioned. Knowing that entering into new economic partnerships and sustainable development projects would open the way to strengthening and multiplying relations and establishing more and more ties.

Moreover, if China is able to control the amount of pressure it could put on the countries of the region, in politics and the degree of military presence, so can it resort to “brake” the extending of its trade and investment relations, with the accompanying soft military deployment in the region?

As a matter of fact, it is difficult to be achieved, not only because the process of controlling the degree of developing influence is not an easy thing, but also because the Middle East has become a vital region for China, as a trading partner, and as a major source of oil.

In addition, the region has become linked, according to the Chinese considerations, to the broader circle of the country and its economic and security stability as well.

Undoubtedly, Beijing's gradual transition from one stage to another in its relations with the Middle East, especially from the stage of attracting merchants to the stage of marketing on the ground, and then aggressively rushing towards the new "Silk Road", massive investments, and major partnerships, as well as developing the military presence, whether it was through soft power or through military base in Djibouti, all indications that traditional China, which used to subscribe to neutrality or having trade relations, is likely to be ending.

The world is witnessing a new Chinese strategy based on massive and advanced production and making progress in various economic, technological and security fields, in parallel with a great rush to most countries of the world.



This strategy, which will place the country on the economic throne of the world for several years, will pose a new reality that Beijing can never ignore seeking getting its political- if not military- fruits, all over the world, including the Middle East.

At the very least, therefore, China is expected to become more involved in diplomatic and military activities in the region, leading to the possibility of building alliances and seeking to establish new military bases.

In parallel, China has a place in a political axis, including Russia and some allies in the Middle East or outside it beside China. None of this axis components constitutes a real competition for China in the ability to strengthen trade and investment relations with the Middle East.

Russia is trying to build some new partnerships and expand its trade relations in the region. For example, its trade relations with the UAE witnessed a strong push in June 2018, when Russian President, Vladimir Putin and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh "Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan" signed in Moscow, the declaration of the strategic partnership between the two countries (33). Despite COVID19- "Corona" epidemic spread in 2020 in a wide scale, which caused a great stagnation in the movement of trade universally, the trade exchange between Russia and the UAE continued to progress, as "Lavrov" announced last December, that during the nine months of 2020, the volume of trade exchange between the two countries increased by more than %60.

But these relationships with Russia will not be able to compete with China's economic invasion in the Middle East, and therefore will not threaten China's interests. On the contrary, whenever it remains within certain and limited frameworks, it will be in the interest of Beijing, Moscow's ally in many political files, and most importantly, the joint alliance in confronting Washington.

(33) The declaration stipulated "the establishment of a strategic partnership for the existing relations between the UAE and Russia, including the political, security, commercial, economic and cultural fields, in addition to the humanitarian, scientific, technological and tourism fields." The declaration also promoted "dialogue and consultations on major bilateral, regional and international issues of mutual political interest."



Besides, observers believe that the tendency to believe that Chinese influence will increase in the Middle East reduces the importance of the difference between American influence and the Chinese one in terms of military and diplomatic affairs. No one single influence can be greater unless the competing one declines, and thus how will things be in the face of American influence?

Of course, China will not try to provoke the United States directly. Its declared primary goal is economic expansion, and its policy is based on a lot of deliberation and long-run policy. This policy has worked in the past, and is expected to bring good results in the future, even in the face of American influence.

Some obstacles to the expansion of China's influence are represented in the desires of the Middle Eastern countries themselves, and the extent to which Washington can pressure them to "halt" Chinese projects, and put an end to the rise of Beijing's leverage. This is now in favor of the United States, which has for decades built close structural relations with the countries of the region, especially the Gulf states, while it is unlikely that the latter will tend to provoke the American administrations, or to take the risk of be in conflict with global systems of which it is a part or with systems controlled by the United States, including the banking system.

The bottom line here is that Washington is working to confront Chinese influence in the Middle East while it is burdened with political files, in contrast to Beijing's pragmatism, which does not care about political interventions, as it still places its priority in the economy and trade, not caring about the identity of the government and the nature of the regime, and perhaps with a small margin for politics to use if its role in the Security Council necessitates.



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[info@dimensionscenter.net](mailto:info@dimensionscenter.net)