

**China's Strategic Objectives in the Middle East**  
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**Dr. Jonathan Fulton**  
**Associate Professor, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates**  
**Nonresident Senior Fellow, Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative, Atlantic Council**

The Middle East – North Africa (MENA) has emerged as an important strategic region for the People's Republic of China (PRC), with a significant expansion of its interests and presence across the region.<sup>1</sup> However, at this stage China remains primarily an economic actor there, with growing political and diplomatic engagement and little in the way of a security role. This economics-first approach has contributed to improved public perceptions of China across MENA; public polling data from the Arab Barometer consistently shows positive views of China as an external actor, with respondents from 8 out of 9 countries perceiving China more favorably than the US.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, its modest involvement in regional political and security affairs, evident in its minimal response to Houthi strikes on maritime shipping, underscores its reluctance to play a more meaningful role in MENA, which has no doubt been recognized by governments that expected a more robust response given Beijing's outsized economic presence.

This highlights an important point about how MENA features in the PRC's broader strategic objectives. It is first and foremost a region where China buys energy, sells goods, and wins construction infrastructure contracts. These economic interests have not required a corresponding political or security role, and Chinese leaders have not indicated that they will do so; they benefit significantly from the US security architecture that underpins the region's fragile status quo. China works closely with US allies and partners in MENA, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Egypt, and in many regards Beijing's interests in the Middle East have been consistent with those of the US.

At the same time, MENA has to be considered as part of a larger global strategy under which US-China interests diverge substantially. China's more assertive foreign policy since the global financial crisis started under the leadership of Hu Jintao and has intensified under Xi Jinping.<sup>3</sup> The 2017 US National Security Strategy identified China as a great power competitor, and the rivalry is playing out in MENA as elsewhere. Beijing has rolled out new global initiatives – the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), discussed

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Jonathan Fulton (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of China – Middle East Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Robbins, "Public views of the U.S.-China competition in MENA," Arab Barometer, July 2022, [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_US-China\\_Report-EN.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_US-China_Report-EN.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See Susan Shirk, *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

below<sup>4</sup> – to present itself as a leader of the Global South, using a state-centered alternative to Western liberalism.

In this effort, the MENA is a region where China aims to establish a normative consensus consistent with Beijing's preferences. As a result, we see several examples of PRC leaders promoting narratives that the US is unreliable, or that its presence in the region exacerbates tensions and conflict. After a January 2022 meeting with MENA officials, for example, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said the Middle East “is suffering from long-existing unrest and conflicts due to foreign interventions... We believe the people of the Middle East are the masters of the Middle East. There is no ‘power vacuum,’ and there is no need of ‘patriarchy from outside.’”<sup>5</sup> Whereas in the preceding two decades the PRC rarely overtly challenged the US position in MENA, it has become a regular feature as Chinese leaders exploit pressure points between the US and regional actors in order to differentiate itself from the US and to create friction between Washington and its MENA partners and allies. This has been especially present in Chinese messaging since the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, as PRC leaders have consistently used the crisis to undermine the US and present itself as a more reliable partner to the Arab world.<sup>6</sup>

### *China's diplomatic activities in the Middle East*

While it has not been widely recognized, China has developed a deep, broad and systematic approach to diplomatic engagement across MENA. It uses a range of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic tools, and these have been complemented in recent years with international organizations where Beijing has significant influence. It also has appointed special envoys for region-specific issues.

At the bilateral level, China has diplomatic relations with all regional countries. Several of these are enhanced by strategic partnerships, which are mechanisms to coordinate on regional and international affairs. Five MENA countries – Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – have been elevated to comprehensive strategic partners, the top level in China's hierarchy of diplomatic relations. This results in the “full pursuit of cooperation and development on regional and international affairs.”<sup>7</sup> To be considered for this level of partnership a country has to be seen as a major regional actor that also provides added value, such as Egypt's control of Suez, or Saudi's leadership role in global Islam and

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<sup>4</sup> See Michael Schuman, Jonathan Fulton and Tuvia Gering, “How Beijing's Newest Global Initiatives Seek to Remake the World Order,” Atlantic Council, June 21, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/how-beijings-newest-global-initiatives-seek-to-remake-the-world-order/>

<sup>5</sup> “Middle East Has No ‘Power Vacuum,’ Needs No ‘Foreign Patriarch’: Wang Yi,” *Global Times*, January 16, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1246036.shtml>

<sup>6</sup> See Grant Rumley and Rebecca Redlich, “Tracking Chinese Statements on the Hamas-Israel Conflict,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, updated February 28, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-chinese-statements-hamas-israel-conflict>

<sup>7</sup> “Quick guide to China's diplomatic levels,” *South China Morning Post*, January 20, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1903455/quick-guide-chinas-diplomatic-levels>

energy markets.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, when assessing China's diplomatic efforts in MENA, these countries (Algeria to a lesser extent) are the load-bearing pillars of Beijing's approach. They see more official visits, attract more investment, do more contracting, and generally support a wider range of China's interests in the region. That China has comprehensive strategic partnerships with both Saudi Arabia and Iran means there are more frequent bilateral high-level meetings, no doubt contributing to China's role in the Saudi-Iran rapprochement.

At the multilateral level, China uses the China Arab States Cooperation Forum, which includes all Arab League members, and the Forum on China Africa Cooperation, which includes nine Arab League members.<sup>9</sup> These forums present China with regular ministerial-level meetings where they map out cooperation priorities. They also have several sub-ministerial level issue-specific working groups. The result is a relatively deep level of diplomatic engagement.

China has appointed special envoys for the Middle East, the Horn of African Affairs, and the Syrian Issue, all of which were designed to present the PRC as an actor with influence and interest in these issues, although the impact of each has been marginal.

Finally, two international organizations where China plays an influential role, BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Forum, have admitted Middle Eastern states as members in recent years. BRICS expanded for the first time in 2023 to include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, the UAE, and Ethiopia, giving the organization a presence in MENA and the Horn. The SCO admitted Iran as a full member in 2023, a position it has coveted since 2005. Other MENA participants in the SCO are Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, all of which are dialogue partners. This does not make them SCO members; it is a position for countries that wish to participate in discussions with SCO members on specific issues that they have applied to join as dialogue partners.<sup>10</sup> It could eventually result in full membership but that does not appear to be on the horizon for any Middle Eastern dialogue partners for now.

All in all, Chinese diplomacy has been highly active and quite successful laying the groundwork for a deeper presence in the Middle East.

### ***China's involvement in MENA conflict mediation***

China's efforts to position itself as a conflict mediator is part of a larger strategy, embedded in the GSI, to present the PRC as a leading global actor. As a 2023 report from MERICS cautioned, "China's current mediation push seems to be largely a reflection of its geopolitical competition with the United

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<sup>8</sup> For more on China's partnership diplomacy, see Georg Strüver, "China's Partnership Diplomacy: International Alignment Based on Interests of Ideology," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10 (1) (2017), 31-65; Jonathan Fulton, "Friends with Benefits: China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Gulf," *Project on Middle East Political Science: Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East*, 34, (2019), pp. 33-38.

<sup>9</sup> See Dawn Murphy, "Chinese Diplomatic Outreach to MENA: Cooperation Forums and Special Envoys," in Jonathan Fulton (ed.) *Routledge Handbook on China-Middle East Relations*, pp. 384-395 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Eva Seiwert, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and China's Strategy of Shaping International Norms*, PhD Dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin, 2021, p. 239.

States and its ambition to expand its global influence at the expense of the West.”<sup>11</sup> In MENA as elsewhere, the results have been mixed. The Saudi-Iran rapprochement is an example of a low cost ‘win’ for China. It has been well documented that much of the negotiation that led to the March 2023 announcements in Beijing had been done through Iraqi and Omani efforts.<sup>12</sup> China’s involvement appears to be as a great power sponsor that was broached during Xi Jinping’s December 2022 summit in Riyadh and further discussed during President Ebrahim Raisi’s visit to Beijing in February 2023. Given China’s comprehensive strategic partnerships with the Saudis and Iranians, it has significant diplomatic relations with both countries and was therefore the only major power that could play such a role. However, it has to be stressed that most of the groundwork had been laid before China’s involvement, and that the rapprochement itself was the result of domestic political and economic pressures within Saudi and Iran.

Given this highly publicized diplomatic ‘win’, Chinese analysis promoted a narrative of a “wave of reconciliation” in the Middle East as a result of Beijing’s efforts. Ding Long, a Middle East expert at Shanghai International Studies University, described China’s mediation diplomacy, guided by the GSI, as driving events in the Middle East in the wake of the Saudi-Iran deal:

Within a month since then, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement is like a key that opens the door to peace in this region. The warring parties in Yemen took a critical step toward a political solution; Bahrain and other Arab countries have restored diplomatic relations with Iran; Saudi Arabia and other Arab powers are interacting more frequently with Syria. A wave of reconciliation is also encouraging more joint efforts between China and the Middle East in pursuing peace.<sup>13</sup>

Shortly after the Saudi-Iran deal, the PRC announced that it was willing to wade into the Israel-Palestine conflict during a June 2023 visit from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Immediately following this, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that he had accepted an invitation to Beijing for October<sup>14</sup>; for obvious reasons the visit did not happen. China’s response to the Hamas attack, discussed below, has negated any prior work towards being a mediator on the issue; its relationship with Israel has been deeply damaged at this point and it is hard to see how Beijing could play a constructive role negotiating between the two. The March 2024 meeting in Doha between Chinese ambassador Wang Kejian and Hamas official Ismail Haniyeh further cements this.<sup>15</sup> Any role China can play would be in support of Palestine and highly partisan.

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<sup>11</sup> Helena Legarda, “The Geopolitics of China’s Mediation Push,” MERICS China Security and Risk Tracker, May 31, 2023, <https://merics.org/en/tracker/merics-china-security-and-risk-tracker-022023>

<sup>12</sup> Niloufar Baghernia, “China’s Marginal Involvement in the 2023 Iran-Saudi Arabia Reconciliation,” *Asian Affairs* (2024), 1-18; Saeed Azimi, “The Story Behind China’s Role in the Iran-Saudi Deal,” Stimson Center, March 13, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-story-behind-chinas-role-in-the-iran-saudi-deal/>

<sup>13</sup> Ding Long, “Global Security Initiative Drives Forward Deeper Reconciliation in Middle East,” *Global Times*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202304/1289834.shtml>

<sup>14</sup> “Netanyahu Says Invited to China, with US-Israel Ties Tense,” *Arab News*, June 27, 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2329116/middle-east>

<sup>15</sup> Dewey Sim, “Chinese Envoy Meets Hamas Political Leader in Qatar to Discuss ‘Gaza Conflict and Other Issues,’” *South China Morning Post*, March 19, 2024,

In any case, just over a year after Beijing's first successful foray into Middle East diplomacy, the region is less stable than it has been in recent memory, and China's efforts at mediation have had little tangible impact. It has little influence on Iran or its nonstate partners of Hamas, the Houthis, or Hezbollah, and is not seen as credible by Israel.<sup>16</sup> Generally, its response to events since the Hamas attack have made China look very transactional and self-interested in the region, rather than a responsible extra-regional power with substantial Middle East interests.

A point worth considering on this topic is that China is a relative newcomer to Middle East political diplomacy. As described above, it is primarily an economic actor in the region, and despite its special envoys, cooperation forums, and strategic partnerships, it does not have the depth of regional specialization that the US or European countries do, given their longstanding involvement in MENA. As China develops a deeper pool of MENA talent this will change, but it is early days. Its area studies programs in universities and think tanks are not nearly as developed as their US counterparts, making for a much shallower pool of expertise.

### *China's response to the Hamas attack on Israel*

The Hamas attack on Israel had significant repercussions for China's approach to the MENA and resulted in a more blatantly realpolitik approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict. China's ambition to play a role in resolving this conflict was based largely on the 'peace-through-development' framework of the GDI/GSI.<sup>17</sup> The attack demonstrated the need for a more robust response, but in the wake of the attack the limits of Beijing's normative approach were evident. Since then, China has not pursued a mediator role, siding firmly with Palestine while frequently condemning Israel and the US. Pointedly, it did not blame Hamas for the attack and has seemingly made the 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter' argument; during International Court of Justice hearings Ma Xinmin, a legal advisor for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argued that Palestinian acts of violence against Israelis are legitimate "use of force to resist foreign oppression and to complete the establishment of the Palestinian state."<sup>18</sup>

A point worth considering is that within China, the Israel-Palestine conflict resonates differently than it does in the US and other Western liberal democracies. The demographic composition of the West with large immigrant populations means that there are significant Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Arab

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3255898/chinese-envoy-meets-hamas-political-leader-qatar-discuss-gaza-conflict-and-other-issues>

<sup>16</sup> Parisa Hafezi and Andrew Hayley, "China Presses Iran to Rein in Houthi Attacks in Red Sea, Sources Say," Reuters, January 26, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/china-presses-iran-rein-houthi-attacks-red-sea-sources-say-2024-01-26/>; Jonathan Fulton, "China Doesn't Have as much Leverage in the Middle East as One Thinks – at Least when it Comes to Iran," Atlantic Council, February 1, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/china-mena-leverage-iran-houthis-yemen/>

<sup>17</sup> On 'peace through development', see Sun Degang and Zhang Jieying, "Peace Through Development: China's Peace Initiative for the Middle Eastern Conflict Resolution," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* (2021), 7(4), 383-408.

<sup>18</sup> "China at the World Court: Palestinians Have the Right to 'Armed Struggle' against Israelis," *The Times of Israel*, February 22, 2024, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/china-at-the-world-court-palestinians-have-the-right-to-armed-struggle-against-israelis/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/china-at-the-world-court-palestinians-have-the-right-to-armed-struggle-against-israelis/)

communities for whom the Israel – Palestine conflict is a major issue that animates voters, NGOs, and lobbyists. Democratic leaders are expected to have positions that represent their constituents, and Middle East policy has to try to thread the needle of interests and values in a manner that balances citizens' often deeply held convictions. In China, religious minorities - especially of the Abrahamic faiths - are comparatively insignificant in the demography, and the immigrant population from the Middle East is virtually non-existent. The Party has increased repression against Muslims, Jews, and Christians during the Xi Jinping era, making overt political action from them incredibly costly.<sup>19</sup> This, combined with the fact that China has an authoritarian government, means the issue of Israel and Palestine does not mobilize Chinese citizens like it does in the US, and the government is less concerned with being responsive to citizens' concerns. It is, therefore, a purely geopolitical issue. The CCP can use its policy in the region to advance its own interests while challenging the US and its Western allies without the additional consideration of managing domestic pressures. Its messaging on the war in Gaza is therefore more about China presenting itself as an alternative to the US as a global leader than it is about the war itself.

### *China's global initiatives and international order*

At this point China's three global initiatives (GDI, GSI, GCI) are following the same early-stage trajectory of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). When it was announced in 2013 there was little understanding or awareness of it outside of China, and within China ministries, agencies and municipalities spent most of 2014 and 2015 incorporating the BRI into their missions.<sup>20</sup> The 2015 white paper on the BRI<sup>21</sup> and the 2017 Belt and Road Forum enhanced its global profile. The GDI, GSI, and GCI have been appearing in joint communiqués across MENA and are cited by local actors as useful contributions from China, but they do not appear to be widely understood yet, nor do many local governments seem to be aware of them. It is likely that the GSI first came to a wider audience when then-Foreign Minister Qin Gang described the Saudi -Iran rapprochement as “a case of best practice for promoting the Global Security Initiative.”<sup>22</sup>

However, the normative framework of these initiatives has appeal for regional governments. Whereas liberal norms of global governance focus on democracy, free markets, human rights, and international institutions, China's trio of initiatives promote sovereignty, territorial integrity, self-determination, and

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<sup>19</sup> “Government Policy toward Religion in the People's Republic of China: A Brief History,” Pew Research Center, August 30, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/08/30/government-policy-toward-religion-in-the-peoples-republic-of-china-a-brief-history/>

<sup>20</sup> Michael Swain, “Chinese Views and Commentary on the ‘One Belt, One Road’ Initiative,” *China Leadership Monitor* 47:2 (2015)

<sup>21</sup> National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (2015) Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Maritime Silk Road. March, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics\\_665678/2015zt/xjpcxbayzlt2015nnh/201503/t20150328\\_705553.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics_665678/2015zt/xjpcxbayzlt2015nnh/201503/t20150328_705553.html). Accessed 18 December 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Iran, “Qin Gang Has a Group Meeting with Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud and Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian,” April 6, 2023, [http://ir.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zyxw/202304/t20230409\\_11056460.htm](http://ir.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zyxw/202304/t20230409_11056460.htm)

noninterference in the domestic affairs of states. Essentially, it rejects the universalism of liberal norms and promotes a statist vision instead. For governments and societies long frustrated by the inconsistent promotion of liberal values from the west, or by those that reject liberalism altogether, China's model is attractive.

The impact of China's global initiative and the BRI should also be considered as a consequence of a global order transition. During the Cold War, bipolarity meant governments in need of development assistance could turn either to the West or the Soviets. The end of the Cold War meant the developing world was limited to Western institutions underpinned by liberal values that imposed conditions, often inconsistent with local norms. The emergence of China and its global initiatives provides alternatives, and that Beijing presents these initiatives in contrast to liberal institutions is appealing to many governments in the Middle East.

### *The issue of Xinjiang*

The CCP identified its 'core interests' in a 2011 white paper, "China's Peaceful Development". These core interests are state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity, national reunification, maintenance of its political system and social stability, and maintaining safeguards for sustainable economic and social development. Importantly, all of these are domestic concerns. In practical terms, anything another country does to undermine these – especially including support for independence movements in Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan – will damage the relationship. The CCP faces numerous challenges from issues of domestic governance, and pressure from within is the most significant threat to its continued rule. When foreign governments apply pressure on Beijing on domestic issues there is pushback, typically in the form of coercive economic statecraft.<sup>23</sup>

All of this is to say that Middle Eastern governments have shown no inclination to speak or act on the issue of repression of Uyghurs or other Muslim minorities in China. No regional government wants to jeopardize a bilateral relationship with one of its most important trading partners on an issue that few feel is relevant to their own core interests of building sustainable economies and improving governance in the face of significant domestic pressures. Engagement with China is largely seen as an opportunity for regional governments to address these challenges, and China's own experience of development since the Reform Era began in 1978 is perceived as a model for this.

Another consideration here is that Beijing frames its repression of Uyghurs as a response to a conservative religious ideology that promotes separatism and has used terrorism in an attempt to establish an independent state. In doing so, it addresses a concern for many Middle Eastern governments, most of which are deeply concerned about the spread of political Islam in their own countries. As such, the issue is less about any notion of pan-Islamic solidarity than it is about challenges to the state from an ideology seen with deep hostility from regional governments.

### *Policy Recommendations*

- Provide explicit support for MENA countries in their development programs.

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<sup>23</sup> Evan A. Feigenbaum, "Is Coercion the New Normal in China's Economic Statecraft?" *Macro Polo*, July 25, 2017, <https://macropolo.org/coercion-new-normal-chinas-economic-statecraft/>

- Encourage more investment into MENA from private US companies.
- Improved messaging on what the US does in the region beyond the realm of security.
- Improved messaging on how MENA features in US interests and policy.
- Enhance public diplomacy – bring more MENA students to US on training and education programs.
- Draw upon the narratives of other extra-regional allies and partners that have interests in MENA and have also had challenges in dealing with China. They can help with the messaging – what have their experiences with China been? What issues should MENA countries be considering?
- Where possible, align approaches to MENA with US allies to provide a greater range of investment, development, and trade options.