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## CHINA-WEST ASIA RELATIONS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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### ABSTRACT

*China-West Asia relations can be analysed in two broad foreign policy contexts. First, China does not believe in binding treaty alliances like the US, preferring instead, and material interests that link its own internal priorities such as economic growth. China believes in investment, and generally does not get involved in giving aid to other countries, with the exception of a few. Second, China mostly prefers to deal with countries that are in its regional strategy. Despite China's cordial relations with all the regional countries, Beijing has been given mixed signals of its engagement with the WANA region. For example, on several occasions Chinese leaders have shared with the leaders of the Persian Gulf countries that 'China is interested to the establishment of a strategic partnership, using the prospective free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries as a driving force to boost pragmatic cooperation in all fields'.*



**KEY WORD:** *China-West Asia relations , economic growth.*

### INTRODUCTION

In recent times, China's role in the West Asian region is growing in accordance with Beijing's increasing economic, diplomatic and political interests in the region. Many countries in the region, have been faced with the effect of the Arab uprising especially political instability and economy slowdown due to falling oil prices.

Due to disengagement of the western countries in the region, China got the chance to directly involved in the regional countries. Chinese president Xi Jinping visited the region in 2016 and 2018 and elevated the level of partnership with Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Xi's (July 2018) visit to the UAE was the first head of state to the Gulf countries in 29 years. The head of Chinese visit to the region has been also reciprocated by high-level visits by leaders from the WANA region to China. During the visits number of economic and strategic agreements have been signed. Due to frequent visits from both sides, China has become the largest investor in the region. In 2018, China promised US \$20 billion in loans for reconstruction in the region, as well as US \$3 billion in loans for the banking sector.<sup>1</sup> China also provided commercial loan to the regional countries.

The trade relations between China and the WANA region also increase drastically. The trade between two sides reached to about US \$245 billion. Chinese private sector companies are also strongly contributed in bilateral relationship between the two regions. 5 of the top 10 e-commerce companies in the region belong to China. The main attraction of Chinese e-business is the growing size of the WANA e-commerce market.

China is expected to beat the US as the world's largest oil importer in years to come, making energy security the top issue in Beijing. In 2014, 22 per cent of Chinese companies' global investment was directed towards the West Asian region. Chinese tourism in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region rose more than fivefold during 2000-2012. However, the number of Chinese nationals working and travelling in the region is still modest. Beijing has become a marginal arms seller in the region; however, China is the leading proliferator of small arms in the world, with the West Asian countries as top recipients. Some US leaders and scholars have been expressed concerns about the implications of increasing Chinese influence in the region, while others have welcomed China's increasing presence and called on China to make greater contribution to regional stability, by leveraging its important soft power to help resolve conflicts.<sup>ii</sup>

Further, China's has good relations with all the West Asian countries. China's ties with Iran, Turkey, and the Arab world are growing rapidly. Today, China is the biggest exporter to the West Asian countries, the top trading partner of the region, the biggest importer of Iranian oil, a major player in the Iraqi oil game and a growing economic partner of Turkey. China's main partners in the West Asian region are Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman and Iran. However, Iran, a non-Arab country which does not enjoy good relations with most Arab nations. Roughly half (44.1 per cent) of Chinese imported crude oil comes from nine West Asian countries in 2018. Saudi Arabia was top oil supply to China about US \$29.7 billion in the region in 2018. Iran is the fourth largest exporter of oil to China after Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Oman from the region. Iran supplied US \$15 billion oil to China in 2018. China has also invested heavily in the development of Iran's energy sector plugging the gap left by Western countries because of the tensions over Iran's nuclear programme.<sup>iii</sup> It is estimated that Chinese investments in Iran's energy sector amount to more than US \$100 billion over a 25-year period.<sup>iv</sup> China has also raised its exports of gasoline to Iran in an effort to ease the pressure on Iran created by the US sanctions.

Iran under the Shah was one of the more assertive countries leading the OPEC to redefine the relationship between oil-producing countries and international oil companies. One of the first major declarations of power by OPEC came in February 1971 during a meeting in Tehran, when the oil-producing countries forced the Western oil companies to increase the displayed price of oil by 3 per cent and the oil tax rate by 5 per cent. The month after the Tehran OPEC conference, then Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai applauded it during the Pahlavi Princess Ashraf's visit to Beijing. He said,

In order to safeguard state sovereignty and protect their natural resources, Iran together with other members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries have recently waged effective struggles against the Western imperialist oil monopoly consortium and won victory. We express support for your just struggle and sincere congratulations on your victory.<sup>v</sup>

Experts like John W Garver stated "the formation of Iran-China relations in August 1971 articulated China's 'resolute support' for the 'effective struggles' and 'positive results' secured by the 'Iranian government and people' in the struggle against 'Western petroleum monopoly groups'". Again in July 1973 when Iran passed the law launching Iranian ownership of all oil resources in Iran, China weighed in with support. *Peking Review* announced the new Iranian move as "a resounding victory" ending 72 years in which Iran's "oil resources have been in the hands of the big monopoly groups of the West". The Iranian move was hailed as "another victory chalked up by the people of Iran in their protracted struggle to protect their oil rights and interests". Beijing saw OPEC's efforts to raise oil prices as part of the Third World's struggle against superpower hegemony. The 1974 year-end roundup by *Xinhua* proclaimed:

The Third World's anti-imperialist and anti hegemonist struggles in the past year have brought to the surface a number of fundamental problems [in the imperialist system]...once distorted or covered up....The Arab people achieved great successes through the use of the oil weapon. In doing so they revealed one of the secrets of how the imperialists and superpowers amassed their wealth making super-profits by forcing down the price of Third World raw materials....The Third World's conscious application of their raw materials as a weapon against imperialism and hegemonism is a new thing, a formidable weapon which strikes panic in the hearts of the imperialists and superpowers, threatening to deprive them of the means by which to

batten onto the Third World....The Third World fight against economic plunder has cut down the imperialist and superpower world market aggravating the capitalist world crisis.<sup>vi</sup>

According to Garver:

Beijing also strongly rejected the western allegation that OPEC price growths were responsible for the global recession that began in 1973. Following the beginning of stern international economic recession, the heads of OPEC countries gathered at Algiers (Algeria) in March 1975. The main objective of the OPEC meeting was to deny Western allegations that OPEC's actions had caused the global recession. Again China came forward and strongly supported the decision of the OPEC meeting. Even China said 'the profit mad monopoly capitalists' who had pushed oil prices up not to the actions of the oil-producing countries. The Third World oil producing countries have simply adjusted the extremely unfair oil prices and got back some of their legitimate rights.<sup>vii</sup>

Iran has the world's second-largest natural gas reserves however, it lacks the technology to develop them. China has specifically helped Iran to develop its heavy oil fields. Heavy crude is harder to produce, refine, and sell than light crude oil, which has a lower density. 60 per cent of Iran's oil reserves are thought to be of the heavy crude variety.<sup>viii</sup> China has also sealed the opportunities created by the departure of Asian and European energy companies due to UNSC and Western sanctions to develop the huge South Pars field.

At the same time, China is also the biggest market for Israeli exports in Asia, despite Israel- arch rival of Iran. China and Israel started their diplomatic relations in 1992, a year after the beginning of peace negotiations between the Arabs and Israel. Since then, relations between the two countries have grown rapidly. In 1992, Israeli President, Chaim Herzog, visited China. Then Chinese President, Jiang Zeming, paid a historic visit to Israel in 2000, when the trade between the two countries surpassed the billion-dollar barrier for the first time. Growing political relations between China and Israel resulted in strengthening economic relations between the two countries. The bilateral trade between China and Israel grew almost 220-fold, from US \$51 million in 1992 to US \$11 billion in 2013.<sup>ix</sup> In 2018, bilateral trade between two countries again increased in 2018 and reached to US \$14 billion. Today, China (including Hong Kong) is Israel's second biggest export destination after the US, and also the biggest in Asia. It is noteworthy to mention here that despite strong political and economic relations between China and Israel, Beijing also maintain cordial relations with other Persian Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia, Palestine and Iran. In January 2012, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao travelled to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and UAE, the first trip by a Chinese high official in two decades. Jiabao stated that the two countries have established mutual and beneficial understanding and support on major issues of common interest, and cooperation in various sectors. He also added that China views its relationship with Saudi Arabia from a strategic and long-term perspective and is willing to work with Riyadh in promoting friendly and pragmatic cooperation so as to benefit the two countries and their peoples. He went on to say "the two sides have already become good friends, good brothers and good partners."<sup>x</sup> Some experts believe that Jiabao visit came due to some certain reasons. The Chinese government may be more careful about the side it selects, considering the embarrassment caused when the biggest state-owned arms company was found to have offered to sell weapons to Colonel Qaddafi of Libya to put down the uprising in 2011. Since 1990, Saudi Arabia and China bilateral relations have grown rapidly. Their trade grew to US \$40 billion in 2010, and their 'strategic oil partnership' has resulted in growing investments in Saudi oil and gas fields from Chinese national oil companies as well as Saudi equity in Chinese refinery facilities. In 2009, for the first time, Saudi Arabia exported more oil to China than it did to the US. Regular high-level officials visit from both sides and growing business ties have further boosted the bilateral relationship between the two countries.

For China, the most important country in West Asia is Saudi Arabia and Iran. After 9/11, the tension in US-Saudi relations gave China the opportunity to woo the House of Saud. In 2009, China became the largest importer of Saudi oil surpassing the US. Saudi Arabia is now China's top commercial partner in the region. Trade between the two countries also amounted to about US\$ 40 billion in 2010 and is expected to increase further. Saudi oil exports to China in 2009 exceeded 1 million barrels per day (mbd)– double the quantity in 2008 – while exports to the US dropped by a third, to 989,000 barrels a day.<sup>xi</sup>

This change did not take place over night. The Chinese Government has worked hard to improve its relations with Saudi Arabia.<sup>xii</sup> In 2004, the two countries held a series of political meetings. In the same year, the Chinese oil company, Sinopec, signed a deal to explore for gas in Saudi Arabia's vast empty quarter (Rub al-Khali). Later, in December 2005,<sup>xiii</sup> China participated in its first formal discussions with the OPEC. West Asian countries on their part are also turning increasingly towards East Asia, especially China, to market their oil and gas. In 2018, Saudi Arabia with the world's second largest after Venezuela, and Iran with the world's fourth largest, oil reserves found China to be their most important growth market.

Saudi Arabia has also become a key investor in Chinese refineries. In 1999, Saudi Arabia's Aramco Overseas Company invested US \$ 750 million (25 per cent of the total project) in a petrochemical complex in Fujian capable of processing eight million tonnes of Saudi crude oil per annum.<sup>xiv</sup> Saudi Arabia, with the help of several members of OPEC, also plans to build a new refinery in Guangzhou with a total investment of US\$8 billion.<sup>xv</sup> To cement their relationship further, Aramco signed an agreement with Sinopec in June 2009 to boost exports of Saudi crude to 1.5 mbd.<sup>xvi</sup> Both countries are also involved in talks to authorise Saudi Aramco to develop the capability of Sinopec's existing oil refining facilities and other petrochemical complexes in China to handle Saudi oil. The meeting in January 2010 between China and Saudi Arabia, which paved the way for furthering bilateral relations, is attracting international attention for its potential impact on West Asian geopolitics and as a sign of China's rising influence on the world stage.<sup>xvii</sup> China and the GCC countries are also in process of finalising a free-trade agreement (FTA).

China's energy interests in Saudi Arabia, Iran and the wider West Asian region are inseparable from the larger geopolitical issues of the region. These developments may create complications in the long-term, but in the near-term, West Asia's, especially Saudi Arabia's and Iran's "look east" policies are definitely on course, and the US will have to construct its foreign policy accordingly.<sup>xviii</sup> Energy insecurity has also emerged as an important aspect of the power play in Asia. In particular, China's active energy-centric diplomacy has encouraged other Asian powers to pursue the same.

In February 2009, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Saudi Arabia and signed major trade agreements, including the US \$1.8 billion.<sup>xix</sup> Bilateral relations between two countries boost further after the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia in January 19-20, 2016. This was the first state visit by a Chinese head of state to Saudi Arabia in seven years. During his visit, both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding in industrial capacity cooperation. Both countries also signed agreement related to "Belt and Road" initiative. The "Belt and Road" initiative denotes to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, proposals put forward by Xi in 2013 to increase interconnectivity and regional development. Saudi Arabia is China's biggest global supplier of crude oil and in 2013, China became the biggest trading partner of Saudi Arabia for the first time. The bilateral trade between the two countries reached US \$ 69.1 billion in 2014, increasing by 230 times over that of 1990 when the two countries established diplomatic ties.<sup>xx</sup> Saudi Arabia and China have worked hard to enhance their bilateral relations further. Saudi Arabia strongly cooperated and contributed in the Belt and Road Initiative and the Vision 2030. The bilateral trade between two countries increased further and reached to US \$ 63.33 billion in 2018. Saudi Arabia remained China's largest trading partner in West Asia and Africa for 18 consecutive years. Both countries have also identified the major sectors for investment cooperation and signed a deal on industrial capacity and investment cooperation worth US \$55 billion. Recently, the first investment project was initiated in Jizan province of Saudi Arabia of US \$3.2 billion.

On Palestine issue, Xi and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud held talks and said they support the establishment of an independent, unified state of Palestine with full sovereignty, with East Jerusalem as its capital. China supported and voted in the United Nations for the Palestinian state, opposed any military strike against Iran regarding its nuclear programme, and emphasised for a peaceful resolution, and does not agree to recognise Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organisations.

Beijing also maintains cordial relationships with other major countries in the region, including Syria. Given this unique position, China maintain cordial relations with the countries of region and might be able to make a positive contribution to a number of regional security issues, such as combating terrorism,

contributing to resolve Iran's nuclear crisis and the continuing crises in Yemen, Syria and other regional countries. Beijing may also play a significant role in the West Asia peace process in the future, as the people of the region including Palestinians view China as a more impartial actor.<sup>xxi</sup>

In the aftermath of Libya crisis, China has tried to rebuild relations with Tripoli, mainly in an attempt to rebuild some of its pre-war construction and infrastructure contracts, which were worth US \$20 billion before the 2011 clash. The Libya experience framed China's response to the Syrian crisis, where it stood with Russia, despite huge pressure from the US and Britain, and voted against any military involvement. Even China strongly criticised NATO strikes against Libya.

Despite the Arab Uprising and fall of friendly countries, China is being able to maintain cordial relations with the Persian Gulf. The statement by Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao at the Fourth China–Arab Business Conference in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (UAE), in January 2012 highlighted China's close links with the West Asian countries. He stated that the trade between China and the Arab states entered record figures in 2011 despite political turmoil in the region, suggesting that China was a growing power in the West Asian region, gaining influence at the expense of the US.<sup>xxii</sup> In recent years, relations between China and West Asia has grown beyond defence cooperation, spilling over into commerce, energy, and political support. Trade and economic cooperation between China and West Asia countries have increased exponentially.<sup>xxiii</sup>

China was the second-biggest trading partner of the Arab world. In 2013, China surpassed the US as the Persian Gulf's major oil customer. China's energy requirements have guided much of its West Asia strategy. Although in recent years China's relations with the West Asia have built on commercial levels. However, unlike the US or the European Union (EU), China does not have a precise West Asia policy as such. Its policy towards the region works within broader foreign policy parameters; respect for sovereignty of others and non-interference in their internal affairs, and support for a more multi-polar world order as an alternative to Western hegemony. In other words: China's policy towards the West Asian region is based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence interpreted in this context as: allowing the West Asian countries to decide their own social and political systems; helping these countries' independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity; and opposing external intervention in their internal affairs. Iran too is working against Western hegemony, particularly American, and has been trying to build an alliance with major Asian countries including China and India.

While China's main source of energy is coal, 20 per cent now comes from oil. Since 1993, China has imported more oil than it can domestically produce. More than 50 per cent of this comes from the West Asia region, and this dependency is likely to increase. China's trade with Saudi Arabia alone has increased 10-fold since 2003, and according to official figures, Saudi Arabia has replaced the US as China's single most important trading partner. Projections from the International Energy Agency suggested that West Asian oil exports to China could more than double by 2035. This will force China to maintain cordial relations with the regional countries, especially with Iran and Saudi Arabia. China has already started the process of signing major oil deals with both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Possibly to offer a more consistent framework for engagement, Chinese President Xi Jinping laid out his plans to establish a 'New Silk Road', reviving old logistics and trade routes between China and Europe through Central Asia and West Asia. Chinese exports and foreign direct investment into the region have also increased import of oil from Tehran over the past decade.<sup>xxiv</sup> Despite unrest in the WANA region, China's investments in West Asia have increased. However, West Asian investment into China is very limited. The vast majority of Chinese investment is in energy sectors, with some diversification recently in tourist and transport infrastructure. China's most important economic actors in the region are the state energy companies such as Sinopec, Petro-china and the Chinese Offshore Overseas Oil Corporation.

## CONCLUSION

The combination of China's increasing economic and geopolitical weight along with its continuing need for imported oil from the WANA region will, create great challenges to its ideal low profile position,

where its political promises only depend on defending what it believes are its core interests. Despite China's cordial relations with all the regional countries, Beijing has been given mixed signals of its engagement with the WANA region. For example, on several occasions Chinese leaders have shared with the leaders of the Persian Gulf countries that 'China is interested to the establishment of a strategic partnership, using the prospective free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries as a driving force to boost pragmatic cooperation in all fields'. However, free trade agreement between China and GCC is still pending despite several meetings between the leaders of two regions. The press release following the China-GCC January 2014 meeting very vaguely underscored the 'strategic importance of West Asia and the Persian Gulf region', as well as naming an all-encompassing list of potential fields for cooperation.<sup>xxv</sup> The Chinese State Council (China's highest executive body) has published White Papers on many foreign policy issues, but not on China's relationship with the West Asian countries. Moreover, West Asian affairs are divided between two separate departments in China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs – the Department of West Asian and North African Affairs, and the Department of European and Central Asian Affairs. China-West Asia relations can be analysed in two broad foreign policy contexts. First, China does not believe in binding treaty alliances like the US, preferring instead, and material interests that link its own internal priorities such as economic growth. China believes in investment, and generally does not get involved in giving aid to other countries, with the exception of a few. Second, China mostly prefers to deal with countries that are in its regional strategy. Given this broad outline, the West Asian region is unique for China – of moderate priority compared to many other regions. The preservation of access to oil means that China is a cautious, even reluctant, player in West Asia's political and security affairs. China's relations with the West Asia region are based on loose pragmatic links, via the GCC and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF). Despite the CASCF was established in 2004, China's relations with the League of Arab States and the GCC are currently low profile. A strategic dialogue with the GCC to structure the relationship was only established in 2010, long after similar dialogues were started with the EU and the US. Until then, China had not even discussed 'strategic partnership' with any country or group of countries in West Asia, although Beijing has recently shown an aspiration to develop such relations with these countries. However, its debate is mostly based on economic cooperation and investment especially in the energy sector.<sup>xxvi</sup>

China's reluctant behaviour towards the West Asia region especially in political and defence sectors, was also reveal after the arrival of Arab uprising. During Arab uprising China played neutral role even with friendly country like Libya. However, China's preference for neutrality has been challenged by the events in the WANA, in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings. China has had to monitor the changing developments closely, in order to protect its growing commercial interests in the region. It has realised, to its disappointment, that the past policy of diplomatic relationships based on separating economics from politics in dealing with West Asian countries is no longer relevant.<sup>xxvii</sup> China finds itself in the awkward position of having to justify its position on issues like good governance and human rights in its own backyard as well, especially in the Xingjiang province. Some Chinese officials and academics view the ongoing crisis in the West Asia region as a threat to its national interests. Others consider it is an opportunity to develop new ties in the region that has been strongly controlled by other foreign powers, especially the US and European countries.

The Arab uprising not only impacted China's political outlook, energy, and trade and commerce but also spread fear among the Chinese elite at home. Proactive measures were taken to avoid a 'Jasmine Revolution' from taking place in China: for example, tighter Internet monitoring and censorship, especially the use of social media, and surveillance and control of public mass gatherings and protests. In 2011, for the first time in decades, the resources allocated to public security expenditures, approximately US \$95 billion, exceeded the official defence budget.<sup>xxviii</sup> The human rights advocate, Perry Link, disclosed in the New York Review of Books that the day after Mubarak's fall, members of the Chinese Politburo called an urgent, informal meeting to review the situation. Six days later, an independent Chinese news outlet, Boxun, revealed the outcomes of the meeting:

Halt all independent reports, commentaries, and discussions (including internet threats), whether in the print media or internet, on the situation in Egypt and similar places; strengthen work in filtering and managing blogs, micro-blogs, and discussion forums; assure that media in all locations uniformly adhere to the standard texts of the New China News Agency in any report or commentary on the Middle East.<sup>xxix</sup>

However, unless China finds domestic or external options for sources of energy, it may require to engage more with countries of the West Asia region especially in political, economic and security sectors. However, China is presently reluctant to become an increasingly significant player in West Asia especially in defence sector.

## END NOTES

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