

HOW CHINA'S RISE IS CHANGING THE MIDDLE EAST*

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The book, which consists of nine chapters starts with the historical context of China-Middle East relations, before focusing on major regional countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Türkiye, and Israel. The main thesis of the book is multi-dimensional. Primarily, it assumes that historically no major clash of civilization is observed in the bilateral relations and China's evolving relations with the Middle East since 1990 is rooted in economic interests, particularly its significant need for energy imports (p. 2). The importance of this issue is highlighted by the fact that the Middle East has been in tension with the West over normative issues. This distinction is emphasised by the Crusades, where the Middle East directly confronted the West, unlike the Middle East's relationship with China, which has not seen any comparable major conflicts (p. 12). The authors also argue that China's strategic approach aligns with its aspiration for global influence, aiming to restore its historical grandeur. Moreover, in some cases there are also commonalities between China and the Middle East. For example, both sides have the experience of Western imperialism and its sanctions which is dubbed in China as humiliation. Hence, the relations since the 1970s, and especially in the post-Cold War era, are marked by authoritarian Arab nations imitating China's economic model. It argues that China's concerns about Middle East instability revolve around energy dependency, with its Belt and Road Initiative presenting economic advantages. The Chinese military's presence in the Middle East, notably in Djibouti, underscores its broader strategic interests and desire for a secure maritime presence. The book generally examines the mutual perceptions between China and Middle Eastern countries. The methodology employed involves case study

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of five countries and content analysis of various sources, including statements from officials, journals, news agencies, and other media outlets from both China and the selected countries.

The second chapter explores the historical evolution of China's relations with the Middle East, spanning the Han to Qing dynasties. It highlights pivotal periods such as the Tang dynasty, marked by diplomatic ties and the export of glassware to the Middle East, and the Ming era, characterized by vibrant interactions with Muslim generals and exploratory voyages. The chapter also focuses on the relations between China and the Middle East after Islam, which altered perceptions, culminating in the Battle of Talas and subsequent positive views of China by medieval Muslims. It asserts that the Ming and Qing dynasties witnessed fluctuations in Sino-Muslim relations, with suspicions emerging during Qing rule, leading to forced cultural assimilation of Muslim communities in China. The chapter concludes by emphasising the historical interconnectedness of Chinese, Middle Eastern, and Western civilizations, underscoring the potential transformative impact of China's economic rise on the global order. In this chapter, the theory of a burgeoning China-Middle East coalition challenging the post-American order is explored, with Iran endorsing this shift, while Türkiye and Israel maintain a delicate balance between China and the West, and Egypt and Saudi Arabia remaining uncertain about the implications of this emerging geopolitical landscape.

The third chapter traces China's engagement with the Middle East from 1912 to 2012, delineating key periods such as the Republic of China, People's Republic of China, alignment with the Soviet Union, isolationism, opening to the US, and dependency on Middle Eastern oil. The narrative unfolds with subtle shifts in China's normative stance, particularly during the Republic of China era, where efforts were made to re-Arabize Islamic culture among the Hui Muslim community (p. 27). The subsequent period under Mao witnessed assertive Communist ideology export, strained relations with Middle Eastern countries, and support for revolutionary movements. Moreover, the chapter underscores the pivotal shift in the early 1970s when China transitioned from ideological pursuits to pragmatic considerations, aligning with Iran and forming the China-Pakistan-Iran triangle. As such, the Iran-Iraq war solidified China's role as a major arms exporter to the Middle East particularly Iran, and coincided with a broader strategic shift towards oil dependence in the 1990s. Notably, the chapter emphasises China's evolving relations, driven by geopolitical considerations, ideological realignments, and the growing significance of Middle Eastern oil in sustaining China's energy needs.

Chapter fourth is dedicated to Sino-Iranian relations during the contemporary period leading up to the Trump era, emphasising the strategic shift in China's Middle East perspective

under President Xi Jinping. The fundamental presumption is that China aims to establish a military alliance with Iran, although there is a divergence of opinions within Iran regarding its stance towards China. Noteworthy events include Xi's 2016 visit to Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, signaling a more strategic outlook. The chapter argues that despite not being an official ally, the defence agreement signed between China and Iran in 2016 and the launch of the Yiwu-Tehran Railway highlight a growing strategic partnership. The chapter also illustrates China's cautious approach, balancing economic interests with careful consideration of Western concerns, especially from the US. It explores China's multi-dimensional perception of Iran, spanning nuclear energy, economic relations, and strategic considerations, as evidenced by academic analyses. On the Iranian side, the chapter assumes that the perspective is divided between reformists, viewing China sceptically as a regional hegemon, and conservatives, advocating a strategic coalition. The issue of Xinjiang Uighurs and Chinese companies' role in Iran further adds complexity to bilateral relations, with reformists expressing reservations and conservatives welcoming China's involvement while proposing an expanded role in the Gulf region.

China's strategic perceptions of Saudi Arabia are explored in the fifth chapter. The author focuses on the period since 1993 when China began actively seeking Middle East resources due to its growing energy needs. It is argued that Saudi Arabia, as a major oil power in the region, holds special importance for China. The analysis outlines Riyadh's goals in establishing relations with Beijing, emphasising economic reliance on oil exports and the desire to counterbalance China-Iran relations, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia's discontent with the JCPOA agreement and US policies. At this point, the 2020 publication of the book exhibits a notable limitation by not incorporating recent developments in the Middle East post-2020. It overlooks China's positive role in facilitating détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Spring 2023, which aligns with the book's argument regarding China's moderate and secular approach in its Middle Eastern relations. Economic ties between the two nations are a significant aspect, with Chinese companies investing in Saudi infrastructure, including substantial investments in projects like the Mecca-Medina Expressway and the Yanbu refinery. The study presumes that despite cultural differences, economic interests have overshadowed political and diplomatic considerations, as evident in China's cautious stance in condemning Saudi actions in Yemen. The chapter also highlights reports from Chinese officials and academia that underscore the economic importance of Saudi Arabia as a major oil exporter and

a crucial player in global economic platforms, with potential optimism for expanding relations to the military domain.

The sixth chapter examines the evolving relations between China and Egypt since 2012, emphasising China's strategic goal of shifting Egypt's orientation from the West to the East. The authors argue that Egypt views China as a model for economic success, suggesting that Egypt sees value in adopting and replicating China's experiences. The pivotal nature of this transformation is underscored by the significant economic investments made by China in Egypt, such as the \$1.7 billion allocated for the upgrade of Cairo's metro system and the construction of an administrative capital near central Cairo. The authors also address the historical context, including the Cold War-era divergence of interests between China and Egypt due to Gamal Nasser's alignment with the Soviet Union. Notably, subsequent leaders Anwar Sadat and Husni Mubarak's pro-American stance did not hinder China's interest in fostering bilateral relations. Highlighting the post-2011 warming of relations, marked by high-profile visits and economic cooperation, the authors argue that Egypt emulates China's economic strategies. The pursuit of knowledge rather than borrowing financial assistance is emphasised, reflecting Egypt's aspiration to adopt the East Asian model.

It also asserts that Egypt emulates China as an economic and population control model. However, it faces a limitation as it references a 2016 journalistic column from al-Ahram, not acknowledging China's abandonment of the one-child policy by then. Non-governmental perspectives express concerns about China's aid to Egypt's African rivals, the Belt and Road Initiative's impact on the Suez Canal, project delays in Cairo, and dissatisfaction with Chinese goods. The conclusion highlights China's aim to geopolitically reorient Egypt towards the East, emphasising Asianisation and de-Westernisation.

The nuanced evolution of Sino-Turkish relations since 2012 is discussed in the seventh chapter. The authors examine historical factors, including Türkiye's initial alignment with the US, which postponed Türkiye's acknowledgment of China until 1971. Despite the formal recognition, bilateral ties witnessed limited improvement between 1970s and 1990s, influenced by Türkiye's European orientation and expanding role in Central Asia in the post Cold War era. The authors assert that Türkiye shifted away from pan-Turkism in Central Asia after 2002. However, the authors contradict by asserting that Türkiye's consideration of Uyghurs complicates its relations with China (p. 119). This prompts questions about the coherence between Türkiye's abandonment of pan-Turkism and its stance on the Uyghur issue. According to the authors economic considerations, military collaboration, and normative concerns,

notably the Uighur issue, further characterize this intricate relationship. The analysis also contends that Türkiye strategically deploys its ties with China as leverage against Western allies, emphasising the economic dimension while navigating normative challenges and divergent geopolitical priorities. Despite economic imbalances and normative differences, the chapter illuminates the multi-dimensional nature of Sino-Turkish relations.

The eighth chapter explores the evolving relations between the PRC and Israel, tracing the historical trajectory from initial ideological hostilities to the current phase of economic collaboration and diplomatic engagement. The authors argue that despite early antagonism under Mao Zedong, who aligned with the Palestinian cause, diplomatic overtures gained momentum in the post-Mao era. The thawing of US-China relations in the 1970s facilitated advanced Israeli weapons deals, and subsequent Chinese support for the Camp David Accords led to a significant warming of ties. The establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1992 marked a pivotal shift, driven by China's desire for technological access and Israel's superiority in science and technology. The chapter argues that this engagement, however, faced setbacks in the early 2000s due to the Falcon surveillance deal, severed under US pressure. However, when it was recognized that a military approach to Israel posed challenges due to the sensitivity of US involvement, it shifted to an economic strategy after 2010. Notably, Chinese perceptions of Israel emphasise historical parallels, particularly the shared victimhood of Jews and Chinese during World War II. While Palestinian issues are portrayed as non-detrimental to Sino-Israeli relations, potential side effects arising from China's relations with Iran are acknowledged.

The authors conclude by expressing that there are three basic discourses regarding the rise of China. It asserts that some believe that China will emerge as an undisputed hegemon that could undermine the US domination in the world. Another view points to the undisputed economic and political collapse of China. The third assumption, as the moderate ground, puts the country in its current position as a middle-income country. However, the first assumption is open to debate given the emergence of other great powers in a multipolar world. Since a singular global hegemony is unlikely (Mearsheimer, 2002, p. 40), there may be a suggestion that China could potentially establish regional dominance, particularly in the Pacific and the Middle East. The validity of the second assumption also appears questionable when considering the ongoing developments in China's political and economic arenas. The book also concludes that China changes the world and the Middle East. While Chinese officials see Middle Eastern stability as a springboard to world domination, its insufficient involvement in the region's political tensions has made Beijing an opportunistic actor. The recent lack of US interest in the

Middle East has afforded China an entry into the region. The strategic vision entails the re-Asianisation of the Middle East, with the objective of establishing Asia as the central locus for global political hegemony.

The book has utilized both journalistic and academic sources. Despite this, it provides a solid historical foundation for the bilateral relationship, emphasising the absence of major clashes. The book's strengths include its concise examination of China-Middle East relations and its use of multilingual source materials. However, there remains room for further exploration of China-Middle East relations in light of contemporary developments.

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