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China’s Engagement with Middle Eastern Countries in Regional and International Organizations

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing on “China and the Middle East.” My testimony today focuses on China’s engagement with Middle Eastern countries in regional and international organizations. I have structured my testimony around the questions put forward by the commission staff.

Why does China engage with Middle Eastern states through regional and international organizations? What interests or initiatives is it seeking to advance?

China engages with Middle Eastern states through a wide range of multilateral regional and international organizations. For this testimony, the Middle East includes members of the League of Arab States (Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen), Iran, Israel, and Türkiye. This testimony focuses on a sub-set of China’s interactions with regional and international organizations, including cooperation forums (the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum- CASCF and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization- SCO), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the League of Arab States (LAS), the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and the United Nations (the United Nations Security Council and the United Nations Human Rights Council).

Through these regional and international organizations, China seeks to advance its interests in the Middle East and globally. Those interests include ensuring access to resources and markets across the region; fostering support for China’s goals and behavior in the broader international system; ensuring silence or supportive statements from states in the region about China’s actions in Xinjiang and Hong Kong; maintaining and developing support for China’s stance on issues of territorial integrity such as Taiwan and South China Sea territorial disputes; and promoting China’s global initiatives of Belt and Road, the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global

Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI).¹ One important driver of China's behavior in these organizations is to promote regional stability in the Middle East. It tends to see the region as having a high potential for turmoil and interstate war. It also views it as a breeding ground for non-state actor security threats, such as terrorism, that could threaten China's interest in the Middle East and beyond.

China's interactions with regional and international organizations generate many benefits in the Middle East. These organizations provide China with an efficient and effective way to interact with a large number of countries and better understand their needs and positions. Through these organizations, China can amplify its voice and join together with other states to coordinate positions on issues. These organizations give China a platform to highlight the shared norms it wants to promote in the international system, including a strict interpretation of Westphalian sovereignty, South-South cooperation, and a heavy role for state involvement in economic interactions. Operating through regional organizations and international organizations on security issues also gives the PRC an opportunity to emphasize that it does not seek to play a unilateral security role in the region and differentiate itself from other great powers, such as the United States and Russia.

Assess China's interactions with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. How does China's engagement with the GCC advance its energy and economic interests?

China interacts with GCC states through regional organizations in two ways, through cooperation forums and direct interactions with the GCC.

Established in 2004, the China- Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) is China's primary multilateral coordination mechanism with the Arab States, including the GCC states.² The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC), established in 2000, also encompasses North African states (Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, and Tunisia), but this testimony focuses on the CASCF.

The LAS represents its twenty-two members in the CASCF. All of those states recognize the People's Republic of China (as opposed to Taiwan). Due to coordination by the Arab League in the CASCF, the Arab States have the opportunity to communicate with China in a unified voice and the ability to actively negotiate for the inclusion of collective projects involving multiple Arab countries.

CASCF conducts ministerial meetings every two years. In 2022, CASCF conducted its first summit level meeting with Xi Jinping in attendance. The next meeting of the CASCF is planned for later this year in 2024.

¹ For an in-depth discussion of China's interests in the Middle East, see Dawn C. Murphy, *China's Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order*, Stanford University Press, 2022, ch. 3.

² For an in-depth discussion of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, see Murphy, *China's Rise in the Global South*, Ch. 4.

This testimony focusses on the political, economic, and security aspects of the CASCf. That said, almost every type of state-to-state interaction is in scope for this organization, including environment, health, education, culture, foreign aid, media, legislature cooperation, science and technology, policing, and a wide range of other functional issues.

The CASCf emphasizes political cooperation with China. The foundational norms of political cooperation in the CASCf are China's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (5POPC) and South-South Cooperation. The 5POPC represent a very conservative interpretation of Westphalian norms of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. The 5POPC are: mutual respect for territory and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

The CASCf also explicitly includes cooperation on key Arab political issues, in particular the Middle East peace process. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the most important political issue addressed in the forum and China has constantly emphasized the issue. China also seeks support from Middle Eastern states in the CASCf for its behavior in Xinjiang.

Through the CASCf, China also solicits support from Middle Eastern states for its approach to territorial claims. One clear example of this type of behavior was the inclusion of wording in CASCf documents supporting China's position on territorial disputes in the South China Sea in 2016.³

The CASCf is also the primary multilateral mechanisms through which China coordinates economic activities with the Middle East. The main areas of economic cooperation in the forum are trade, investment, finance, infrastructure, economic security, and BRI. CASCf also encourages energy cooperation between China and Arab states.

Finally, CASCf officially promotes security cooperation but compared to economic and political interactions, this activity is minimal. The forum calls for establishing a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. CASCf documents also highlight the need to combat global terrorism, but unlike the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), CASCf forums do not contain actual mechanisms for bi-lateral counter-terrorism activities.

The CASCf is the primary multilateral mechanism for China's interactions with the GCC members, along with the rest of the LAS, but China now is also setting up standalone mechanisms to interact directly with the GCC. In 2022, immediately following the CASCf summit, Xi Jinping held a summit with the GCC leaders in Riyadh. Also, although China already has a strategic partnership with the LAS, it is now pursuing one with the GCC as an organization.⁴

³ The 2016 CASCf declaration states "Arab states support China and relevant countries to peacefully settle territorial disputes and maritime issues using friendly consultations and negotiations through bilateral agreements and regional consensus; emphasize the need to respect the right of sovereign States and States parties to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to choose dispute settlement methods." See "China-Arab Cooperation Forum Ministerial Conference of the Seventh Doha Declaration," (2016), section 6, www.cascf.org.

⁴ "HE GCCSG: Conditions for Establishing GCC-China Strategic Partnership Are Based on Political Trust, Mutual Respect, Strong Understanding Among them and Their Weight in Global Economy, Building on Outcomes of 1st

China has also been negotiating a free trade agreement with the GCC since 2004 and both sides hope to finalize the agreement soon.

China's recent push to set up organizations to interact with the GCC reflects the rising role of the Arab Gulf in China's Middle East strategy, the importance of GCC states as economic partners with China, and increasing cohesion among GCC members since the ending of the embargo against Qatar. The aim of these new GCC-focused organizations is to pursue China's economic, energy, and political instruments with a block of countries that are increasingly important to China's economic and political interactions with the Middle East.

Why have several Middle Eastern states become members, dialogue partners, or observers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)? How could relationships through the SCO potentially amplify China's influence in the Middle East?

In 2023, the SCO expanded to include Iran as a formal member.⁵ Turkiye is already a dialogue partner and has expressed an interest in membership.⁶ Five out of six GCC member states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) together with Egypt have become dialogue partners in the last few years. Saudi Arabia has expressed an interest in joining the SCO as a full member in the medium term.⁷ Each of these states has different motives for joining the SCO.

Before 2023, the only Middle Eastern states that were not yet part of a Chinese cooperation forum in the Middle East were Iran, Turkiye, and Israel. China's CASCFC already encompassed all of the League of Arab States members, including all GCC members, and North African states are also already in scope for the FOCAC.

Joining the SCO provides Iran opportunities to further institutionalize its relations with China, Russia, the Central Asian states, India, and Pakistan. As a result, it offers the possibility of more robust economic, political, and security cooperation with these states. Due to Iran's relative isolation from the international system, joining this organization provides it with more opportunities to build relations with regional countries and legitimize its role in the international arena.

GCC-China Summit in Saudi on Dec. 09, 2022," GCC website at <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/MediaCenter/NewsCooperation/News/Pages/news2023-10-22-1.aspx>

⁵ Jonathan Fulton, "Iran joining the SCO isn't surprising. But Beijing's promotion of illiberal norms in Eurasia should get more attention," Atlantic Council blog, July 13, 2023,

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-sco-china-bri-illiberal-norms/>

⁶ "Turkey's Erdogan targets joining Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, media reports say," *Reuters*, September 17, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-targets-joining-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-media-2022-09-17/>; and Umut Uras, "Can the SCO be Turkey's alternative to the West?" *Aljazeera*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/21/turkey-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-membership-nato-west-alternative>

⁷ "Riyadh joins Shanghai Cooperation Organization as ties with Beijing grow," *Reuters*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/riyadh-joins-shanghai-cooperation-organization-ties-with-beijing-grow-2023-03-29/>

Turkiye also does not currently participate in the other Chinese-led cooperation forums in the Middle East. Although Turkiye is a NATO member, full membership in the SCO would provide Turkiye more opportunities for economic, political, and security cooperation with regional countries. Through joining SCO, Turkiye can demonstrate it has options for relations with multiple great powers outside the US and NATO.

There are three primary drivers for GCC states and Egypt to join the SCO as dialogue partners and possible future full members. First, it provides a way for these Arab States to balance against potential Iranian influence in the SCO. Next, as states in the Arab World become increasingly concerned about perceived lack of attention to the Middle East, joining the SCO is a way to build stronger ties with China. Also, as states in the Arab Gulf and Egypt become more important in China's overall foreign policy, SCO provides yet another venue for demonstrating the importance of the countries to China and coordinating policy positions with the states the PRC sees as key regional actors.

What is the significance of the recent admission of four Middle Eastern countries to the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) grouping? How could relationships through the BRICS potentially amplify China's influence in the Middle East?

In August 2023, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) announced plans to expand to include members from the Middle East. Four out of six of the new invited members were from the region: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE.⁸ The other two proposed members were Argentina and Ethiopia. Although Argentina ultimately decided to decline the invitation, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates all confirmed that they plan to join.⁹

The fact that six of the new members invitations for the BRICS were extended to Middle Eastern countries indicates the importance of key regional powers from the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Iran) to BRICS members in general and China in particular. Historically, China has viewed Egypt and Saudi as the two leaders of the Arab World, Iran as an important regional power, and the UAE as an economic powerhouse with increasing regional influence and economic development plans that align well with China's own economic priorities. Iran and Egypt's inclusion in the list with Saudi Arabia and the UAE likely indicates that the PRC is not wanting to pick sides between states in the region and is attempting to maintain a balanced approach.

⁸ Julian Borger, "Brics to more than double with admission of six new countries," *The Guardian*, August 24, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/aug/24/five-brics-nations-announce-admission-of-six-new-countries-to-bloc>.

⁹ "South Africa says five countries confirm they are joining BRICS," *Reuters*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/south-africa-says-five-countries-confirm-they-are-joining-brics-2024-01-31/>

Assess China’s efforts to cultivate Middle Eastern countries’ support for its initiatives and positions at the United Nations. Where has Middle Eastern countries’ support proven most valuable?

In the United Nations, Middle Eastern countries’ support for China’s positions has been most valuable in the UN Human Rights Council to shield China from criticism about its behavior in Xinjiang. For example, in July 2019, after twenty-two countries formally condemned China for its mass detention of ethnic and religious minorities in China, thirty-seven states signed a letter praising China’s “remarkable achievements in the field of human rights.” Signatories included several Middle Eastern states, such as Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the UAE.¹⁰ Also, in 2022, Middle Eastern states (Qatar and the UAE) voted in the UN Human Rights Council to prevent debate of China’s behavior in Xinjiang.¹¹

Address China’s use of its UN Security Council veto to block U.S. sponsored moves in the organization, such as the October 2023 U.S.-sponsored draft resolution calling for pauses in fighting to allow humanitarian aid access, the protection of civilians and a stop to arming Hamas and other militants in the Gaza Strip.

China’s voting behavior in the United Nations Security Council since October 7, 2023, needs to be considered in the broader historical context of China’s approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. During the Mao era, China provided material support to various Palestinian groups seeking national liberation. China recognized the State of Palestine in 1988 and established robust state-to-state relations with Israel in 1992. Since at least 1997, China has articulated its contemporary views on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and in 2002 it established a Special Envoy for Middle East Issues to attempt to contribute to resolution of the contemporary conflict.¹² The Palestinian-Israel conflict has been a centerpiece of China’s political discourse with the Arab States, reflected in declarations of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum.

China’s approach to events after October 7, 2023, including its voting behavior in the United Nations Security Council, mirrors its longstanding approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. China views the current Israel-Hamas war as a flare-up in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Arab-Israeli conflict. China considers the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as the core threat to peace and security in the Middle East. For over twenty years, the PRC has advocated for peaceful negotiations, an end to violence, a two-state solution with an independent Palestinian state based on pre-1967 borders with East Jerusalem as the capital, a return of the Golan Heights to Syria, a cessation of Israeli settlements in occupied territories, the establishment of an international supervisory mechanism, and the utilization of a multilateral mechanism to resolve the conflict.

¹⁰ Joshua Berlinger, “North Korea, Syria and Myanmar among countries defending China’s actions in Xinjiang,” CNN, July 15, 2019.

¹¹ “China: Xinjiang vote failure betrays core mission of UN Human Rights Council, Amnesty International, October 6, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/10/china-xinjiang-vote-failure-betrays-core-mission-of-un-human-rights-council/>; and Emma Farge, “U.N. body rejects debate on China’s treatment of Uyghur Muslims in blow to West,” *Reuters*, October 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/un-body-rejects-historic-debate-chinas-human-rights-record-2022-10-06/>

¹² For an in-depth discussion of China’s Special Envoy for the Middle East, see Murphy, *China’s Rise in the Global South*, ch. 5.

Although it is different from its material support for Palestinian groups during the Mao era, China's behavior over the last twenty years has been Palestinian-leaning, including in its United Nations Security Council voting. Since 1991, China's votes in the UNSC about issues involving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict often vary from the US. Over the years, it has consistently criticized what it considers to be Israel's disproportionate responses towards the Palestinians and violations of international law. It considers its approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to be a long-standing principled stance to stand up for the Palestinians.

Starting immediately after October 7, 2023, China's official statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Special Envoy to the United Nations (Zhang Jun), Special Envoy for the Middle East Issue (Zhai Jun), and Xi Jinping were all consistent with its past stance on the Palestinian - Israeli conflict. China emphasizes that it condemns violence against civilians, but it refuses to characterize Hamas (or other Palestinian groups) as terrorists. China tends to frame Palestinian actions as part of an armed struggle for national liberation rather, not terrorism. In the 2023 UNSC vote referenced in this question, and other cases where China's vote differs from the US on this issue, China vetoed the resolution, because it does not align with China's longstanding stance on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. China's complaint about that particular resolution was that it did not call for an unconditional cease fire.¹³

At this point, the PRC is deeply concerned the Israel-Hamas war could escalate into a much broader conflict. China views the Middle East as a region of instability that is ripe for conflict. In particular, it expresses concerns that violence could increase between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iranian-backed groups in Syria and Iraq, as well as the Houthis in Yemen.¹⁴ The PRC also likely worries that conflicts between those Iranian proxies and Israel could ultimately draw Iran into direct conflict with Israel or the United States. A broader war in the region could further threaten China's shipping through the Middle East, cause global oil prices to rise, and pose a danger to Chinese citizens and businesses in countries involved in the conflict. China's top interests in the Middle East are economic. A regional war would pose significant risks to those interests.

Since October 7, the PRC has highlighted how its approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict differs from the US. It often leverages debate in the UNSC to highlight those differences. Much of the framing of this issue is centered on criticism of the US role in the Middle East, support for Israel, and broader US international behavior that the PRC considers to be hegemonic. Although China's relations with Israel may be damaged by its current approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflicts, it is likely Beijing's position on the Israel-Hamas war and its UNSC voting on this issue will positively resonate with the Arab World, the Muslim-majority world, and many countries in the Global South more broadly.

¹³ Michelle Nichols, "Russia, China veto US push for UN action on Israel, Gaza," Reuters, October 25, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/un-security-council-vote-rival-us-russian-plans-israel-gaza-action-2023-10-25/#:~:text=UNITED%20NATIONS%2C%20Oct%2025%20%28Reuters%29%20-%20Russia%20and,Hamas%20and%20other%20militants%20in%20the%20Gaza%20Strip>

¹⁴ Dewey Sim, "Israel-Gaza war: China will 'do anything' to restore peace, but 'prospects are worrying', envoy says," The South China Morning Post, October 23, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3238893/israel-gaza-war-china-will-do-anything-restore-peace-prospects-are-worrying-envoy-says>

The Commission is mandated to make policy recommendations to Congress based on its hearings and other research. What are your recommendations for Congressional action related to the topic of your testimony?

- Congress should make efforts to better understand China's role in regional organizations in the Middle East and the ways in which China's interactions with these organizations translate into influence in the region.
- Congress should consider urging the US government to establish multilateral organizations in the Middle East similar to China's cooperation forums in order to fully engage with members of the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Those new organizations could be leveraged to pursue a wide range of joint activities with states in the region across functional issues.
- Congress should avoid overreacting to China's engagements with regional organizations. Many of China's activities with these regional organizations are viewed in a positive light by members of the LAS and GCC. The US government should triage which Chinese behavior in multilateral organizations is most problematic for US interests and focus on addressing those specific issues.
- Congress should make efforts to better understand how China's Palestinian-leaning behavior in the United National Security Council resonates with states in the Middle East and the Global South more broadly.
- Congress should make efforts to better understand the role of GCC states in China's broader strategy for the Middle East. Increasingly, China is incorporating GCC states into a number of multilateral organization formats. The US government needs to better assess the significance of those actions and how to interpret them relative to China's relations with other states in the Middle East (e.g., Iran, Egypt, Israel, Turkiye).