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INFLUENCE OF THE MENA COUNTRIES IN CHINA

ABSTRACT: The Middle Eastern and North African (MENA)¹ region nowadays enjoys an increasing amount of attention from around the world, especially China. As a gateway between Europe, Asia, and Africa, this region is of utmost geopolitical importance. Despite being valuable assets to world economy, they themselves – as of recently, largely due to regional military conflicts, political strife, ethnic tensions, and religious division –, are unable to assert their own interests towards great powers, such as China, however, they are not lacking potential. With the gradual withdrawal of the traditional great powers from the region, the stage is set for others, mainly China.

Although China is silently dominating the region, without the co-operation of the MENA countries, Beijing would certainly not be able to gain a foothold of any sort there. As about 50 percent of China's oil imports stem from the Middle East, as the MENA region is in an important position for Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, and as the whole region offers a great and diverse market and plenty of room for investments, the Middle Eastern and North African countries are in a position to exploit their status of being valuable assets. They could grow from aspiring regional powers to great or even world powers should an agreement and eventual co-operation among them emerge.

KEYWORDS: MENA, China, Belt and Road, strategic resources, Hui Chinese, soft power, Uighurs, Xinjiang, terrorism

HISTORICAL RETROSPECT

The Silk Road (207 BC – 1450s AD), stretching from China to the Levant and the Mediterranean, was made possible by, among others, Persian and Arab traders and merchants who transferred the goods from the oases of Xinjiang to Anatolia. It was, in fact, not a simple trade route, but a network thereof, with multiple routes on land and on sea as well. The significance of the overland routes was damaged by the disintegration and collapse of the Mongol Empire, and was ultimately eclipsed when safer maritime trade routes were discovered in the 15th century.

Islam is believed to have reached China during the Caliphate of 'Uthman ibn Affan (644 AD – 656 AD), who sent an embassy there in 651, a little less than 20 years after the death of the prophet Muhammad; however, it is still argued whether the head of the deputation, Sa'd

¹ The definition of the MENA region differs from researcher to researcher; countries can be included and excluded, however, the core territory that is always mentioned consists of Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, State of Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The greater MENA region can also comprise Afghanistan, Turkey, Sudan, and Western Sahara, and sometimes even more countries are included from Mauritania through Eritrea to Pakistan. In this paper, only the core region will be mentioned with the occasional addition of Turkey for its important role played in the region, but only where stated so.

ibn Abi Waqqas, the maternal uncle of the prophet, has ever been to Tang Dynasty China. Despite the debates, it is agreed that Muslim diplomats and merchants did indeed arrive in Tang China just a few decades after the Hijra (622).²

Arab and Persian merchants made up the majority of Muslim settlements in Northwest China. They played a great role in the transmission of trade goods along the Silk Road as well as the introduction and spread of Buddhism to China (from 148 AD onwards). Chang'an (today's Xi'an) was the first imperial city to officially house Muslim communities.

The battle of Talas (751) brought the Silk Road under Abbasid control, which effectively cut off Chinese influence in the region. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this did not sever the diplomatic relations between the two empires. On the contrary, it was the Arabs and Persians who helped China quell the rebellion of An-Lushan in 756, and some 50 years later the Abbasids and Chinese formed an alliance to repulse Tibetan attacks in Central Asia.

During the Ming Dynasty, some decades before the European Age of Discovery, the Chinese emperor (the Yongle Emperor) sent a eunuch of Muslim faith, Zheng He (1371–1435?), to lead several maritime missions with a grand fleet to assert the cultural and political hegemony of China, to establish imperial control over maritime trade routes, and to show the might of the fleet and thus to coerce countries into the Chinese tributary system, reaching as far as Persia, the Arabian Peninsula, and even East Africa. This shows that China had not always been closed to the outside world before the Europeans arrived there and had actively tried to project its power further and further. The next emperor (the Hongxi Emperor), however, discontinued the voyages and ordered every ship to be destroyed, as he deemed them highly unprofitable. In essence, this short period was the only time China regarded maritime presence to be of any worth to maintain – all until modern times –, and it is important to stress that it had happened just before the Europeans embarked on their ships and happened to discover and then subsequently colonise the New World.

The 19th century saw two notable Muslim rebellions against the Manchu Qing dynasty: the Panthay Rebellion (1856–1873) which was an anti-discriminatory and anti-Qing uprising joined by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and the Dungan Revolt (1862–1877) which was a chiefly Hui Chinese (Muslim) ethnic and religious one. Both were quelled and retaliated ferociously, as millions died and were murdered during these two events.³ The leader of the latter, Du Wenxiu, is today regarded as a hero by the Chinese government.

Modern relations were re-established during the second half of the 20th century. China's main strategic partners in the (greater) MENA region are Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. In terms of main trade partners, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia are considered, with Iran achieving the fourth place.

Xi Jinping's 2013 initiative, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, alternatively the Belt and Road Initiative, the New Silk Road, or originally One Belt, One Road Initiative, aims to resurrect and expand the historical Silk Road mainly under Chinese control. This initiative proves highly important in China's ambitions, and is heavily reliant on the co-operation of the involved countries, thus increasing the importance of them, most notably the MENA Region.

² Lipman, J. N. *Familiar Strangers, a history of Muslims in Northwest China*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997.

³ Gernet, J. *A History of Chinese Civilization*. 2. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

ECONOMIC INTERESTS

As of 2016, China's GDP rose to USD 11,199.15 billion with USD 6,894.5/capita,⁴ while that of the MENA was USD 3,103.78 billion⁵ with about USD 7,211/capita. As for comparison, the United States attained USD 18,624.48 billion with USD 52,194.90/capita,⁶ while Russia's GDP sank to USD 1,283.20 billion with USD 11099.20/capita.⁷

China contributes to the Middle Eastern and North African countries' economy by investing in infrastructure and trading with them, buying resources from less developed, import-reliant countries, selling them products in return, or exchanging products with more developed, export-oriented countries. Machinery, electrical and other appliances, clothes, and articles of iron and steel are the most prominent products of import from China to the MENA countries, while oil, ores, raw materials, and vehicles are the most exported articles of the MENA countries towards China.⁸

Table 1: *All 19+1 MENA countries' total import and export value from/to China, unit in USD thousand (data from 2017 except for where stated otherwise)*⁹

| MENA countries | sorted by sum of | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| | total import from China | total export to China |
| Turkey | 23,370,849 | 2,936,041 |
| United Arab Emirates (2016) | 22,424,487 | 3,662,749 |
| Saudi Arabia | 19,391,019 | 5,970,098 |
| Iran (2016) | 10,696,326 | 8,369,572 |
| Israel | 9,002,146 | 3,339,276 |
| Iraq (2014) | 10,506,358 | no data |
| Algeria | 8,317,844 | 691,612 |
| Egypt | 8,105,343 | 679,855 |
| Qatar (2016) | 3,320,172 | 4,485,834 |
| Kuwait | 5,499,611 | 499,670 |
| Morocco | 4,082,507 | 307,484 |
| Jordan | 2,764,407 | 163,560 |
| Lebanon | 1,718,352 | 422,740 |
| Bahrain (2016) | 1,429,744 | 534,645 |
| Tunisia (2016) | 1,819,971 | 28,836 |
| Oman | 1,179,721 | 536,067 |
| Yemen (2015) | 708,489 | 6,915 |

⁴ "China GDP". Trading Economics. 2016. <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/gdp>, Accessed on 6 June 2018.

⁵ "GDP: Asia". Trading Economics. 2016. <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/gdp?continent=asia>, Accessed on 6 June 2018.

⁶ "United States GDP". Trading Economics. 2016. <https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/gdp>, Accessed on 6 June 2018.

⁷ "Russia GDP". Trading Economics. 2016. <https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/gdp>, Accessed on 6 June 2018.

⁸ "Trade Map". International Trade Centre. <http://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>, Accessed on 6 June 2018.

⁹ "Trade Map". International Trade Centre.

| MENA countries | sorted by sum of | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| | total import from China | total export to China |
| State of Palestine (2016) | 382,679 | 61 |
| Libya | no data since 2011 | |
| Syria | no data since 2011 | |

As the above chart implies, the five main trade partners of China in the MENA region are Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel. This shows a Middle Eastern dominance over MENA–China trade relations. Trade between China and the Middle East has been increasing ever since around the beginning of the second millennium. In 2004, the total trade between the Middle East (including Turkey) and China was about USD 43.5 billion, whereas this number in 2014 was approximately 313.5 billion, which translates into a more than 700 percent increase in 10 years. However, during the following two years, it dropped to about 211.6 billion.¹⁰

The US is increasingly reliant on its own oil deposits and thus imports increasingly less from the Middle East: in 2000, the Middle Eastern countries exported 2.5 million barrels of oil to the US; this number by 2011 decreased to 1.9 million, and predictions foresee that the amount will continue to decline,¹¹ virtually giving green light to China. However, just as the total trade between China and the Middle East, oil imports also suffered, dropping from about USD 120.7 billion in 2014 to about 55.9 billion in 2016, while China’s total imports of oil also diminished from approximately 228.2 billion to about 116.6 billion, which means a drop in its share of total oil exports to China from 53 to 48 percent for the Middle East.

China is the largest exporter of goods to the MENA region,¹² and became the largest investor in the Middle East in 2016 with investments worth USD 29.5 billion, making up 31.9 percent of total investments in the region, while the US only holds 13.3 percent.¹³ On the other hand, according to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, no Middle Eastern or North African country was among the top ten investors in China in 2016.¹⁴ The MENA countries could potentially invest more in China, however, currently the majority are in no position to become major investors in the far eastern country, as generally they cannot invest as much as they depend on foreign investments.

Chinese direct investment to the North African region represents around 15 percent of the total investment flows to the entirety of Africa. Chinese investments in this region

¹⁰ “Trade Map”. International Trade Centre.

¹¹ “The great well of China”. *The Economist*, 18 June 2015. <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21654655-oil-bringing-china-and-arab-world-closer-economically-politics-will>, Accessed on 6 April 2018.

¹² Hindy, L. “A Rising China Eyes the Middle East”. The Century Foundation. 6 April 2017. <https://tcf.org/content/report/rising-china-eyes-middle-east/?agreed=1>, Accessed on 19 June 2018.

¹³ “China is largest foreign investor in Middle East”. Middle East Monitor. 24 July 2017. <https://www.middleeast-monitor.com/20170724-china-is-largest-foreign-investor-in-middle-east/>, Accessed on 19 April 2018.

¹⁴ “News Release of National Assimilation of FDI from January to November 2016”. Foreign Investment Department of the Ministry of Commerce. 30 December 2016. http://www.fdi.gov.cn/1800000121_49_4473_0_7.html, Accessed on 19 June 2018.

have been directed towards oil and gas extraction, infrastructure, and as of late towards electronics, automotive, and textiles as well as the establishment of Special Economic Zones.¹⁵

GEOPOLITICS

The MENA region is in a unique situation of being not only a gateway between Europe, Asia, and Africa, thus rendering itself geopolitically quintessential for any state with military or economic world-power ambitions, but also the largest oil source in the world – this explains the US’s particular keenness to intervene and be present in the region with its own troops. The MENA and especially the Middle Eastern countries, although being neither currently nor in the foreseeable future in position to do so – except for some attempts at asserting interests at a larger, regional scale from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and possibly Turkey –, could use this situation to their advantage and turn the tables in their own favour. Perhaps as only a mere coincidence, the aforementioned three countries happen to be some if not the biggest partners and points of interests for China in the Middle East, being crucial either being oil-rich – like Saudi Arabia – or being located just in the right place – like Iran and Turkey – for China’s economically and geopolitically quite beneficial enterprise, namely the Belt and Road Initiative. If the project succeeds, the Middle East could become a major trade hub.

Interestingly enough, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel, being the top five trade partners of China from the entirety of the MENA region, themselves pose the biggest threat to the stability of the Middle East with their rivalry – based on religion, ethnicities, politics, and by attempts on power projection – among each other. This greatly prevents them from being able to project their influence onto and efficiently assert their interests in China. This multipolar conflict also makes the assertion of interest in another theatre nearly impossible, limiting the line of sight to the Middle East.

The Chinese-and-Russian-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), described as a possible future challenger to NATO,¹⁶ is now looking forward to welcoming post-sanctions Iran, and with Turkey having expressed its interest in joining the organisation, the situation is looking favourable for China. One could argue that having Iran in their ranks, thus implicitly siding with them over Saudi Arabia, would mean Riyadh withdrawing from the sphere of Chinese influence, however, India and Pakistan having joined together in 2017 demonstrates that the SCO is willing to deal with rivalry among their members,¹⁷ possibly fuelled by the aim to try to ease the situation and solve disputes with long history, thus asserting Chinese regional ambitions. However, this does not at all mean that the rivalry and power play demonstrated among these countries, stemming from conflicting national interests, are to peacefully cease anytime soon – if at all – thanks to their joining the same international organisation, which could be seen as nothing more than a mere diplomatic

¹⁵ Alden, C. and Clerx, F. A. “Chinese investment in North Africa should be viewed as an opportunity not a threat”. London School of Economics. 10 December 2012. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/74700/1/Africa%20at%20LSE%20%E2%80%93%20Chinese%20investment%20in%20North%20Africa%20should%20be%20viewed%20as%20an%20opportunity%20not%20a%20threat.pdf>, Accessed on 20 April 2018.

¹⁶ Darling, D. “Is the SCO Emerging as Eastern Counterweight to NATO?”. Real Clear Defense. 30 August 2015. https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2015/08/31/is_the_sco_emerging_as_eastern_counterweight_to_nato_108426.html, Accessed on 23 February 2018.

¹⁷ Fulton, J. “China is trying to pull Middle East countries into its version of NATO”. *The Washington Post*, 21 June 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/21/how-china-is-shifting-toward-the-middle-east/?utm_term=.1d20d2ebf118, Accessed on 23 February 2018.

move in a long strategic game of politics. Still, while visibly being only a stepping-stone for China, as mentioned above, the MENA countries could get in position to assert their own interests by holding Beijing's back, simply supported by the fact that China needs them.

Nevertheless, this would require a certain level of co-operation, which, as of now, is highly unlikely to come about, especially in the conflict-ridden Middle East. Furthermore, any country trying to bring about some sort of ad hoc alliance with other MENA countries by initiating the blocking of Chinese interests would be doomed economically as the others would simply ignore or even side against them to win the favour of Beijing, exploiting the situation in their regional conflicts for their own benefit. Word of a pre-arranged alliance against China would also quickly end up in Chinese ears. Xi Jinping's 2016 trip to Riyadh and then, about a week later, to Tehran¹⁸ – a move that was not frowned upon by either country but would be considered bold if any other less important country had done it – proves the aforementioned general refusal to act among the MENA countries, because if two of the leading Middle Eastern countries do so, it gives way to the assumption that other countries in the MENA region would also simply conform to China's will.

The MENA region's countries do not seem to intervene in or stand up against Beijing's policies in Xinjiang, and it is understandable: they are reliant on maintaining good relations with Beijing, as any sort of political interference in China's affairs would essentially lead to a diplomatic fallout and thus to quasi self-inflicted economic damage. This could be countered by shifting dependence on other regional players, such as Turkey in case of North Africa,¹⁹ or Russia in case of the Middle East.²⁰

SOCIETY AND RELIGION

It is important to stress that the way of thinking in China is that of an empire. The ethnic composition is irrelevant; China has always been a multi-ethnic empire that was held together by massive "cultural" (political, scientific, diplomatic) and "populational" (military, economic) strength – in other words soft and hard power –, which is only today being rallied under the flag of the "Chinese as one" identity. The cultural entity that we call China has always been a stable one in the Far East, despite political struggles, periods of infightings, and wars. The acquirement of the imperial throne, rather than the integration or the destruction thereof, was always among the objectives of the nearby nomadic tribes, which they sometimes did successfully achieve (Mongolian Yuan and Manchu Qing Dynasties). The tribes that were pillaging Chinese villages, and even those that ruled over them, would be victims of sinicisation over time and are now all lost to the ages, except for the remaining Mongols and a handful of others. This is a natural process: the bigger (in this case cultural) entity engulfs and absorbs the smaller one – in other words, it was a China-centred "globalisation" on a regional

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Xi Jinping Pays State Visits to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran". Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. s. a. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpdstajyljxgsfw/, Accessed on 1 June 2018.

¹⁹ Besenyó, J. and Olah, P. "One of the new competitors in Africa: Turkey". *AARMS* 11/1. 2012. 135–48. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276278260_One_of_the_new_competitors_in_Africa_Turkey, Accessed on 19 June 2018.

²⁰ Sladden, J. et al. "Russian Strategy in the Middle East". RAND Corporation. 2017. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE236/RAND_PE236.pdf, Accessed on 19 June 2018.

scale. Muslims in general have not really attempted an actual overthrow, or coup d'état, of the system, in fact, they were mostly part of the “Middle Empire” just as the ethnic Chinese.

Xinjiang today is different, however, as Uighur revolts and independence movements arose relatively recently in the mid-20th century and are still actively lobbying – peacefully or otherwise – to this day for an independent East Turkestan. As a response to terror attacks, Uighurs had to have on them at all times a special card called “*bianmin* card” (literally “for the convenience of the people’ card”), which basically enabled Chinese authorities to effectively monitor Uighurs while other ethnicities did not receive such “attention”, but this card has since been repealed.²¹

Islam is welcome in China, as made clear by the government, and the Muslim and non-Muslim Chinese live in relatively undisturbed coexistence. This coexistence, however, is hardly something natural: Beijing is actively promulgating that the state comes before Allah, and mosques in China boast gold etchings that call upon the believers to love their country and their religion, strictly in this order. Moreover, since the Chinese system only allows one party to govern, that is the theoretically atheist Communist Party, Chinese patriotism and the support for the ruling party coalesced into one.²²

Nevertheless, this fusion is not an innovation in the several-thousand-year-old country: it has been in existence ever since Chinese history is recorded. Religions have always been allowed but never raised above the state itself, unlike in Europe, as religion has always been a rather personal matter in China, insignificant to the governance. As a multiethnic but basically monocultural empire, rather than a simple country with a single ethnic and religious identity, everything is integrated into and submitted to the state for it to function. Chinese patriotism is not only an explicit love for the country, it is also an implicit support for the Communist Party, and in Chinese state hierarchy, personal matters such as one’s religion may only come after state matters. China is the embodiment of not a communist country, but a multi-millennial collectivist empire. The state philosophy that defines how to govern the country is Confucian – which has not been completely eradicated yet, in spite of the end of imperial dynasties and “Communism”, which in reality has only been a means to gain legitimacy among the people, seize power, and keep the country together –, furthermore, religions such as Buddhism or Taoism have not only served a purpose in state administration – for instance, Buddhist temples conducted censuses –, but have also lived in synergy.

In possession of the above knowledge, one could deduce that Islam is unable to gain more space in China, as Beijing is more than eager to keep religious – and for that matter, each and every – group in line with and subservient to the central government. According to what the Syrian ambassador to China in 2017 said, 4-5,000 Chinese Uighurs may be fighting in various militant groups in Syria.²³ A study conducted in 2016 among volunteers of ISIS’ foreign fighters shows that the Uighur fighters are not seasoned jihadists or veterans of terrorist groups, but new recruits and volunteers, furthermore, given the harsh circumstances of the trip between Syria and Xinjiang, these Uighur fighters are more than likely to have

²¹ “The race card”. *The Economist*, 3 September 2016. <https://www.economist.com/news/china/21706327-leader-troubled-western-province-has-been-replaced-he-will-not-be-missed-its-ethnic>, Accessed on 9 March 2018.

²² “For Allah, China and Marx: theological mix for young imams”. *The Express Tribune*. 23 May 2016. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1108451/allah-china-marx-theological-mix-young-imams/>, Accessed on 9 February 2018.

²³ Blanchard, B. “Syria says up to 5,000 Chinese Uighurs fighting in militant groups”. *Reuters*. 11 May 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-china/syria-says-up-to-5000-chinese-uighurs-fighting-in-militant-groups-idUSKBN1840UP>, Accessed on 18 May 2018.

long-term plans fighting for the Islamic State.²⁴ China's view on terrorism in Xinjiang and the current treatment of the non-pro-Beijing Uighur population might be a driving force behind the motives of Uighurs joining the ranks of ISIS, possibly making the ISIS jihad also partly a fight for an independent East Turkestan in their mind.

OFFICIAL STANDPOINTS

Beijing's political stance on the Muslim world is somewhat bipolar and is a subject to constant change. The Chinese government openly speaks about protecting China's Muslim minority, which only makes up around 1.6% (approximately 23 million) of its current population. The reason behind this could be due to the fact that one of the regions mostly inhabited by Muslims is Xinjiang, where Uighur separatism is active; however, while these activities are labelled acts of terrorism and thus being repressed, the Hui Chinese that make up the majority in Xinjiang do not revolt against the government, and thus are being "favoured". Oases mostly populated by Hui Chinese and pro-Beijing Uighurs, for example Turpan, are being favoured and thus laws regulating Islamic teachings and the education in ethnic languages in schools in Xinjiang are not enforced upon them, unlike in oases like Kashgar where rebellious Uighurs live.²⁵ Tensions between Hui and Uighurs also exist due to the Hui disliking (and sometimes crushing) Uighur separatism, thus it is a conflict of political differences and not religious ones as both are Sunni; they live separately and attend different mosques. Beijing wants to prevent any kinds of separatism in Xinjiang lest it gains independence from China, while also maintaining good relations with Muslim countries, especially in the MENA region.

This could explain why the Chinese government acted as it did when Uighurs and Hui Chinese both protested against the ban and public burnings of a book in 1989: the Uighurs were imprisoned for vandalism whereas Hui Chinese protesters were let go unpunished.²⁶ Another interesting event was when in 2007, during the advent of the Year of the Pig, all kinds of depictions of pigs were banned from state-owned CCTV.²⁷ This was an interesting development in Chinese politics, especially from a historical standpoint: China has always been the "middle" of the world in every way – in Chinese, they even refer to China as the Middle Country –, and everyone else has been considered "barbarian", as in culturally – and not ethnically – not Chinese, even its allies and partners, resulting in interesting diplomatic anecdotes where the Chinese would not welcome an emissary unless they gave them a gift as a form of homage to show that they consider the Chinese superior to them, even if only symbolically. Banning a highly important cultural element in favour of the "barbarian" 1.6%, even if temporarily, is, without a doubt, strange and most likely a decision made solely with political and diplomatic consideration.

Regarding the Israeli situation, China – unlike, among others, Israel, the United States, and the European Union – does not acknowledge the terrorist nature of Hamas, and instead

²⁴ Rosenblatt, N. "All Jihad Is Local – What ISIS' Files Tell Us About Its Fighters". *New America*. 26 July 2016. <https://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/ISIS-Files.pdf>, Accessed on 18 May 2018.

²⁵ United States, Congress, Committee on Foreign Relations and US, State Department (eds). *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, 2004*. Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2005. 159–60.

²⁶ Gladney, D. C. *Dislocating China: Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

²⁷ Lim, L. "Ban Thwarts 'Year of the Pig' Ads in China". *NPR*. 2007. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7213210>, Accessed on 9 February 2018.

sees it as a rightful political party that represents the Palestinian people.²⁸ The Sino-Israeli relations ameliorated over the past several decades, in spite of China trying to maintain good relations with both Palestine and Israel, as the Jewish state rose to one of China's biggest trade partners, and now China tries not to lose Israel, as Beijing cannot afford to. But this reliance is mutual: by the end of 2017, China rose to Israel's second biggest investor with the potential to soon overtake the US,²⁹ as well as the fastest growing source of tourists.³⁰

In 2012, Russia and China vetoed a UN resolution to intervene in the Syrian conflict, which garnered tremendous diplomatic outrage by the Arab League and western powers.³¹ In 2015, in response to the Charlie Hebdo shooting, the magazine was attacked by Chinese state-run media for publicly insulting Muhammad, arguing that limitation of freedom of speech is necessary, and also claiming that therefore it comes as no surprise that they were "paid back".³² Hui Muslim religious schools are autonomous and were run by a Hui Sufi leader who openly admitted attending an event where Osama Bin Laden, former leader of Al-Qaeda, also spoke.³³ In April 2017, the Islamic Association of China, run by the government, encouraged new mosques to be built in traditional Chinese architectural design, and to reject the "arabisation" and "desinicisation" of architecture, with its "excessive size and extravagance".³⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Despite its favourable geopolitical location, abundance in much needed resources, such as oil, and its manifold potential, the MENA region suffers from regional instability, which effectively prevents any kind of co-operation between the Middle Eastern and North African countries. Without such a co-operation, their capabilities of any sort of power projection and assertion of interests are severely hindered. Even if one or two countries stood up against China either politically or economically, it would not prompt the other countries to help, on the contrary, they would side with China in order to exploit the situation to their advantage.

The MENA countries are not dominantly present in investments in China or Chinese imports, nor politically, nor culturally. The Middle Eastern countries' current strategy is to turn a blind eye to what happens to the Muslim population in China in order to not sour Sino-MENA relations, which might be effective in the short run, but definitely is not in the long run.

²⁸ Zambelis, C. "China's Palestine Policy". *China Brief* 9/5. 2009. 9–12. https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/cb_009_5_04.pdf?x87069, Accessed on 11 May 2018.

²⁹ Schindler, M. "Chinese Investors Flock to Israel for Unlikely Reasons". *The Jerusalem Post*, 20 December 2017. <https://www.jpost.com/Jpost-Tech/Chinese-investors-flock-to-Israel-for-unlikely-reasons-518600>, Accessed on 1 June 2018.

³⁰ Xiang, B. "China remains Israel's fastest growing source of tourists in 2017". Xinhuanet. 23 January 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/23/c_136918314.htm, Accessed on 1 June 2018.

³¹ Logan, J. and Worsnip, P. "Anger after Russia, China block U.N. action on Syria". Reuters. 5 February 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria/anger-after-russia-china-block-u-n-action-on-syria-idUSTRE80S08620120205>, Accessed on 19 April 2018.

³² "Xinwen ziyou yao you xiandu" ("Freedom of press needs to be limited"). Xinhuanet. 11 January 2015. http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-01/11/c_1113952852.htm, Accessed on 9 February 2018.

³³ Bovingdon, G. *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013.

³⁴ Leng, S. "Chinese mosques becoming too 'Arab': experts". Global Times. 20 April 2017. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1043274.shtml>, Accessed on 19 April 2018.

Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative appears to be a double-edged sword, as the project's possible future outcome for the MENA countries is still too vague and can only give way to assumption. It would most likely put the Middle East in particular into its focal point, increasing in importance and thus in political power, however, it might just integrate the region into China's area of uncontested power projection.

The MENA region first needs to consolidate its many on-going conflicts, be it religious, economic, or armed conflict, in order to be able to become a more-than-regional player in the world. Furthermore, it needs to be cautious as to not fully rely on one source of foreign capital and trade, involve more countries and possibly attempt to play them against each other, thus preventing or, at the very least, reducing the scale of further foreign exploitation, particularly the possibility of future Chinese exploitation, giving way to the establishment of a MENA-dominated MENA region, before being able to pivot to China.

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