



MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL
ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS



上海社会科学院
SHANGHAI ACADEMY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

The Belt and Road Initiative Ten Years On: China and the Middle East in a Changing Geopolitical Landscape



April 25-26, 2024
Shanghai, China





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This report has been compiled and edited by Adel Abdel Ghafar and Hana Elshehaby.

We extend our gratitude to all of the workshop's participants, organizers, and contributors, whose invaluable inputs and insights have made this report possible. Additionally, we thank the ME Council and SASS teams for their support in organizing this workshop and help in publishing and translating this report.

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Key Takeaways

Emerging Multipolar Order

China's relations with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are developing against the backdrop of an emerging multipolar world order. With the United States' future role in regional security uncertain, MENA states are gradually shifting their sights to new horizons. Since the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI's) launch in 2013, economic cooperation between China and the MENA region has grown significantly across various areas. However, China's expanding engagement faces challenges including U.S. pressure to limit Beijing's political and security cooperation with MENA countries.

Nascent shifts in global order are also driving great power competition in the Middle East and North Africa. The launch of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) last year signifies the West's efforts to counter the BRI's influence. These comprehensive projects also highlight the importance of regional and global connectivity in shaping great power-MENA states' relations. Competitive dynamics will be consequential to the future of China's relations with the Middle East and regional powers will have to strike a careful balance between their traditional partners and emerging alliances.

Expanding Diplomatic Efforts, Limited Security Role

In 2023, China brokered the Saudi-Iran peace deal which signaled Beijing's aspirations for a wider political role in the MENA region. While China's diplomatic footprint is expanding, its foreign policy continues to adhere to its long-standing principles of non-alignment and non-intervention. Escalating tensions in the Middle East might challenge this policy and push Beijing to play a wider role in regional politics and security. China will likely expand its mediation efforts and support regional peace initiatives but will come short of extending security guarantees.

Beijing's political ties with the Middle East will also be shaped by the region's growing disillusionment with the West. The United States' unwavering support for Israel in its war on Gaza, since late 2023, is casting doubt regarding Washington's commitment to the MENA region's security and driving regional powers to pursue alternative partners. The launch of frameworks such as the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022 will be crucial in shaping the future of China-MENA political cooperation, but many Middle Eastern and North African states will likely maintain close relations with the West considering Washington's role as the key architect of the region's security landscape.

Energy Remains Central to China-MENA Relations

The launch of the BRI in 2013 ushered a new era of China-MENA economic cooperation. China's investments in key infrastructure projects across the region have been a critical driver of the Middle East and North Africa's development. However, the expansion of China's investments is challenged by many MENA states' limited financing capacities. This has also raised concerns over a potential debt trap in which some borrowing countries could find themselves.

Despite efforts to diversify economic ties, energy remains integral to many MENA nations' economies. Beijing is still the world's largest oil importer, making the Middle East and North Africa an indispensable economic partner. Energy is also paving the way for developing strategic relations between China and regional powers. Looking ahead, energy will maintain its centrality, but global efforts toward facilitating the energy transition and China's efforts to increase its energy self-sufficiency will be in-

strumental to the future of China-MENA economic ties. The Gulf's abundant liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplies make it an important partner in this transition. China's strides in the wide-scale adoption of clean energy will further drive its cooperation with MENA states in facilitating an energy transition.

Chinese Technology Enhances MENA's Strategic Autonomy

Emerging technologies and infrastructure development are playing a significant role in Middle East and North African states' strategic coordination with China. Notably, leading Chinese technology provider Huawei is expanding regional access to advanced technologies. Political and strategic dimensions underlie growing technology ties between China and Middle East and North African countries.

The acquisition of Chinese technology is contributing to the MENA's economic modernization and increasing regional powers' strategic autonomy. Chinese technology is crucial for the ambitious national development plans of various MENA powers, including Saudi Arabia's National Vision 2030. However, mounting U.S.-led pressure on the MENA to limit technology cooperation with China may complicate relations. Such pressure will test the region's balancing act between Beijing and Washington, leaving a difficult road ahead for MENA countries' utilization of Chinese technology.

Cultural Exchange to Play a Pronounced Role in the Future of the BRI

Person-to-person cultural exchange is increasingly defining China-MENA relations. The BRI's promotion of global connectivity is highlighting cultural relations between China and the Middle East. Various countries across the region are now host to Confucius Institutes. These institutes reflect China's expanding soft power footprint. Beijing's emphasis on promoting cross-civilizational dialogue—through President Xi Jinping's Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)—is also centering the discourse around cultural connectivity in China's MENA diplomacy.

The wide-reaching influence of online platforms such as TikTok further reflects China's increasing social media influence. Expanding social and cultural connections between China and the Middle East will also enhance cooperation in key areas such as climate action. Elevated water scarcity levels and rising global temperatures make addressing climate change imperative for the MENA region's future. China's leading efforts on this front can inform regional climate policies.

China's Foreign Relations: Peace through Development

Rapid shifts in global order are heightening pressure on Beijing to consolidate its role as a political power. The MENA is increasingly looking to China's leadership as a potential alternative to the U.S.-led global order. As such, Beijing is poised to play an important diplomatic and political role in the region, but its approach will be grounded in harnessing peace through development. In driving development, China holds that peace can be achieved for the Middle East and North Africa at large. Mediation will also be key to China's diplomacy in the region.

China will continue to cultivate comprehensive relations with the MENA states and affirm its commitment to regional prosperity. The growth of multilateral coordination, through the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for instance, will also be vital to boosting China-MENA cooperation. Yet, security concerns in the Middle East and aspirations for a wider Chinese security presence in the area will complicate the future of political ties between Beijing and MENA capitals.

Introduction

Tarik M. Yousef & Wang Jian

2023 marked a decade since the establishment of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Over the course of the last ten years, the project has been indispensable to the development of China's relations with the Middle East and North Africa. The MENA region has also served as a strategic fulcrum for the implementation of the BRI. Today, amidst global political uncertainty and a rising multipolar order, MENA countries are becoming key allies of Beijing.

China has also become an important economic partner for countries in the Middle East. Energy exporting countries are seeking to diversify their economies beyond hydrocarbons as part of efforts to achieve ambitious national development strategies. Beijing has emerged as an integral partner in these processes. Meanwhile, non-energy exporting MENA countries are also seeking to modernize and develop their economies as they face socio-economic challenges which include high unemployment rates and demographic pressures.

China's focus on supporting the region's development efforts has significantly expanded Beijing's economic footprint across MENA states and made it a vital partner in building infrastructure projects. Besides infrastructure development, China has also been active in various sectors of MENA economies such as manufacturing, chemical industries, and technology.

Recent years have also witnessed increased China-MENA political coordination. In 2022, Beijing hosted the inaugural China-Arab States Summit and the China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit. These frameworks reflect the robustness of China-Middle East relations and both sides' commitments to enhancing cooperation. Moreover, Beijing's mediation between Saudi and Iran in 2023 further highlighted China's considerable diplomatic and political role in the region within the context of its Global Security Initiative (GSI). Following the outbreak of the war on Gaza late last year, China has also proposed a concrete road map for a two-state solution, pledged to host an international peace conference, and stressed that it would support reconstruction efforts.

To explore these issues and assess prospects for strengthening China-MENA ties, the Middle East Council on Global Affairs (ME Council) and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS) convened a two-day workshop in Shanghai, China. Over the course of the workshop, participants from across the MENA region and China comprehensively explored the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of relations between China and MENA countries. Attendees specifically explored the evolution of China-MENA ties since the establishment of the BRI in 2013. Sessions assessed future cooperation in a tumultuous geopolitical environment; the evolving security landscape in the Middle East and China's role; the BRI as a crucial channel driving cooperation on investments, trade, and finance; emerging tensions surrounding technology and infrastructure cooperation; the role of people-to-people cultural exchange in China-MENA relations and navigating future uncertainty through regional and global cooperation.

Escalating tensions globally and regionally necessitate cultivating the MENA states' ties with global powers. China is central to these efforts. Looking ahead, Beijing will likely not only inform the region's development trajectory but also facilitate de-escalation efforts in the Middle East and create a political environment conducive to the MENA's prosperity thereby illustrating China's importance on the global stage.

Session 1: Future Cooperation in a New Geopolitical Environment

Context:

Over the last decade, China has significantly expanded its cooperation with the MENA region through the BRI. However, the future of China-MENA relations is now complicated by a landscape of rapid changes in global and regional geopolitics. The United States' intensifying competition with China, an evolving multipolar world order, and escalating conflicts have heightened pressure on MENA states to balance upholding long-standing relations with Washington and pivoting toward establishing new alliances. These dynamics leave an uncertain future for China-MENA relations. How will these geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics impact China's cooperation with the MENA region and in what ways will increased great power competition pose challenges to this cooperation?

South-South Cooperation in a Post Bretton Woods World

Ding Yifan

The BRI is playing a crucial role in the integration of the Global South into the international economy. Prior to the BRI, countries across the Global South were largely dependent on Western markets. Today, China's trade volume with non-Western countries surpasses that with Western countries which signals a new era of South-South cooperation.

Strengthening MENA-China trade ties have also increasingly diversified Middle Eastern and North African countries' investments beyond security needs. Aiming to safeguard themselves from regional and global threats, most MENA states geared investments toward bolstering security capacities. Consequently, development came secondary to defense. However, this tendency to prioritize security concerns over development has begun to change following China's brokering of the Saudi-Iran peace deal last year. The Saudi-Iran deal increased prospects for wider regional peace, catalyzing the Middle East's interests in pursuing development-focused initiatives.

Economic cooperation with China has been integral to these efforts. Notably, earlier this year, five new members (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, and Ethiopia) were admitted into the BRICS. Expanding BRICS membership will likely further empower the Global South and foster greater economic cooperation among member states, increasingly strengthening South-South ties. This year also marked 80 years since the establishment of the Bretton Woods system which has achieved limited success in integrating the Global South into the international economy. This prompts a reassessment of the status quo. Promoting initiatives such as the BRI will enable the Global South to harness potential for a more equitable and inclusive global order.

Towards a New Understanding of Geopolitical Competition?

Bahgat Korany

Geopolitical competition has long been underpinned by a focus on understanding the role of geography in forming rivalries and alliances. Geographical considerations conventionally directed states' formulation of their respective foreign policies. While this territorial logic remains relevant, it is increasingly challenged by globalization and a shrinking world, necessitating a different approach to understand international dynamics.

China's BRI is reflective of this paradigm shift as it introduces a society-based approach rather than a conventional state-centric approach. Instead of merely linking countries, the BRI is connecting societies and communities across nations, fostering greater integration and interdependence. This shift empowers local communities and societies. It enhances state capacities and introduces a deeper understanding of geopolitical competition. However, territorial tensions amongst rivaling states persist. For instance, the introduction of competing initiatives to the BRI—such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)—partly illustrates ongoing competition for dominance over geographic spaces.

The existence of the IMEC highlights that traditional geopolitical frameworks have not disappeared entirely. However, the IMEC as a response to the BRI also displays the evolutionary nature of understanding geopolitical competition. The focus of governments is now pivoting toward increasing global connectivity through societal links and infrastructure alongside formal state-based political ties. Today, global order is characterized by a hybrid system where territorial competition coexists with broadening social connectivity. The BRI, the IMEC, and other projects present alternative models to traditional competitive frameworks. Initiatives for societal connectivity demonstrate the importance of looking beyond inter-state relations and adopting a nuanced understanding of the social links underlying changing political dynamics.

China and the United States in the MENA: Between Competition and Cooperation

Sun Degang

Before the BRI's launch in 2013, China and the United States' presence in the Middle East and North Africa was largely compatible. The United States' engagement with the region was centered around geopolitical interests such as establishing itself as the area's largest security guarantor. Meanwhile, China primarily sought to improve its geoeconomic interests by establishing itself as the region's largest trade partner and energy importer. However, the establishment of the BRI heightened Washington's concerns around Beijing's global influence.

China's growing economic footprint in the Middle East catalyzed U.S. efforts to limit China-MENA cooperation. By limiting economic ties, Washington aims to offset the transformation of Beijing's role from an economic partner to a regional political partner. Despite these tensions, the Middle East can accommodate both China and the United States. China-U.S. cooperation can drive regional prosperity and allow both powers to pursue their interests in the Middle East and North Africa. To cultivate the benefits of collaboration, Washington and Beijing should first establish common ground in their approach to the region. Traditionally, the United States has focused on promoting democracy in the Middle East, while China has advocated for the promotion of peace through development. Both parties should seek to reconcile their approaches to increase cooperation.

Infrastructure can also serve as a central avenue for China-U.S. cooperation. China's expansive experience leading construction development and the United States' technology expertise are complementary forces which can drive the Middle East and North Africa's economic diversification efforts. Washington and Beijing can also join hands to craft effective mechanisms for the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the region. By capitalizing on their respective strengths, China and the United States can facilitate a peaceful and prosperous Middle East.

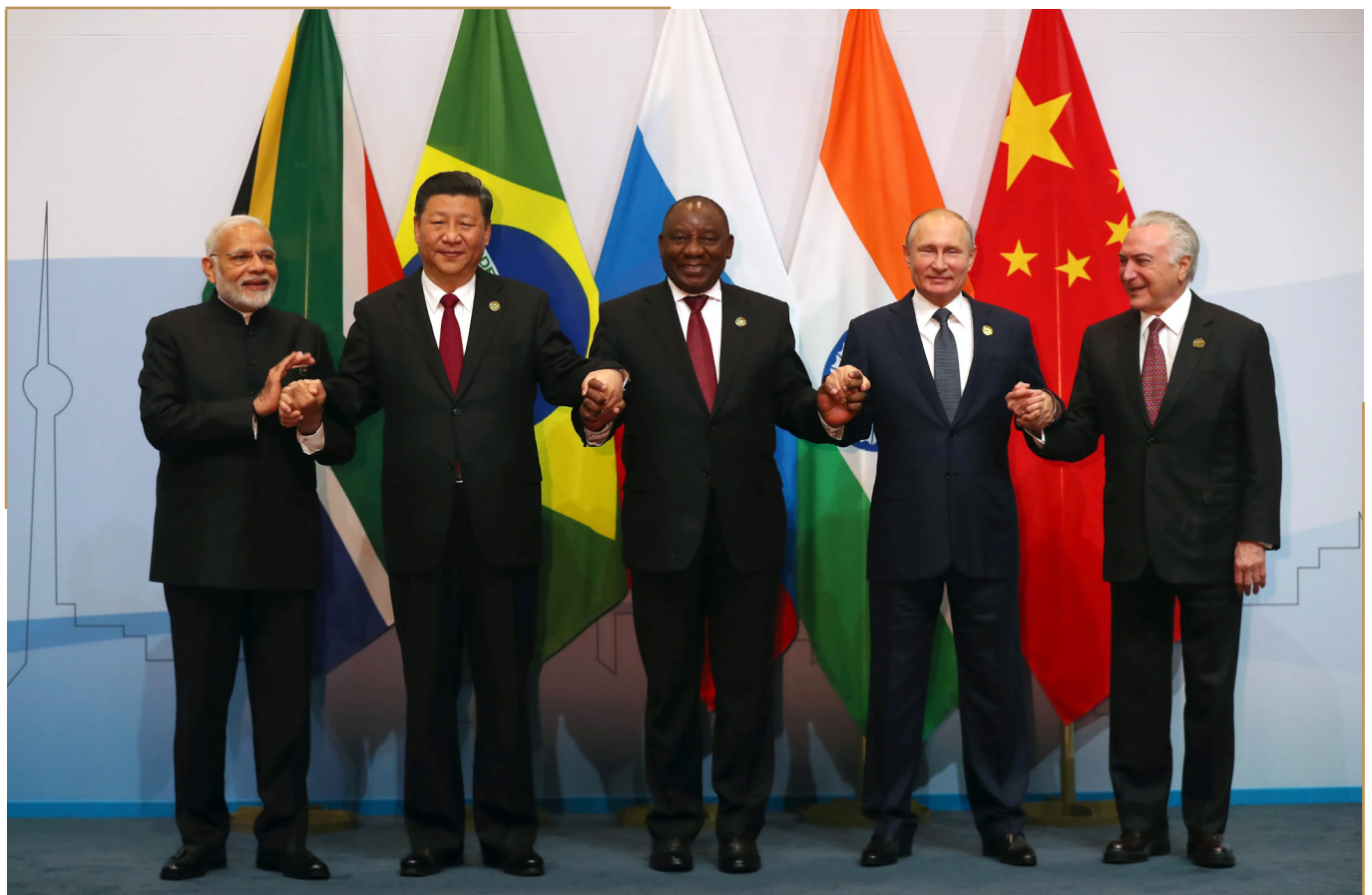
The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: Aspirational Vision Lacking Concrete Plan

Dalia Ghanem

On the sidelines of the 2023 G20 Summit, India, the United States, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the European Union announced the launch of IMEC. An ambitious undertaking by the West in cooperation with India, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, the initiative aims to establish a network of infrastructure connecting Europe to Asia through the Middle East.

While the initiative purportedly aims to create alternatives to the Suez Canal, it is primarily viewed as the West's response to the BRI. Its implementation and success face various challenges. For instance, the IMEC encompasses at least 20 countries which will require organized coordination and execution mechanisms. On the other hand, the BRI's development is a centralized effort led by a single state. The financing and technical capacity of the IMEC also remains unclear. To date, no financial commitments have been made by any of the signatory countries. While the European Union anticipates potential private investments, it is difficult to envision the materialization of these aspirations in a region marked by a volatile geopolitical environment.

Another important challenge to the IMEC is the exclusion of regional heavyweights such as Qatar, Iran, Türkiye, and Egypt which will likely impede some MENA states' cooperation on the project. Moreover, while the IMEC is in its early stages and is projected to entail a long-term implementation process, it is further complicated by diverging interests within its signatory states. Countries in the Middle East are likely seeking development opportunities, while the EU, the United States, and India view the IMEC through a competitive lens as a counter to China's BRI. Considering the challenges at play, the IMEC—in its current state—appears to be a long-term vision rather than a concrete plan.



Leaders of the BRICS nations holding hands during the 15th annual summit in South Africa in 2023.

Discussion

Participants raised key questions surrounding the future of U.S.-China relations in the Middle East and North Africa. Many agreed that the rise of a multipolar order will be consequential to the future of Washington's and Beijing's relations with the region. Some attendees noted that the United States would not tolerate increasing China's engagement in the region due to its potential of undermining Washington's influence in the Middle East and its overall status as a global hegemon.

Others cautioned against assessing the United States' engagement with the region exclusively through a competitive lens, stressing that Washington continues to hold economic interests in the MENA. When considering the future of China's ties with the region, participants underscored that the depth of China's economic cooperation with the Middle East should translate to political engagement. The region has positively received several of Beijing's initiatives including the GSI, which strives to empower the region to develop its own defense capacities, and the GCI, which highlighted the importance of mutual respect amongst civilizations. Yet, some discussants felt that these initiatives should pave the way for an increasing Chinese role set on advancing Middle Eastern and North African states' strategic autonomy.

Looking ahead, China-MENA economic and political relations will likely be strengthened further. However, charting the course of future engagement will be complicated by Western pressures on the region. For MENA countries, the West's interventionist legacy and Arab publics' disillusionment with the United States and other European nations will be central to driving the area's engagement with rising powers such as China.

Session 2: Evolving Geopolitics and Security in the Middle East

Context:

As great power competition plays out globally, the MENA region finds itself in turmoil and its security grows increasingly precarious. Prior to the outbreak of the war on Gaza, the United States signaled that it was moving in the direction of re-channeling its resources from the Middle East and North Africa toward the Indo-Pacific and thus pushing the region to diversify its security partners and establish new alliances. The United States' support for Israel in the ongoing war on Gaza has also intensified regional tensions and disillusionment with Washington.

Against a looming potential decline in the United States' security presence, is the MENA's security architecture changing? If so, how is the potential decrease in Washington's activity shaping MENA states' alliances? Which actors are emerging as alternative security partners? How is Israel's ongoing war on Gaza and the Russia-Ukraine war shaping global power dynamics and how will these changes impact China-MENA relations?

Prospects for a Chinese Role in Reshaping the Middle East's Security Architecture

Jin Liangxiang

October 7 marked a watershed moment in the Middle East. Western states' support for Israel's war on Gaza and subsequent destabilization of the region is driving countries across the Middle East and North Africa to reassess their alliances and the role of external actors in their affairs. Across the MENA, a consensus regarding the West's role in destabilizing the region and undermining its autonomy is gaining traction. China's expanding diplomatic relations with the area is also driving the re-configuration of the MENA region's political ties with external powers.

Despite these shifts, the United States will likely continue to be the most important external player. However, China can play a considerable role in contributing to regional security frameworks. This is best reflected by Beijing's mediation of the 2023 Saudi-Iran reconciliation. China's role surprised many and the agreement's potential to ease tensions between the region's biggest rivals was heralded as a major step toward promoting regional security and prosperity.

Within the security realm, China can neither compete with nor replace the United States' hard security investments and resources in the region. However, Beijing can play a more important role in the Middle East's security by promoting states' strategic autonomy. A precarious regional security environment makes political cooperation vital in the MENA. However, the United States' view of cooperation confines China to its own policy frameworks and even expects China to clean up the messes made by the United States in the Middle East and North Africa. Washington's current view of Beijing's role in the MENA therefore limits prospects for cooperation between both powers in the region.

What Remains of the United States in the Middle East?

Joseph Bahout

The United States' changing role in the MENA region precedes October 7. Before the war, the Middle East experienced a wave of Gulf normalization with Israel that was driven by economic and financial interests but ultimately resulted in sidelining the Palestinian question. Normalization with Bashar Al Assad's regime in Syria was also well underway. Underlying these changes was the question of where the United States stood in relation to these geopolitical transformations?

Washington's recalibration of its posture toward the Middle East remains largely ambiguous and is complicated by various factors including rising tensions between Israel and the United States. While the United States continues its support for Israel's offensive on Gaza, it is also increasingly frustrated by Netanyahu's government and international pressure to end the war. Post October 7, the future of Palestinian statehood has become central to the future of U.S.-MENA ties. Regional powers, including Saudi Arabia, have stressed their commitment to securing Palestinian statehood.

Uncertainty surrounding the future of the United States in the Middle East is compounded by a set of structural, unaddressed issues, across the region, dating back to the Arab Spring. As great powers expand their footprints in the Middle East and North Africa, they will have to navigate region-wide economic downturn and brewing conflicts. For the United States, the next president will determine the future of U.S.-MENA relations. In the absence of any major changes, the region will continue to cautiously strengthen its ties with China.

Beyond Great Power Competition: China in the MENA

Wang Zhen

China's success in brokering the Saudi Arabia-Iran peace deal in 2023 reflected China's transformative influence in the MENA region from economic clout into an increasingly political and diplomatic power. While some in Washington view Beijing's expanding influence through the lens of great power competition, China maintains its opposition to the "great power rivalry" framework advanced by the United States. China does not intend to replace the role of the United States in the region nor does it aim to confront Washington. Beijing primarily relies on defending its own interests.

The war on Gaza, since October 2023, marked a historic turning point in the United States' regional standing and influence. The United States' blind eye to the unprecedented humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and limited efforts to stop Israel's military operation is casting global doubt on the motives of U.S. human rights policy. Despite the United States' declining influence in the region, there are currently no alternative countries that can replace the role of Washington. Consequently, regional countries relying on U.S. support are facing significant challenges. For instance, despite large amounts of U.S. military aid and political support, since October, Israel has still not managed to re-establish its military and strategic deterrence in the region.

Leading Middle East and North Africa players are actively pursuing security diversification with—among others—China, India, and Russia. However, the willingness of some global powers, namely China, to cooperate with MENA states is limited by Washington's "great power rivalry" frame. On the other hand, some MENA powers, including several non-state actors, are exploiting great power competition and capitalizing on strategic gains from an uncertain geopolitical environment.

Discussion

During the discussion, participants explored great powers' changing role in the Middle East. Israel's war on Gaza was identified as a defining moment for the future of the West's relations with the Middle East and North Africa. While Washington will struggle to salvage its image and reputation in the Middle East, the United States' status as the region's leading security guarantor will continue. When assessing the future of China-MENA ties, discussants noted that security commitments will be the central question guiding the future of MENA-China cooperation. Some attendees stated that Beijing's growing economic footprint will eventually need to expand to political and security concerns in the region.

China's diplomacy in the current war on Gaza also illustrates the limits of Beijing's political engagement with the region. Some participants noted that while Beijing has actively advocated for a resolution and pledged its commitment to Palestinian statehood, it has done little to mobilize the Global South and lead coordinated efforts. Several participants stressed that the Middle East's balancing act—between China and the United States—is now being tested by soaring global and regional tensions. While Washington will remain a vital part of the region's security frameworks, Beijing is now presented with a crucial opportunity to demonstrate its importance in MENA affairs and foster regional cooperation.



The Houthis have recently intensified operations against Saudi Arabia as they attempt to seize the Yemeni government's last northern stronghold of Marib [File: Mohammed Huwais/AFP]

Session 3: BRI Cooperation on Investment, Trade, Energy, and Finance

Context:

China and the Middle East's economic cooperation has primarily taken place within the realms of investment, trade, energy, and finance. China-MENA diplomatic, political, and security cooperation has also been catalyzed by economic engagement. As countries across the Middle East and North Africa seek new economic partners, what are the main opportunities and challenges to expanding economic ties between China and the MENA region? How is the transition toward clean energy impacting China-MENA energy cooperation? Considering global financial fragmentation, how will de-dollarization efforts and the growth of institutions such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization impact China's and the Middle East and North Africa's economic relations?

Chinese Infrastructure Strengthens Connectivity Across the Greater Maghreb

Yahia H. Zoubir

Chinese infrastructure is bolstering connectivity within the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. Today, China has consolidated its status as a considerable player in the Maghreb (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia). Between 2005 and 2019, Chinese investments in North Africa grew¹ from \$600 million to over \$29 billion.

At the heart of China's growing economic engagement with the Maghreb is support for the construction of critical infrastructure. For instance, Algeria's East-West highway project, completed in 2023, with the support of the China International Trust Investment Corporation, now connects both ends of the country. The highway represents a milestone in Algeria's connectivity infrastructure.



Rapid technological innovation has led solar energy to become more affordable in recent years [AP]

1. Yahia H. Zoubir, *Expanding Sino-Maghreb Relations: Morocco and Tunisia*, Research Paper, (London, United Kingdom: Chatham House, February 26, 2020), 7, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/02/2020/expanding-sino-maghreb-relations/-2china-and-maghreb>.

Another notable example is an ambitious railway project in the desert, supported by the China Railway Construction Corporation, which will connect Algeria's Gara Djebilet iron ore mine with the Dumiat Industrial Zone.² Upon completion, the project will accelerate Algiers' energy diversification efforts. These initiatives also reflect the wide-reaching impact of China supported infrastructure projects across the Maghreb.

Despite China's sizable investments, the EU continues to hold economic primacy in the Maghreb. The EU's long standing influence draws on the structural dependence resulting from European nations' colonial legacy in the region. However, China has demonstrated its importance to the area's development through its maritime silk road and affiliated port projects as well as technology transfer and trade. For example, the 4,500 km Trans-Saharan Highway—dubbed the African Unity Road—will ease trade, transportation, and regional integration among Maghreb, Sahel, and Sub-Saharan African states. China is therefore poised to continue capitalizing on its successes in the Maghreb which will strengthen Beijing's economic links across Africa and potentially translate existing economic linkages to wider political engagement.

The BRI: A Driver of the Middle East and North Africa's Economic Diversification Efforts

Xu Mingqi

Just over a decade ago, China launched the ambitious BRI which is now heralded across the MENA as an integral driver of the region's economic development. Since the establishment of the BRI, the Middle East and China have substantially strengthened economic relations. In just the last decade, trade between China and the Middle East and North Africa increased by a striking 76%.³

China's investments in the MENA region span various powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. For China, the Middle East serves as an indispensable partner due to its role as a key energy supplier. While China is currently seeking to diversify its energy partners, the Middle East and North Africa remains China's largest energy supplier. Ongoing efforts to facilitate a global energy transition are also pushing Beijing and various Middle Eastern capitals to pursue enhanced energy cooperation, especially within the field of solar energy production. Despite diversification efforts, coal still makes up over 53%⁴ of China's energy use. To facilitate its transition to cleaner energy, China can rely on the MENA, particularly the Gulf states' supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG). China can also provide the Middle East with support via infrastructure and technology to increase the region's clean energy production capacities, driving energy diversification.

China's approach to the Middle East and North Africa is grounded in a commitment to achieving peace through development. Many MENA states lack the capacity to sufficiently address gaps in foundational infrastructure. China can support regional efforts to address these gaps by extending support to both develop infrastructure and modernize regional economies. China's investments in the region's manufacturing industries could also help the Middle East speed up industrialization processes, driving the creation of a more diversified economic foundation.

2. Jevans Nyabiage, "How North African railway is on track to helping China de-risk its iron ore supply," South China Morning Post, April 8, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3257816/how-north-african-railway-track-helping-china-de-risk-its-iron-ore-supply>.
3. Alexandre Raffoul and Kai Keller, "As China-Gulf relations deepen, here are 3 key sectors for growth," World Economic Forum, April 10, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/04/3-key-sectors-poised-for-explosive-growth-as-china-gcc-cooperation-deepens/>.
4. Lauri Myllvirta, "Analysis: China's clean energy pushes coal to record-low 53% share of power in May 2024," Carbon Brief, accessed September 7, 2024, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-chinas-clean-energy-pushes-coal-to-record-low-53-share-of-power-in-may-2024/>.

Between the Energy Transition and Energy Independence: China's Outlook

Sun Xia

In recent years, global energy markets have been struck by significant shocks. Europe continues to grapple with addressing energy shortages resulting from its sanctions on Russia following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. Disruptions to maritime routes, namely the Suez Canal, are also further impacting global energy markets. These dynamics are unfolding against a nascent energy transition.

The energy transition is mainly driven by Western states' calls for phasing out fossil fuels and increasing the production of renewable energy. However, it is important to distinguish between the energy transition and energy independence, two essential drivers of energy diversification efforts. While many countries globally are increasingly shifting their focus toward the production of clean energy, energy independence is equally critical to projecting future energy supplies. Under the Obama administration, the United States pushed for increasing energy independence by reducing reliance on energy imports. Today, the United States has largely achieved self-sufficiency within the energy realm.

As the largest importer⁵ of oil, China is re-assessing its dependence on energy imports while facing a series of complex challenges. The Trump administration's trade war on China and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected the Chinese economy. These challenges are now driving China's efforts to increase its energy independence. Simultaneously, China is also cognizant of its energy partnerships and is actively fostering strategic relationships with Russia and the GCC states. China will also likely play a decisive role in mapping the future of energy supply chains and securing energy trade routes.

Beyond Energy: China and Iran Expand Strategic Ties

Amir Mohammad Esmaili

China and Iran share a history of extensive cooperation dating back to ancient times. Although Iran's energy exports to China constitute the core of their economic relations, Tehran and Beijing's engagement has evolved to encompass several areas including technology, agriculture, tourism, and renewable energy.

China's stance toward Iran's nuclear program represented an important turning point in China-Iran relations, catalyzing increased strategic cooperation. However, efforts to enhance strategic relations are complicated by several challenges. Economically, China and Iran's complex financial systems hinder the growth of bilateral economic ties. Engagement is further limited by social and cultural barriers, including language differences and limited people-to-people exchange. Western powers' aggressive approach toward both countries and the region's volatile security conditions also affect prospects for cooperation. Despite challenges, various opportunities exist for Iran and China to expand comprehensive engagement.

To cement economic ties, Tehran and Beijing should diversify their trade portfolios and banking linkages. The development of cooperative industrial parks, technology transfer agreements, agricultural programs, stronger ties between small and medium-sized enterprises, and maritime cooperation are all vital to strengthening economic relations. This strategic direction will likely require the development of a broader diplomatic strategy by both countries. Iran has been adapting to the changing

5. "China imported record amounts of crude oil in 2023," U.S. Energy Information Administration, accessed September 7, 2024, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=61843#:~:text=China%2C%20the%20world's%20largest%20importer,according%20to%20China%20customs%20data>.

regional and international environment by engaging with established and emerging institutions. Moreover, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, aimed at containing China, along with increased pressure on Iran after October 7, are likely to open up more opportunities for cooperation between Tehran and Beijing.

Discussion

The session was followed by a comprehensive discussion where participants assessed the current state of China's economic ties with the MENA region and highlighted future avenues for expanding cooperation. Attendees stressed that the Middle East and China should cooperate further on increasing China's foreign direct investments in MENA states.

Some discussants pointed to the recent and noticeable decline in China's diplomatic engagement with the Middle East and North Africa. Particularly when compared with the strength and frequency of China-MENA diplomatic exchanges in the early BRI years, participants stated that Beijing should seek to reinvigorate China's diplomacy in the region.

When discussing the MENA countries' responses to China's investments, several attendees assessed reputational issues pertaining to the quality of Chinese infrastructure and projects in the region. Many highlighted that the growing debt incurred by states in the region is raising questions around a looming debt trap that could potentially see China seize control of strategic assets in the Middle East. Others also raised concerns surrounding Chinese companies' corporate responsibility and mechanisms of accountability. In response, some participants stated that China maintains strict regulation policies and oversight on companies operating across the region.

Looking ahead, several areas will advance China-MENA economic cooperation including renewable energy. However, China and the MENA states should also focus on fostering routine dialogue to increase diplomatic engagement. In order to establish a greater commercial presence in the area, China should seek to harness reconciliation between rivaling powers in the region to build on the success Beijing had in brokering the Saudi-Iran peace deal.

Session 4: BRI Cooperation on Technology and Infrastructure

Context:

Technology lies at the center of evolving great power competition, with sensitivities surrounding information security and the United States' efforts to limit the use of Chinese technology. China's ports construction across the Middle East, the building of 5G network infrastructure and cooperation with MENA states in the fields of space and digital communications has attracted concern, prompting the United States to actively counter China's engagement with the region. How have countries in the MENA utilized China's technology? Have regional countries placed any limits on technology cooperation with China? How will mega-trends such as the global energy transition and the rise of AI impact China-MENA relations in general and China-GCC connections in particular?

China's BRI and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030: Avenues for Cooperation

Fahad Saleh

Saudi Arabia is an integral pillar of China's BRI. The Kingdom's strategic location—serving as a gateway to the wider region—facilitates the BRI's efforts of bridging Asia and the West. China is also essential to Saudi Arabia achieving its National Vision 2030.

China-Saudi cooperation spans various domains including energy, technology, and trade. The launch of the BRI elevated bilateral economic engagement and paved the way for the signing of numerous economic agreements and expanding comprehensive cooperation. China has also illustrated the importance of facilitating the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's economic modernization efforts. Beijing's provision of advanced technologies and support in setting up a number of production facilities across the Kingdom has allowed Riyadh to boost its local production efforts. Strengthened China-Saudi ties can also bear positive impacts on regional stability which is essential to the Kingdom's realization of its Vision 2030. China's brokering of the Saudi-Iran peace agreement last year was a defining moment for the Middle East's geopolitical landscape.

Mutual interest in increasing the Middle East and North Africa's connectivity will be central to the future of Saudi-China relations. Beijing's investments in the region's development and use of advanced technologies complement Riyadh's aspirations to diversify and modernize its economy. However, both powers will have to chart a diplomatic course within a volatile geopolitical context. Intensifying great power competition and rising tensions across the MENA region could present challenges to relations between Saudi Arabia and China, but the robust foundation set by existing ties should allow Riyadh and Beijing to withstand these tests and capitalize on their respective efforts in promoting prosperity in the Middle East.

Strengthening Technology Cooperation through Enhanced Regulatory Mechanisms

Ding Long

Technology cooperation is a crucial component of China-MENA ties, particularly under the BRI. Infrastructure cooperation is also integral. Through the BRI, China has invested in developing ports, railways, highways, pipelines, and smart cities across the region. Both technology sharing and infrastructure development are cornerstones of MENA states' and China's development visions. Moreover, aspirations to boost economic diversification efforts—shared by both China and Middle Eastern and North African states—rely on the provision of necessary infrastructure and technology.



The construction site of the Alamein Downtown Towers Project in New Alamein City, Egypt [Xinhua News].

The vitality of this cooperation necessitates improving coordination and regulation mechanisms. BRI investments should be subject to increased transparency and risk assessment through the creation of evaluation mechanisms that can comprehensively survey prospective projects. These assessments should seek to promote third party market cooperation, environmentally sustainable projects, and incentivize the participation of the private sector and small and medium enterprises. Western pressure on increasing China-MENA technology cooperation should also be addressed.

China and MENA states welcome other countries' participation in BRI technology cooperation. However, issues arise when some countries rely on an interventionist approach geared toward undermining China's technology cooperation with the region. The expansiveness of China-MENA collaboration warrants ensuring that foreign states do not function as spoilers to existing arrangements. China and MENA states should remain steadfast in their efforts to promote the integration of key technologies via cooperation. Both should also seek to harness wider technology coordination in emerging spheres such as the energy transition and the development of modern infrastructure in the region.

MENA Seeks Strategic Autonomy through Technology Cooperation with China

Galip Dalay

Recent years have witnessed a notable growth in the MENA's procurement and adoption of Chinese technology. In the Gulf, almost all six of the GCC states share some formal agreement with leading Chinese information and communications technology provider Huawei on 5G technology. Growing tech cooperation between China and MENA states reveals the region's ambitions for increased strategic autonomy.

Many MENA states are pursuing increased engagement with China and Russia on sensitive technologies and infrastructure. For instance, Russia is becoming a leading player in the region's nuclear energy capacities which signals Middle Eastern countries' intent to diversify their international partners. Further indicative of China's increasing strategic presence is the recent flurry of diverse connectivity projects across the MENA. These projects are driving the construction of strategic infrastructure—mainly by China through the BRI—in the region. However, the materialization of these projects is challenged by geopolitical competition and financing issues.

While the IMEC (largely viewed as a potential competitor to the BRI) officially aims to bridge the Middle East and Europe to India, the project is, in reality, reflective of the United States/West's opposition to China's and Russia's roles in the Middle East. The IMEC is effectively framed as a rival connectivity project to the BRI. At the heart of these two projects are competing visions of regional order. As geopolitical competition plays out, MENA nations will seek to maximize strategic gains while maintaining their balancing act between traditional Western partners and emerging powers such as China and Russia.

Building a Nuanced Understanding of China's Ties with the Middle East and North Africa

Zhang Chuchu

Various misconceptions distort understandings of the factors driving robust MENA-China relations. The West has continuously cast the Middle East against a background in which sectarian conflict is viewed as an inescapable reality. However, China maintains that sectarian conflict can be overcome which advances Beijing's engagement with the Middle East.

The West has also historically pushed for democratizing authoritarian regimes in the region. Conversely, China's relations with the MENA have not been conditioned upon political reforms. Consequently, China is viewed by many MENA states as an important political and strategic partner that does not carry the West's interventionist legacy.

Development focused investments and projects constitute the core of China's economic role in the region. However, these efforts also face challenges. In North Africa and the Levant, the business environment is a pressing issue with complex barriers hindering progress. On the other hand, economic interactions between China and the GCC states are complicated by local protectionism and the Gulf's lack of complete industrial chains. While Chinese firms pursue investments in the Gulf, many GCC countries' costly national projects limit their capacity to fund Chinese initiatives. Various factors also affect the future of China's economic relations with the MENA region including worries about a precarious security environment as well as Middle Eastern states' abilities to repay their debts to Beijing. Yet, China will likely remain a vital economic partner to the MENA, driving infrastructural and technological progress.

Discussion

The discussion centered around the future of China-MENA economic cooperation in the face of growing Western pressure on regional states to limit procurement of Chinese technology. Participants stressed that while China-MENA relations draw on shared interests and mutual respect, an uncertain global political backdrop presents challenges for the road ahead.

One discussant noted the decline in Russia's defense exports to the Middle East between 2019-2023. The decline has—the participant stated—reduced MENA states' reliance on Russian military exports. Many attendees highlighted the idea that a similar outcome of reduced reliance could occur as a result of confrontations between the United States and China, with discussants stressing that the resilience of China-MENA strategic relations could be tested by a direct confrontation between Washington and Beijing. However, one participant underscored the idea that China would maintain its deterrence efforts—provided that no major developments unfold in Taiwan—and continue to strengthen economic relations with the Middle East.

Notably, attendees unpacked topics on the ways great power competition is playing out within critical technologies such as the acquisition of drones and drone technology. To gain strategic advantage, MENA countries will likely continue their balancing act between global powers. Many participants explained that Middle Eastern states should seek long-term comprehensive agreements that can provide robust roadmaps toward utilizing Chinese technology and increasing Beijing-led infrastructure projects in the MENA.

Session 5:

The Future of the Middle East: Society, Culture, and Climate Change

Context:

The MENA is undergoing rapid social changes. Countries across the region are host to diverse cultures and are increasingly open and inclusive. Various editions of the Conference of the Parties (COP) have been held in the region, with COP 27 convened in Egypt and COP 28 occurring in the UAE. The high profile of COP events happening across the MENA highlights Middle Eastern states' commitment to addressing climate change. The region is also home to numerous Confucius Institutes, illustrating the growing cultural exchange between the MENA and China. How have social reforms impacted the Middle East and what have they achieved? What is the potential for cooperation, between China and the Middle East and North Africa, to address climate change in the future? How can China-MENA ties be strengthened in the fields of soft power and people-to-people exchange?

China-MENA Cultural Relations: From the Silk Road to the BRI

Gafar Karar Ahmed

The successes of the BRI are primarily discussed within the economic realm. However, China-MENA cultural exchanges are a vital aspect of the BRI. Cultural openness between Beijing and Middle Eastern and North African capitals facilitates trade and expands both respective regions' markets. Historically, the Silk Road played a considerable role in shaping the MENA's cultural scene, driving the movement of trade, music, and food which helped bind together countries across the MENA region. Similarly, the BRI today is enabling wider exchanges between the MENA and China.

While many have focused on economic connectivity as a landmark of the BRI, it is crucial to understand the cultural connectivity underpinning the initiative. Diverse exchanges and exposure across BRI beneficiaries will establish a strong socio-cultural foundation for stable connectivity. This foundation will invariably contribute to expanding trade relations and increasing economic investments across Asia and the MENA region.

Yet, some challenges will have to be addressed in the process. China and the MENA region will have to harness dialogue to understand cultural differences. This will foster new understandings and cross-cultural connections. BRI beneficiary states and China should also seek to understand the various cultural mechanisms underlying economic exchanges. By adopting a two-fold focus on both culture and economics as core elements of the BRI, the MENA and China can capitalize on financial gains from this initiative while consolidating strong relations.

Social Media Challenges Western Narratives and Traditional Media

Wang Jin

Since October 7 the war on Gaza has challenged traditional media's coverage of events and the Western narrative more broadly. While Israel and the United States have primarily relied on legacy media outlets to disseminate messaging, Palestinians and others across the MENA region have relied on outlets such as TikTok to circulate their narratives on events happening in the Gaza Strip. The increasing use of social media has exposed the shortcomings of traditional Western media outlets and made online citizen journalist platforms consequential to MENA citizens' ability in advancing counter-narratives.

Legacy media conventionally relies on a unidirectional dissemination approach. Audiences consume information with limited to no feedback mechanisms. Meanwhile, short video outlets, such as TikTok, allow users to post content with minimal restrictions. This content, in turn, is not subject to the censorship and filtration of traditional media, exposing an online audience to various versions of events often not communicated by legacy media outlets. The growing use of TikTok is generating wider discussions among the global public on key issues—such as the war on Gaza—which increases the influence of social media outlets and decreases the credibility and economic viability of traditional media.

The rising influence of outlets like TikTok is shifting the global media landscape from a monopolistic one where a handful of media channels control the narrative to a fragmented media landscape where multimedia outlets are used to relay narratives vis-à-vis social media. These transformations will empower audiences across the Global South to challenge dominant narratives and traditional media's coverage.

The Role of Confucius Institutes in Cultivating Inter-Religious Dialogue

Liu Yi

Evolving cultural relations between China and the MENA region can be observed through the increase in Confucius Institutes across the Middle East and North Africa. Recognized as a hallmark initiative under China's cultural exchange efforts, these institutes play a crucial role in exposing and educating people in MENA states about Chinese culture.

A considerable number of BRI beneficiary countries have established Confucius Institutes. The growing number of institutes in the region reflects the significance of culture in the BRI. While Confucius Institutes are often relatively small in size, the scope of activities they cover is wide. The institutes act as language learning centers and culinary teaching spaces. At Confucius Institutes, attendees can learn the craft of Chinese dumpling-making and the intricacies of Chinese calligraphy. The breadth of activities encompassed by the institutes underscores their role as conduits which bridge Chinese culture to the peoples of the MENA region. The institutes also facilitate the hosting of international forums such as the China-Türkiye Forum, an annual forum aimed at fostering international dialogue on global issues.

Under the directive of the GCI launched by President Xi Jinping, in 2023, Confucius Institutes will likely gain renewed importance as pivotal outlets promoting cross-civilizational, cross-cultural, and cross-religious exchanges. However, the institutes also face various challenges. Countries hosting the institutes still tend to primarily rely on English as the language used to understand China—despite the institutes' primary responsibility to teach foreigners Mandarin. Focusing on expanding MENA countries' access to and learning of Mandarin will therefore be instrumental to increasing the Middle East's engagement with China.

Discussion

During the discussion, participants explored the salience of culture, people-to-people exchange, and climate change in shaping China-MENA ties. Several attendees called for increasing the collection of data on people-to-people exchanges in recent years to gauge trends on the movement of populations between China and the Middle East and North Africa.

When discussing the climate's role in China-MENA relations, some participants voiced concern over the quality and sustainability of Chinese infrastructure. While Beijing is a leading exporter of solar panels, one discussant noted that the materials and resources used to produce solar panels, namely the batteries, could be harmful to the environment. The attendee posed questions regarding China's approach to this issue and whether solar batteries' harmful potential was accounted for in the solar energy supply chain. Others touched on issues pertaining to maintenance costs in a region already grappling with economic downturn and financial constraints.

Looking ahead, participants diverged on the potential implications of the energy transition on China-GCC relations. Many explained that Beijing's ties with the Gulf are a by-product of China's reliance on GCC states' energy exports. As the energy transition drives reliance away from fossil fuels, some therefore projected a decline in China-GCC relations. However, a number of discussants highlighted that in the near-future, China's reliance on fossil fuels will likely remain unchanged, particularly since technologies—such as AI—require an abundant electricity supply generated through fossil fuels.



The students of Prince Sultan University displaying Chinese calligraphy at a cultural event in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. (Wang Haizhou/Xinhua)

Session 6: New Challenges and China's Role in the Middle East

Context:

China's mediation of conflicts across the region could chart pathways to peace as the Middle East and North Africa experiences a wave of reconciliation between rival actors, prominently between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Against this backdrop—in January of this year—four MENA countries—Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Iran—accepted invitations to join the BRICS. These new members reflect the bloc's increasing presence in the Middle East. Since then, various additional MENA states have expressed interest in BRICS membership. While Beijing's current role in the region's security landscape remains minimal, it is seeking to expand its role through various efforts such as the 2022 GSI. How have countries across the MENA region responded to Chinese diplomacy and mediation? What role can China play in the Middle East and North Africa's security and diplomacy landscape? And how will growing relations between countries in the Global South impact the future of the international and regional order?

Multilateralism in the Future of China's Foreign Relations

Wu Bingbing

Heightened great power competition has exerted pressure on China to consolidate its presence as a global power. However, China does not seek global hegemony. Instead, Beijing aims to establish a strong and expansive network of partnerships. The BRI falls under these broad efforts and aims to globalize China's understandings of development and security. When Beijing brokered the Saudi-Iran peace deal in 2023, many anticipated a wider Chinese role in the region's politics and security. Yet the deal was driven, in large part, by a mutual desire from both Riyadh and Tehran to establish peace.

China's diplomacy then is centered around furthering cooperation and coordination within the MENA and beyond. China is committed to collaboration with the region through a foundation established by its MENA partner states and not from a top-down imposition of Beijing's policies and political dispositions. This understanding has instantiated China's regional engagement through hosting initiatives such as the China-Arab States Summit in 2022 and creating platforms that bridge MENA countries to discuss important security issues. Chinese diplomacy is also pivoting toward multilateral engagement. While China shares strong bilateral relations with countries across the region, it is gradually shifting to foster multilateral cooperation. One example of this new focus on multilateralism is Beijing's engagement with the GCC as a collective body.

China is also willing to expand its peacekeeping efforts, through multilateral diplomacy, to Israel's war on Gaza. Yet, such endeavors must be led by joint frameworks proposed by regional powers including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Qatar. Through coordinated efforts, China's multilateral engagement with the Middle East and North Africa can contribute to securing the area, strengthening intra-regional ties, and bolstering the MENA's strategic autonomy.

Will China's Mediation Challenge Global Norms?

Dania Thafer

China is strategically establishing spheres of influence in the Middle East by leveraging opportunities created by a changing global order. By promoting South-South solidarity and supporting Arab causes, China seeks to “win the hearts” of the people in the Middle East, particularly as the legitimacy of the United States and the Western-led order comes under scrutiny. China’s approach also includes providing aid as well as fostering close economic ties throughout the Global South. The Middle East was a leading recipient of investments under the BRI, only second⁶ to Africa globally.

China is not currently seeking to establish an alternative military order in the Middle East. Instead, it has significantly expanded its political and economic presence in the region. The BRI, for instance, serves as China’s primary strategy for challenging the existing international order and creating alternative spheres of influence. The foundations of these efforts are built on enhancing connectivity across various domains such as trade, infrastructure, finance, policy, and investment. China’s reliance on economic interests as its main approach to strengthen its influence in the Middle East allows it to solidify its footprint in the region without relying on military means.

China has shown interest in expanding its influence through mediation, especially in conflicts where it might have more leverage than the United States, such as between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, its ability to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians is limited, largely due to resistance from Israel and the United States. China avoids leveraging its economic ties with regional allies, in a coercive manner, preferring a cautious diplomatic approach that minimizes risks, particularly in a region crucial to its energy needs. This cautious stance reflects China’s broader strategy of expanding its influence while avoiding direct confrontations.

MENA Aspires for Broader Chinese Political Role

Ye Qing

The changing international rules-based order leaves an uncertain future for the Middle East and North Africa. While the United States continues to be the region’s primary political and security actor, the process of emerging powers strengthening their ties with the MENA can contribute to the stability of the Middle East.

The future of China-MENA relations rests on policymakers’ abilities to navigate a set of intricate challenges complicating the global and regional political landscape. The 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement ushered a new era of China’s and MENA states’ political cooperation and illustrated Beijing’s willingness to serve as a political partner. However, the 2023 Saudi-Iran reconciliation raised regional expectations for China to play a larger political and security role. While many MENA countries aspire for China to play a role similar—or increasingly similar—to that of the United States, Beijing’s peace process initiatives are focused on advancing global security and peace through development. To that end, China will likely not play the role that the United States has in the Middle East.

Growing China-MENA relations are also complicated by regional states’ perception of China as a transactional power seeking to achieve its own interests. This perception has also been echoed in the West. The diplomatic future of China in MENA countries therefore also rests on Beijing’s ability to challenge this anti-China narrative and position itself as a reliable economic and political partner.

6. Christoph Nedopil, China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023, Brief, (Nathan, Australia: Griffith University and Shanghai, China: Fudan University, February, 2024), 7, https://greenfdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Nedopil-2024_China-BRI-Investment-Report-2023.pdf.

While Middle Eastern and North African states appear to be pivoting eastwards, the region's security architecture is still largely dominated by Washington. In a time of escalating tensions and geopolitical competition, security considerations take precedence over economic ones which complicates China's efforts to establish more robust security cooperation in the MENA.

Can China Do More to Stabilize the Middle East?

Omar H. Rahman

China's engagement in the MENA region has primarily been driven by its economic interests, underscored by China's policies of political neutrality and non-interventionism. This approach has allowed Beijing to avoid entanglement in the Middle East and North Africa's many conflicts while relying on the prevailing—albeit fraught—U.S.-led security architecture. In more recent years, however, China appears to have found value in limited diplomatic engagement. Yet, the current crisis in Gaza may be testing the limits of this approach.

Despite emerging great power rivalry between China and the United States, Beijing is reluctant to challenge Washington directly in the Middle East. Nonetheless, China could be doing more to help stabilize the region and protect its interests. First, Beijing needs to recognize that the long-standing international approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is fundamentally flawed. This approach ignores the immense power disparity between rivaling sides, the incentive structures involved, and the lack of grounding in international law. U.S.-led mediation efforts are hamstrung by the country's own domestic politics which prevent Washington from playing an even-handed and constructive role.



Mahmoud al-Aloul of Fatah, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and Mousa Abu Marzouk of Hamas attend an event at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing on July 23, 2024 [Pedro Pardo/Pool via Reuters]

If China is to play a greater role, it must break from the current framework. China should provide backing to international efforts aimed at challenging Israeli impunity. Beijing should also encourage efforts led by MENA states to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only by taking a regional approach can the proper positive incentives be put in place and the necessary power balancing occur to move the needle toward peace. Beyond helping to stabilize the region, such an approach will serve China's regional and international interests. Beijing has the opportunity to advance its regional clout and display global leadership, all while undergirding the international system rather than the international "order."

Discussion

Participants assessed the future of China's transforming role in the Middle East and North Africa. Several discussants highlighted the importance of distinguishing between the United States' long-standing approach of establishing peace through security and China's initiatives to achieve peace through development. This distinction, stated some attendees, underscores the centrality of economic diplomacy in China's wider engagement with the MENA region and beyond.

As the contours of global order rapidly shift, China will have to clearly position itself against changing dynamics. One participant argued that China is not interested in challenging the status quo because it benefits from the United States' security architecture, which indirectly safeguards China's economic investments in the region. However, given China's status as a global economic heavyweight—currently the second⁷ largest economy in the world—the international community, particularly in the Global South, expects Beijing to play a wider political role. China will likely shape its future geopolitical position by striking a balance between Beijing's traditional policies of non-alignment and non-intervention while displaying its commitment to regional security.

A number of participants posited that China presents an alternative security model. Instead of hard security commitments, Beijing aims to achieve and promote regional security through development which serves as the foundation of its ambitious BRI. Other attendees noted that China should capitalize on the nascent shifts in global public opinion against the United States and the West to cement Beijing's credibility as a new global power which seeks to empower the Global South toward collective action and collective peace.

7. Nicholas R. Lardy, "China is still rising: Don't underestimate the World's second-biggest economy," *Foreign Affairs*, April 2, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-still-rising>.

Participants

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Agenda

25 April 2024

Small Auditorium of SASS

09:00 AM-09:30 AM

Welcoming Remarks and Signing Ceremony of MOU

Chair: Wang Jian

Keynote Addresses: Wang Dezhong and Tarik M. Yousef

09:30 AM-10:45 AM

Session 1 : Future Cooperation in a New Geopolitical Environment

Chair: Tarik M. Yousef

Contributors: Ding Yifan, Bahgat Korany, Sun Degang, Dalia Ghanem

10:45 AM-11:00 AM

Break

11:00 AM-12:15 PM

Session 2 : Evolving Geopolitics and Security in the Middle East

Chair: Wu Bingbing

Contributors: Ebtessam Al-Ketbi, Jin Liangxiang, Joseph Bahout, Wang Zhen

12:15 PM-13:30 PM

Lunch

13:30 PM-14:45 PM

Session 3 : BRI Cooperation on Investment, Trade, Energy, and Finance

Chair: Ye Qing

Contributors: Yahia H. Zoubir, Xu Mingqi, Sun Xia, Amir Mohammed Esmaili

14:45 PM-15:00 PM

Break

15:00 PM-16:15 PM

Session 4 : BRI Cooperation on Technology and Infrastructure

Chair: Mirdef Alqashouti

Contributors: Fahad Saleh, Ding Long, Galip Dalay, Zhang Chuchu

26 April 2024

Small Auditorium of SASS

09:30 AM-10:45 AM

Session 5 : The Future of the Middle East: Society, Culture, and Climate Change

Chair: *Ding Yifan*

Contributors: *Ding Yifan, Bahgat Korany, Sun Degang, Dalia Ghanem*

10:45 AM-11:00 AM

Break

11:00 AM-12:30 PM

Session 6 : New Challenges and China's Role in the Middle East

Chair: *Adel Abdel Ghafar*

Contributors: *Wu Bingbing, Dania Thafer, Ye Qing, Omar H. Rahman*

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