

# Can the China be an Influential and Essential Player in the Middle East?

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## Abstract

The China advocates an authoritarian liberal policy in the administration of the communist party, far from democracy, human rights and a western-style government. On the other hand, China, which is fully integrated with the world, is increasing its presence in the regions it chooses such as Africa and Middle East and North Africa. This study will provide a general framework for analyzing the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China with the countries of the Middle East and its investments, military means, trade, economic volumes and position vis-à-vis the problems of the region and taking into account of China's claim to be the world power before becoming a democrat. China manages to touch almost every country in the Middle East. While doing this, the China does not hesitate to use both his soft power and hard power and it takes on the role of mediator as it has never done before. Trying to explain all this, the aim here is not to make a chronological assessment, but to point out the changes and continuities in Chinese politics during the period 1949-2020 with emphasis on current events.

Keywords: China, Middle East, North Africa, Military, Economic Power, Diplomacy, Soft Power

## Sommaire

La Chine mène une politique libérale autoritaire dans l'administration du parti communiste, loin de la démocratie, des droits de l'homme et d'un style de gouvernement occidentale. Par contre la Chine, pleinement intégrée au monde, renforce sa présence dans les régions où elle choisit comme l'Afrique et le Moyen-Orient et l'Afrique du Nord. Cette étude fournira un cadre général pour analyser la politique étrangère de la République populaire de la Chine avec les pays du Moyen-Orient et ses investissements, ses moyens militaires, ses commerces, ses volumes économiques et sa position vis-à-vis des problèmes de la région en prenant considération de la revendication de la Chine d'être la puissance mondiale avant de devenir démocrate. La Chine parvient à toucher presque tous les pays du Moyen-Orient. Pour cela, la Chine n'hésite pas à utiliser à la fois son soft power et son hard power et elle joue le rôle de médiateur comme elle ne l'a jamais fait auparavant. En essayant d'expliquer tout cela, le but de cet article n'est pas de faire une évaluation chronologique, mais de souligner les changements et les continuités de la politique chinoise au cours de la période 1949-2020 en mettant l'accent sur les événements actuels.

Mots Clés: Chine, Moyen Orient, Afrique du Nord, Puissance Militaire et Economique, Diplomatie, Puissance Douce

## Introduction

The 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the China-Arab States Fair was inaugurated in September in the Hui Autonomous Region of Ningxia (northwest of China), with the participation of 2900 companies from China and the Arab world.<sup>1</sup> This edition is just one example to show China's interest in the Middle East. Since many times, China increases its presence, develops its investments, continues to sell arms and takes hydrocarbons in the MENA region. They also strengthen friendship, cooperation and joint development with the Arab countries and they increase its capacity to be a world leader against the United States. It can be also stated that the real challenge for China is to become a superpower before becoming democratic. It is for this reason that China is trying to increase its existence in the Middle East as they did in Africa. The objective of these policies is to strengthen connectivity between the actors of Rimland, an important step in the strategy of the game of "go" which allows encircling an area to bring into the area of Chinese influence.<sup>2</sup> So, in this complicated context, the China uses every means possible for becoming an influential and essential player in the Middle East.

Firstly, the brief history of China's existence in the Middle East should be examined and then the importance of the New Silk Road and Rimland's theory in Chinese strategy should be analyzed. In the first part, the major interest in China in terms of energy supply will be taken into account by talking about China's energy dependence. In the second part, the delivery of arms in the region, also speaking about the maritime presence and Sino-Gulf cooperation and military partnership will be analyzed. In the third part, China's investment in the Middle East as the Egyptian case will be discussed. Lately the Chinese diplomacy with regard to the major crisis such as the Eastern Mediterranean, the Israeli-Palestinian question and the Arab Spring will be explained. All these developments and processes will be an indication of how much China attaches to the region and how much it is trying to increase its dominance.

## A Brief History of the Relationship Between China and the Middle East Countries from the 1940s to September 11

Even though researchers are newly acquainted with the recent translation of a 1,100-year-old narrative, written by an Arab adventurer, offering a 9<sup>th</sup>-century Arab view of China in the Tang Dynasty<sup>3</sup>, it will be started from the 1940s and reach 'to September 11 in 4 important sentences.

Before the creation of the People's Republic of China, the first connection begins between 1945-1955 in which China follows Soviet policy for the Middle East. There was no direct relationship with these countries because they were soon to be born and they were in the hegemony of great power like The United States or Great Britain. At that time, the Arab countries did not recognize the People's Republic of China. On the other hand China described these countries as counter-

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<sup>1</sup> Mona Shoukry, Inauguration en Chine de la 4e édition de la "foire-expo" Chine-Etats arabes, 2019, <https://www.mena.org.eg/fr/news/dbcall/table/webnews/id/8091081> > ,

<sup>2</sup> Tanguy Struye De Swielande, La Chine et ses objectifs géopolitiques à l'aube de 2049, 2017 <https://www.diploweb.com/La-Chine-et-ses-objectifs-geopolitiques-a-l-aube-de-2049.html>

<sup>3</sup> Jan Keulen, Les Chinois vus pas les Abbassides, 2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/reportages/les-chinois-vus-pas-les-abbassides> >

revolutionary leaders and feudal dictators.<sup>4</sup> Despite this situation, the support of China to Egypt during the trilateral aggression of Suez in 1956, the recognition of the Algerian interim government in 1958 and the support of China to the Palestinian National Movement are determinative of this era.<sup>5</sup>

In second phase, China was not in line with the Soviets in 1956-1966, within the framework of the solidarity of the third world, they have begun to establish relations with the countries of the region within the framework of an anti-western policy. They have attended the Bandung Conference which gathered in Bandung, Indonesia on April 18-24, 1955 and brought together the Asian-African states that gained their new independence at that time and continues until the Cultural Revolution launched by Mao to revive the spirit of the Chinese Revolution.

The third period was between 1967-1977. The closures of China by the Cultural Revolution resulted in the estrangement of the Soviets. China began to see the Soviets as a threat and to move closer to the United States. Therefore, China has agreed with the allied countries of the United States. The countries like Turkey, Iran, and China's rapprochement with the United States has opened China to the Middle East.

The fourth period has opened from 1972. The rapprochement of China with the United States was a period that can be summarized with less ideology and more political motivation. It was the orientation of the Chinese regime towards to capitalism. In order to continue modernization and capitalism, it was necessary to establish relations with all countries. The distance or proximity of a country to the United States or Russia wasn't longer matters.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1990s, all countries in the Middle East visited China at least once. As a result, China's development of technology, economic and military powers, no military conflict with any country in the middle east (in addition, China did not send their soldiers to the United Nations during the Gulf War) so everything gave China a place of trust and respect for the countries of the Middle East. During this period, China became close to a number of regional countries, which it classified as "pro-American", "reactionary" and "feudal" regimes during the Mao era and followed a policy based on diversity.<sup>7</sup>

Following these stories, the September 11 attack and the new Silk Road clearly project China's policy on the region. In the article entitled Ben Simpfendorfer's New Silk Road, he talks about economic policy of Chinese people by re-establishing the Silk Road.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, he focused on the September 11 attack that changed the world's view of the Middle East. After 7 days, China has joined the world trade organization then they have developed to import oil. The Chinese economy, fueled in part by the country's entry into the WTO, rapidly moved towards growth of 10% per year in the following years.

Likewise, America and Europe have tightened visa restrictions for Arab nationals after September 11. The number of Arab nationals visiting the United States fell from 251,000 to 232,000 between 2000

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<sup>4</sup> Hakan Güneş, Çin'in Ortadoğu Politikası, Çin Deniz Ülke Arıboğan (dir), Çin'in Gölgesinde Uzakdoğu Asya, İstanbul, Bağlam Yayınları, 2001, p. 297-308

<sup>5</sup> Bichara Khader, La percée chinoise dans les marchés arabes et méditerranéens, *IEMed, Annuaire 2018*, p. 42

<sup>6</sup> Abid, p. 308

<sup>7</sup> Çağdaş Üngör, Çin Ve Üçüncü Dünya, *İ.Ü. Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Dergisi*, No 41, 2009, p. 34

<sup>8</sup> Ben Simpfendorfer, La nouvelle route de la soie, *Études*, 2012/5 (Tome 416), p. 595- 604

and 2010. Visits to Europe also declined in the same period and it was around this time that China unofficially liberalized its visa policy. Many felt more comfortable travelling to China because their name might match that of a wanted terrorist in Europe or the United States. Not surprisingly, China's total trade with the Silk Road countries has increased in the past five years, from less than \$ 1.1 billion to \$ 1.9 billion. As a result, China has overtaken the United States as the world's largest exporter to the Middle East, having overtaken the United Kingdom in 2002 and Germany in 2006.<sup>9</sup>

## Yiwu City, Rimland Theory and the New Silk Road

China's one of the city, Yiwu which explains many things about the Chinese strategy, is building the largest supermarket in the world and it is building the international shopping paradise. Yiwu has become one of the best markets for Muslim guests. Contrary to the somewhat globalizing image - China-Africa, Sino-Arab world - these silk routes are constantly reorganized and renamed by the actors who animate them and in the places where they occur.

Table 1 shows that the main destinations are no longer just neighboring states of China. The Arab and Muslim world are important export destinations for Yiwu.

Table 1: Main Importers of Products from Yiwu (2002-2011)

Rank	2002	2006	2009	2011
1	United Arab Emirates	USA	USA	EU
2	Russia	United Arab Emirates	United Arab Emirates	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
3	USA	Russia	Germany	Iran
4	South Korea	Ukraine	Spain	India
5	Ukraine	South Korea	Russia	Egypt
6	Japan	Germany	UK	United Arab Emirates
7	Saudi Arabia	Spain	Italia	Saudi Arabia
8		Britain	Brazil	Brazil
9		Panama	Iran	Iraq
10		Brazil	India	Algeria

Sources: Yiwu customs (<http://en.onccc.com>, 2002; <http://old.echinacities.com>, 2006; <http://www.yiwumarketguide.com/>, 2009; <http://www.yiwu-sourcing-agent.com>, 2011)

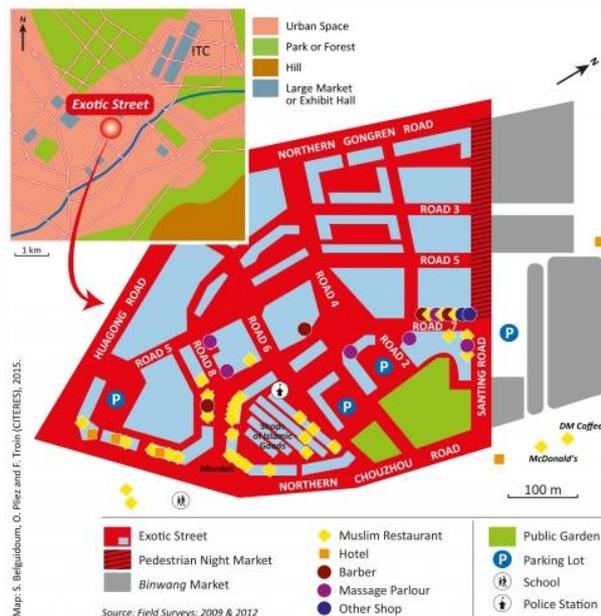
According to source, Egypt was the top destination of products imported from Yiwu towards an MENA country in 2011. Within this group, the same profiles can be found as in the Algerian community.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the formation of an emblematic district of the Arab presence in China is accompanied in a visible but ambiguous way at the local level. It's a city is really unique because there is also the Arab

<sup>9</sup>Ben Simpfendorfer, La nouvelle route de la soie, *Études*, 2012/5 (Tome 416), p. 595- 604

<sup>10</sup>SaïdBelguidoumandOlivierPliez, « Yiwu: The Creation of a Global Market Town in China », *Articulo - Journal of Urban Research* [Online], 12 | 2015, <http://journals.openedition.org/articulo/2863>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/articulo.2863>

restaurant district. The Egyptians were the first to open the Maedah restaurant on Chouzhou Street, one of the main crossroads in Yiwu, where the international shopping center will be built.<sup>11</sup>



Source: Pliez, Belguidoum, Troin, 2015

In addition to these China's strategy, it should be spoken of Rimlang's theory in the article by Tanguy Struye DeSwielande according to which "the traditional competition between the United States and Russia on the Rimland must henceforth take into account a new parameter: China. The latter is asserting itself more and more in the region through an Asian reading of geopolitics which is translated in practice by an application of the game of Go."<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, China's major project, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) development strategy, which aims to strengthen connectivity and cooperation across six main economic corridors, including the Middle East<sup>13</sup> shows us the insistence of the China to be a world power.

## I) A Major Interest for China in Terms of Energy Supply

### Energy Dependence - Big Customer from Saudi Arabia and Iran

Gas, oil, in general hydrocarbon, these are vital energy and resources for developed, industrialized, modernized countries and especially for countries which want to dominate the world like China. This is why China needs to meet its energy needs by diversifying the areas of interest. In this point, it

<sup>11</sup>OlivierPliez, Touteslesroutes de la soiemènent à Yiwu (Chine)- Entrepreneurs et migrantsmusulmansdans un comptoiréconomiqechinois, *L'Espacegéographique*, 2010/2 (Vol. 39), p. 132-145

<sup>12</sup>TanguyStruyeDeSwielande,LaChine et ses objectifsgéopolitiques à l'aube de 2049,2017,<https://www.diploweb.com/La-Chine-et-ses-objectifs-geopolitiques-a-l-aube-de-2049.html>

<sup>13</sup> ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT,China'sBeltand Road Initiative in theglobaltrade, investmentandfinance landscap,2018, <https://www.oecd.org/finance/Chinas-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-in-the-global-trade-investment-and-finance-landscape.pdf>

should be quoted that China is the largest consumer of coal, steel and copper in the world and the second consumer of petroleum and electrical energy after the United States<sup>14</sup>

In order to understand the diversification of the energy supply, the theory of concentric circles shows that China thinks this theory, which aims to differentiate the relations between itself and the more or less close areas of the planet. In this approach, the first group of countries of interest for China is Southeast Asia and the Korean peninsula. A second zone was opened with the western countries, almost deserted after the collapse of the Soviet Republics because, still in this vision, Russia presents a special case. The fourth area of interest is the Middle East,<sup>15</sup> where it contains 60% of the world's proven oil reserves. Therefore, they play an important role in the international energy markets.

In region of Mena, which is China's main source of supply, is mainly interested in Iran, but is also increasingly focusing on Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Unsurprisingly, China's oil and gas imports have grown the fastest in the world. In 2017, China mainly imported 70 million tons of natural gas from Qatar.<sup>16</sup>

As it has been said at the beginning, Saudi Arabia and Iran are the main suppliers for China. In terms of the numbers, the 'TankerTrackersCompany' tracks tanker movements and unloading using satellite imagery. According to its data, Saudi Arabia exported to China a colossal volume of oil: 1,802,788 barrels per day in July 2019 against 921,811 in August 2018.<sup>17</sup> Mutual trade and interests between the two countries are also visible. Because Beijing is actively engaged in energy diplomacy, establishing close relations with many countries, developing exchanges with them and developing military links with the main oil and gas exporting countries. These efforts are naturally concentrated in the Persian Gulf countries in particular, Saudi Arabia is actively seeking to develop its relations with China in order to compensate for its dependence on the United States.<sup>18</sup>

As far as Iran is concerned, between them, a diplomatically strong and ideologically similar relationship regarding hostility towards the United States is available. In addition, cooperation between them, like the Shanghai cooperation organization, is a field available for developing their relations. That's why Iran is China's fifth largest supplier of oil, exporting more than a quarter of its production, and Sino-Iranian trade jumped 20% in 2017 to \$ 37 billion.<sup>19</sup>

After the United States tightened its sanctions against Tehran, several countries and firstly China, continued to import large quantities of Iranian oil. According to a daily report that tracked the

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<sup>14</sup> HeinrichKreft, La DiplomatieChinoise de L'énergie, *Politiqueétrangère* 2006/2 (Été), p. 349-360

<sup>15</sup> HervéL'Huillier, LesChinois à la conquêtedeshydrocarbures de la Planète/  
Esquissed'uneApprocheIntégrée, *Revueinternationale et stratégique* 2007/1 (N°65), p. 37 - 50

<sup>16</sup>VictorienBourgeois, La Chine, PuissanceincontournableauMoyenOrient,2019,<https://www.geostrategia.fr/la-chine-puissance-incontournable-au-moyen-orient/>

<sup>17</sup>Vestifinance.ru, L'Arabiesauditeréorientebusquement ses exportations,2019,  
<https://fr.sputniknews.com/presse/201908161041938953-larabie-saoudite-reoriente-brusquement-ses-exportations/>

<sup>18</sup>HervéL'Huillier, LesChinois à la ConquêtedesHydrocarbures de la Planète/  
Esquissed'uneApprocheIntégrée, *Revueinternationale et stratégique* 2007/1 (N°65), p. 37 - 50

<sup>19</sup> OUEST-FRANCE, Pétrole et gaz iraniens:LaChineauxaguets,facearetraitdes USA, 2018, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/economie/petrole-et-gaz-iraniens-la-chine-aux-aguets-face-au-retrait-des-usa-5764413>>

movements of 70 Iranian tankers, at least 12 have shipped black gold to Iran, including 6 to China and 6 to customers in the eastern Mediterranean, possibly in Syria or Turkey.<sup>20</sup>

Region	2010 (year)	2016 (year)	% (percentage)
Middle East	2 260	3 660	48,1 %
Africa	1 414	1 347	17,7 %
The ex-Soviet republics	521	1 207	15,0 %
Americas	413	1 033	13,6 %

Source : Nasser al-tammimi. « L'émergence de la Chine : les intérêts chinois et les conséquences sur les pays arabes » (enarabe), Al Mustaqbal Al-Arabi, juillet 2017, p. 82

After talking about China's energy supply and their partner Iran, Iran's nuclear issue should be also dealt. China attaches great importance to the stability of the Middle East because of its energy security. The worsening of the Iranian nuclear problem will increase oil prices, destabilize the Strait of Hormuz and threaten security of supply. As a result, it will negatively affect China's national interests and investments in the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia. Furthermore, China is pursuing policies to diversify from energy supply security due to the geopolitical risks in the Middle East. However, it should be borne in mind that China advocates that each country has the right to a civil and controllable nuclear program, while at the same time advocating for a formal and de facto nuclear non-proliferation regime.<sup>21</sup> Therefore *China can use Iran as an alternative partner to balance its policy towards the Arabs and the US*<sup>22</sup>

In conclusion, despite the difficulties and risks in energy imports due to the difficulties in the Middle East, (such as the Syrian war, the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the sanction against Iran etc.) China establishes solid relations with the countries of the region.

## II) Chinese Military Presence and Delivery of Weapons and Drones to Region

### 1. China's Maritime Presence in the Region

China is one of the world's largest arms exporters, and its trend in military spending has grown more sharply since 2007 and now spends more than Russia and the United States.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, Middle East always finds itself as a loyal customer.

<sup>20</sup> LACROIX, Pétrole: la Chine défie les sanctions américaines contre l'Iran, selon la presse américaine, 2019, <https://www.la-croix.com/Economie/Petrole-Chine-defie-sanctions-americaines-contre-Iran-presse-2019-08-05-1301039466>

<sup>21</sup> Ümit Alperen, Çin'in İran Nükleer Politikası: Ulusal Çıkar ve "Sorumlu Büyük Güç" Arasında Denge, *İran Çalışmaları Dergisi*, Cilt: 2, Sayı: 2, pp. 11-35

<sup>22</sup> Lars Erslev Andersen, China, the middle east, and the reshaping of world order—the case of Iran, DIIS WORKING PAPER 2019: 14

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Marcus, The 'Globalisation' of China's Military Power, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-43036302>

Unlike the hydrocarbons that China receives from the countries of the Middle East, the countries of the Middle East starts to demand Chinese weapons which are good and alternative market due to the evolution of their strategic roles. Beyond these arms sales, China is strengthening its military presence in the Middle East, particularly in terms of naval power. One of the most important reasons for the increase in this military presence is competition with America and the terrorist structures threatening the region's oil reserves.

Indeed, over the past decade, China has benefited from international efforts to combat piracy to increase its maritime presence in the region. For logistical reasons, this situation enabled to develop relations with the Gulf countries. In November 2017, the first overseas Chinese military base established in Djibouti and opened its doors. China pays great attention to Djibouti's mention of its strategic position in the Horn of Africa.<sup>24</sup>

The eastern Mediterranean is also a very important region for this purpose of naval power. For example, in May 2015, militarily, China displayed its naval cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean with Russia during joint naval maneuvers. In the same month, the two powers jointly launched an unprecedented naval exercise in the Mediterranean. The exercises brought together nine Russian and Chinese warships and are expected to last 11 days.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, in January 2018, two warships of the 27<sup>th</sup> escort of the Chinese Navy, on a four-month tour, stopped in Algiers for a four-day "friendly visit".<sup>26</sup>

Of course, protecting oil routes is one of China's biggest motivations. Because increasing dependence on oil imports from unstable regions, which must be based on sea routes that are difficult to control, also affects Chinese military projects. Some Western experts believe that the leaders of Beijing are determined to develop their maritime capabilities beyond what is necessary to protect the coasts and the strait of Taiwan.<sup>27</sup> In this point of view, it is emphasized that the strong partnership with the Egypt is determinative because this cooperation also aims at the fight against terrorism, organized crime, cross-border crime, electronic crime, and also facilitate sales of Chinese armaments to Egypt.

## **2. Involvement in Chinese Military Technique in the Middle East and Weapons Sell**

From the point of view of the leaders of the Cooperation Council for the Arab Gulf States, the most important military advantage of a partnership with China is Beijing's willingness to supply the weapons that the United States is currently reluctant to sell. The reluctant reactions of the United States to the current regional turbulence have led the Cooperation Council for the Arab Gulf States to seek to increase their independent capacity. In this case, although China is not entirely a "strategic partner", it can be an important supplier.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Audrey Duperron, La Chine prend graduellement position au Moyen-Orient, 2018, <https://fr.express.live/la-chine-prend-graduellement-position-au-moyen-orient/amp/>

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Bernard Pinatel, La Chine va-t-elle s'impliquer militairement au Moyen-Orient?, 2016, Disponible sur: <https://www.geopolitique-geostrategie.fr/la-chine-va-t-elle-simpliquer-militairement-au-moyen-orient-72137>

<sup>26</sup> Adel Abdel Ghafar et Anna Jacobs, Pékin conforte son implantation au Maghreb, 2019, [https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2019/09/ABDEL\\_GHAFAR/60397](https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2019/09/ABDEL_GHAFAR/60397)

<sup>27</sup> Heinrich Kreft, La Diplomatie Chinoise de l'énergie, *Politique étrangère* 2006/2 (Été), p.349-360

<sup>28</sup> Degung Sun, Çin'in Ortadoğu'daki Yumuşak Askeri Mevcudiyeti, *Dünya Bülteni Araştırma Masası*, 2016 Mayıs, p.38-49

From this point of view, James Char, a specialist in Chinese military affairs at Nanyang University of Technology, announces the same thing in Singapore. According to him, "If the United States uses killer drones extensively for its own account, it has long been reluctant to export them for fear that they would be used against their troops abroad or for fear that their technology would be copied. "It has given China the opportunity to take the place of the Americans. The very competitive prices of Chinese products also play a role."<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, the competitiveness between these two powerful countries is realized both on the economy and on the military. James Char also adds by giving the example of Jordan, which is allied with the United States at the same time as it is turned towards Beijing, finally which would have been refused to buy a US's drone.

At the same time, China continues to selling heavy, light or conventional weapons. Chinese military contractors have already started selling dangerous, self-contained killer robots to customers in the Middle East. For example, according to Defense One, a Chinese company called Ziyang markets its Blowfish A3 - an autonomous helicopter-type drone armed with a machine gun - to international buyers.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Ziyang is working to sell its autonomous killers to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the Chinese government is already well established in the trade in killer robots.

In the published article "China wants to win the military drone war"<sup>31</sup> and it is noted that Chinese companies are discovering a huge arsenal of military drones, a "sensitive" area where they are gradually overtaking the United States and making a breakthrough in the Middle East. Beside these drones are already used by the Iraqi army against the Islamic State organization and in Yemen and these "made in China" drones of the army of the United Arab Emirates were used to attack a rebel leader.

Continuing to these examples, China has also given Iraq a \$ 1.5 billion loan to buy weapons, including Chinese drones that are cheaper than the Americans. Officially, the buyer remains unknown, but Chinese media have mentioned that China can sell Saudi Arabia 300 drones for \$ 10 billion.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, Egypt that has become an ally even a friend of China, in the fall of 2015, Beijing suggested to Cairo to sell two submarines. While this is not the first time that Egypt has acquired Chinese equipment of this type, Beijing had already sold four diesel-electric submarines of the Ming class in the 1980s<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>24Heures, La Chine veut gagner la guerre du drone militaire, 2018, <https://www.24heures.ch/monde/chine-veut-gagner-guerre-drone-militaire/story/19356400>

<sup>30</sup>Saad Idrissi, La Chine vend des drones tueurs autonomes au Moyen-Orient, 2019, <https://www.ttcgroupe.com/la-chine-vend-des-drones-tueurs-autonomes-au-moyen-orient/>

<sup>31</sup>Abid

<sup>32</sup>THEEPOCHTIMES, La Chine et la Russie s'emparent du marché des armes au Moyen-Orient, 2017, <https://fr.theepochtimes.com/chine-russie-semparent-marche-armes-moyen-orient-26624.html>

<sup>33</sup>Elena Aoun et Thierry Kellner, La Pénétration Chinoise au Moyen-Orient : les cas des Relations sino-égyptiennes, *Monde chinois* 2015/4 (N° 44), pages 50 à 67

### III) China's Investment in the Middle East

#### 1. Investments Towards the Maghreb Countries

In addition to China's efforts to increase its military presence in the region, it is also rapidly increasing its economic investments. One can observe these investments in particular in the countries of North Africa and in Egypt. Historically, The China had notably an ideological rapprochement with Algeria and Egypt. China was the first non-Arab country to recognize the provisional government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA, 1958-1962) and provided diplomatic support to the independence struggle led by the National Liberation Front (FLN, 1954- 1962). Also, Gamal Abdel Nasser was the first Arab and African leader to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1956.<sup>34</sup>

It should be considered that China's cultural policies expand through the **concept of soft power**. As part of the memoranda of understanding signed between the King of Morocco and President Xi in 2016, a Chinese cultural center was inaugurated in Rabat in December 2018. Also in Tunisia, the first Confucius Institute opened its doors in November 2018. During the summit of the Forum on Sino-African Cooperation (FOCAC) of 2018 in Beijing and Egypt hosts two Confucius Institutes, one at the University of Cairo and the other at the University of Suez. The Chinese government has also decided to increase the number of scholarships offered to African students, including those from the northern continent, to enable them to receive higher education in China, promising 50,000 government scholarships and 50,000 other scholarships.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of infrastructure and the economy, in 2018 the Middle East and North Africa (Middle East and North Africa) became the second largest region, and Beijing invested 28.11 billion of US dollars immediately after the EU.<sup>36</sup>

In Morocco, for example, on the 70th anniversary of the opening of relations between China and Morocco, President Xi Jinping stressed that Morocco as an important partner in the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]. The key sectors for these linkages are the trade, the infrastructure development, the port construction and the launch of new maritime links, the financial cooperation, the tourism and the manufacturing. Also, China is using its unrivalled capacity to provide cheap finance and labor for infrastructure, an area where the United States and Europe cannot compete.

As for Algeria who is one of Beijing's oldest and most important economic partners, China is interested in Algeria's rich reserves of oil and gas. In 2018, the value of exports reached 7.85 billion dollars, setting a record for North African trade in China. Major projects, such as the Algiers National Opera, the Sheraton Waterfront Hotel on the western outskirts of the capital, the Great Mosque of Algiers and the East-West highway have become Algerian monuments.<sup>37</sup>

#### 2. The Case of Sino-Egyptian Relations

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<sup>34</sup> AdelAbdelGhafar et AnnaJacobs, Pékin conforte son implantation au Maghreb, 2019, [https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2019/09/ABDEL\\_GHAFAR/60397](https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2019/09/ABDEL_GHAFAR/60397)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Sébastien Le Belzic, L'investissement de la Chine en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient est devenu spectaculaire, 2019, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/05/22/l-investissement-de-la-chine-en-afrique-du-nord-et-au-moyen-orient-est-devenu-spectaculaire\\_5465512\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/05/22/l-investissement-de-la-chine-en-afrique-du-nord-et-au-moyen-orient-est-devenu-spectaculaire_5465512_3212.html)

<sup>37</sup> AdelAbdelGhafar et AnnaJacobs, Pékin conforte son implantation au Maghreb, 2019, [https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2019/09/ABDEL\\_GHAFAR/60397](https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2019/09/ABDEL_GHAFAR/60397)

Relations between China and Egypt are historically important for both of states. From Nasser to Mursi, Egypt is still a special country for China. Despite that, relations with the Sisi administration, which took place after the coup, are stronger and more progressive than ever.

Especially after the opening of the Chinese economy by Deng Xiaoping in 1979, and even after the Cold War, the political and economic relations between the two countries has deepen. During the presidency of Mubarak, the two countries are extremely affiliated. Hosni Mubarak made 9 official visits to China. Most recently among them was in November 2006 where he participated in the "China-Africa Cooperation Forum" at the Beijing Summit. It is certain that this rapprochement of politic also leads to economic rapprochement because their bilateral trades were another indicator of the huge development of bilateral relations in the 1990s and 2000. It went from \$ 131 million in 1990 to \$ 953 million in 2001 and then reached \$ 6.9 billion in 2010.<sup>38</sup>

Afterwards it should be passed on to historic visit and the development of bilateral relations with President Mohamed Morsi, because this visit has a special symbolic meaning. President Morsi chose to travel from Beijing to Washington instead of Washington in August 2012, indicating his desire to rebalance and diversify Egypt's foreign relations, making China a partner just as important as the United States. In addition to politics and symbolism, this first visit has a pragmatic objective; Morsi accompanied several ministers and a delegation of 80 businessmen, some of whom had close ties to the old regime, but had a precious role in China.

After Sisi's official visits, trade agreements and the cooperation between two states increased rapidly. From 9.2 billion in 2013 to 10%, in 2012 to 11.6 billion USD in 2014, or + 13.8% compared to 2013 and Beijing became that year the first trading partner of Cairo. Several trip of President Sisi to China (September 2015) makes continue to intensify bilateral political and economic relations. This time, President Sisi did not only meet with Chinese leaders, but also with leaders of the country's major companies, such as telecommunications giant Huawei, to explore the possibility of expanding activities and investments in Egypt. The agreement was reached again. The Development Bank of China (CBD) will provide a loan of \$ 100 million to the National Bank of Egypt (NBE) to finance SMEs.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, the new capital project, which Egypt is currently building, is an important and huge project in terms of this convergence. It doesn't have a name, it's just called NAC (New Administrative Capital), but some people already call it Sisi City. The Egyptian government is building a new capital 35 kilometers east of Cairo with a total area of 170,000 federations (approximately 700 square kilometers). The new capital is located on the regional ring road, between the Cairo Suez road and the Cairo Ain El Sokhna road. Besides, the construction of such type of project normally depends on the funding and technology that China is always present for that. So this project for a new capital of Egypt is the result of an agreement between the Egyptian government, the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) and China Fortune Land Development.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Elena Aoun et Thierry Kellner, La Pénétration Chinoise au Moyen-Orient: le cas des Relations sino-égyptiennes, *Monde chinois* 2015/4 (N° 44), pages 50 à 67

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

<sup>40</sup> Carlo de Nuzzo, Une capitale chinoise pour l'Égypte ? Au Caire, le profil de la « nouvelle capitale », 2019, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2019/08/15/une-capitale-chinoise-pour-legypte-au-caire-le-profil-de-la-nouvelle-capitale/>

Currently as an indicator of this solidarity, China asked 145 million masks from Egypt.<sup>41</sup> In this context, Egypt reflected the Chinese flag on three historical structures of the country to cooperation with China due to the corona virus.



### 3. Investment and Reconstruction of Syria

After the war and the destruction in Syria, China sees this country as a means of diplomacy and uses its investments for the reconstruction of Syria. It is also one of the other countries that demanded stability in the region after Daesh threatened the region's oil reserves.

For the purpose of becoming a diplomatic power that China is one of the countries lagging behind, in this regard the peace process in Syria provides a unique opportunity for Chinese diplomats to deepen their experience of global crises and mediation of conflicts according to Moritz Rudolf, researcher at the Mercator Institute for China Studies in Berlin.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the Association for Arab-Chinese Trade and the Syrian Embassy in Beijing organized a seminar on the reconstruction and development of Syria, which was attended by senior Chinese officials and industrialists. According to the Global Times, Syrian Ambassador Imad Moustapha said that: *Syria has launched its reconstruction program, a Belt and a Road, mainly in the field of energy, from water and industry*<sup>43</sup>.

This rebuilding effort is often treated by Chinese leaders such as Qi Qianjin, Chinese ambassador to Syria, said that his country wished to *"play a more important role in the reconstruction and development of Syria, in particular by intensifying its aid to this war-torn country."* He continued to explain their attention *"I think it is time to focus our efforts on the development and reconstruction of Syria, and I think China will play a bigger role in this process, bringing more aid to the Syrian people and the Syrian government."*<sup>44</sup>

Most recently in January 2017, the Chinese government had already donated one million dollars to the World Health Organization (WHO) to support a humanitarian project aimed at meeting the health needs of Syrians.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> MiddleeastMonitor, Coronavirus: Chinarequests 145m masksfrom Egypt,2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200205-coronavirus-china-requests-145m-masks-from-egypt/>

<sup>42</sup> MoritzRudolf,China's New Era of Diplomacy: Engaging in Syria,2016, <https://thedi diplomat.com/2016/01/chinas-new-era-of-diplomacy-engaging-in-syria/>

<sup>43</sup> SOLIDARITEETPROGRES, La Chine en premièreligne pourreconstruire la Syrie,2017, <https://solidariteetprogres.fr/actualites-001/Chine-reconstruire-syrie.html>

<sup>44</sup> CHINE MAGAZINE, La Chinesouhaites'impliquerdavantage en Syrie,2018, <https://www.chine-magazine.com/chine-souhaite-simpliquer-davantage-syrie/>

<sup>45</sup> ibid

Then, China continues to invest in countries where they have historically converged in the Middle East in cultural and economic terms. At the same time, they take its share of the situation in Syria with the desire to become a diplomatic force.

## **IV. Chinese Diplomacy with Regard to the Major Crisis in the Middle East**

### **1. The Israeli - Palestinian Question**

On the Palestinian side, China has fundamental goals because of its rivalry with the United States and its economic relations in the Middle East. China does not recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, while economically helping Palestine. As every year in November, Beijing commemorates the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

In terms of economic aid, China will provide more than \$ 15 million to the Palestinians, President Xi Jinping said to senior Arab officials in July 2018.<sup>46</sup>Xi Jinping stressed that the importance of this process should not be underestimated, and also announced that China is providing \$ 7.6 million to build a solar plant for the Palestinians. *“China strongly supports the Middle East peace process and the creation of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital on the Jerusalem issue”* said Chinese President. Addressing the headquarters of the Arab League, Jinping called on the Arab countries for peace and supported the creation of an independent state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as the capital.<sup>47</sup>

It might be considered that China's initiative is not only recalls the well-known principles of solving the problem, but also uses the huge capital of the New Silk Road to solve this problem. In addition to the measures taken in Syria to become a diplomatic power and mediator, China also makes recommendations to the international community to resolve the problem, among which could be cited, firmly advancing towards the political solution of the conflict, on the basis of the solution of “two States”, to act in favour of a common, global, cooperative and lasting security concept, to coordinate more and strengthen the efforts of the international community in favour of peace and finally to promote peace through economic development.<sup>48</sup>

However, China, which has a long and complex history, is more sensitive to providing cultural solutions and seems more equipped than the United States, and it can be said that China can exert more pressure for the solution of this question by collaborating with all the countries of the Middle East.

### **2. The Arab Spring**

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<sup>46</sup>46 TIMES OF ISRAEL STAFF, La Chine versera 15 M \$ aux Palestiniens et dit vouloir agir au Moyen Orient, 2018, <https://fr.timesofisrael.com/la-chine-versera-15-m-aux-palestiniens-et-dit-vouloir-agir-au-moyen-orient/>

<sup>47</sup>47 SPUTNIKNEWS, Pékin favorable à une Palestine indépendante avec Jérusalem-Est pour capitale, 2016, <https://fr.sputniknews.com/international/201601221021134206-pekin-pour-palestine-independante/>

<sup>48</sup>48 Christine Bierre, Israël-Palestine : la Chine présente son plan de paix par le développement mutuel, 2017, <https://solidariteetprogres.fr/actualites-001/israel-palestine-la-chine-presente.html>

In January 2016, Khaled Khoja, a leader of the Syrian opposition, was invited to China. While supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime, the communist state does not believe in the status quo. At the start of the civil war in Syria, the UN Security Council in October 2011 served a resolution condemning the repression in Syria. Proposed by the Western Front, China and Russia opposed this resolution.<sup>49</sup>

The same situation in Egypt should be observed. China is deploying a policy that is as pragmatic as they are “supporting” against the many twists and turns that Egypt experienced between 2011 and 2013. 50

Beijing also warmly welcomes popular demonstrations against Hosni Mubarak. Avoiding commenting on the events and openly criticizing the protesters, Chinese diplomacy focuses on non-interference condemning American and European pressure on the Egyptian president.<sup>51</sup>

In the case of Libya, this distrust of the consequences of democratic revolutions was compounded by concerns about the interference of Western powers, criticized by Beijing, which also abstained from voting on resolution 1973 from Security Council of the United Nations, without using its veto power.<sup>52</sup>

These are the reasons why it could be argued that China’s post-Spring Arab policy has no open support for new or old regimes or democratic concerns. It acts more economically and in accordance with its own policies.

## Conclusion

The People's Republic of China, the heritage of an ancestral culture and tradition, has shown the world that China has once again become a great power since its creation and then became a permanent member of the United Nations. It has accelerated its economic development and exported its products to the whole world with its population at the forefront and posed a major threat to the defense industry with its own national weapons. Eager to become a world leader, China is in serious competition with the United States and this current rivalry with the United States has led certain Chinese strategists destined to circumvent American power by taking advantage of its weaker presence (Central Asia, Asia of South, Iran) or its relative disengagement (Afghanistan, Middle East) elsewhere<sup>53</sup>. As well as its cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean with Egypt, its investments in the Maghreb, its project to rebuild Syria, its attempt to be a mediator on the Israeli-Palestinian problem, these actions empower China in diplomatic, military and economic terms.

Even nowadays, a new move of China related to the region was encountered with a day or a week. Finally, except for the coronavirus solidarity with Egypt, even in this case, China continues to support the region such as sending the medical equipment, medical team etc. Likewise the sentence written

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Monnerais, La Chine et la Russie craignent que le printemps arabe donne des idées à leurs populations, 2011, [https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2011/10/05/la-chine-et-la-russie-craignent-que-le-printemps-arabe-donne-des-idees-a-leurs-populations\\_1582757\\_3218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2011/10/05/la-chine-et-la-russie-craignent-que-le-printemps-arabe-donne-des-idees-a-leurs-populations_1582757_3218.html)

<sup>50</sup> Elena Aoun et Thierry Kellner, La Chine et l’Égypte après le Printemps Arabe, *Les Rapports du GRIP*, 2018/7, p:32

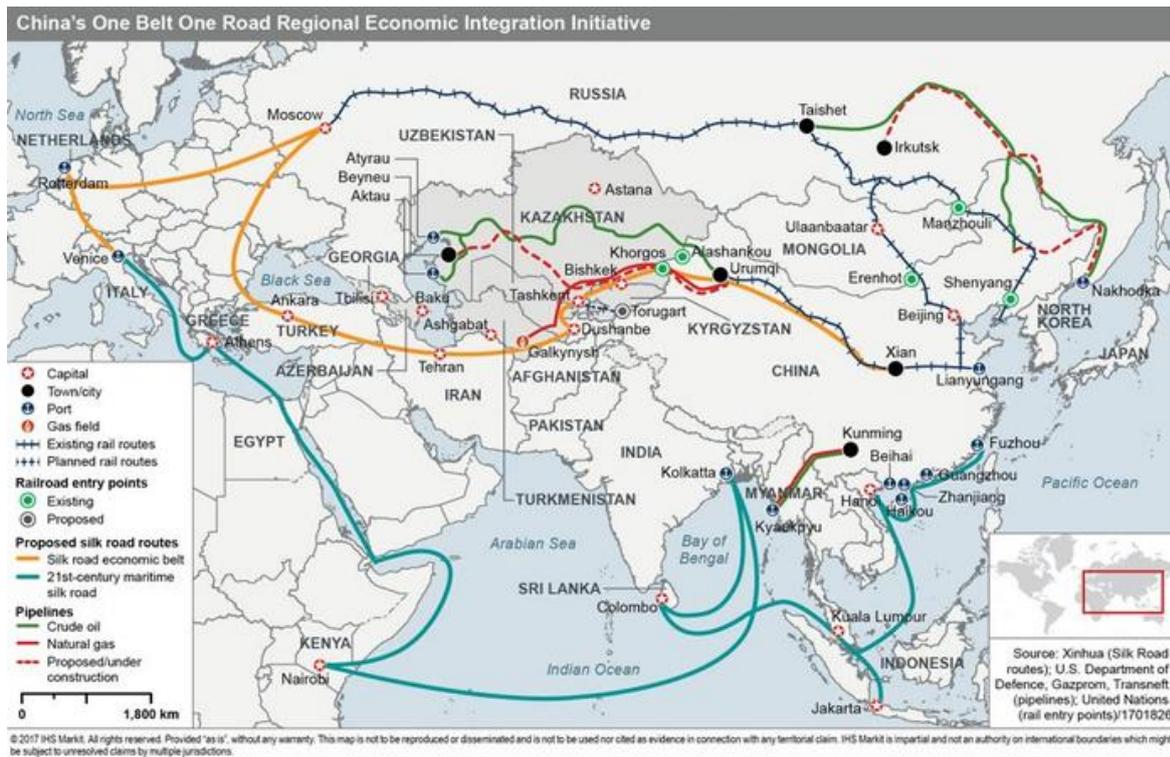
<sup>51</sup> *Ibid* 33

<sup>52</sup> Barthélemy Courmont, La Chine et le Moyen-Orient après le printemps arabe, *Maghreb – Machrek*, 2011/2 (N° 208), pp: 119 à 129

<sup>53</sup> Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Jusqu’où ira la Chine dans son affirmation de puissance ? *Le Débat*, 2014/2 (n° 179), pp: 116 -128

on the aid packages sent from China to Iraq says everything. **Friendship becomes evident in a hard day**<sup>54</sup>. Despite everything, the China is not the only and unique actor, they have become the one of the most important player in the Middle East thanks to the projects, investments and bilateral relations mentioned in this article.

### China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Development Strategy Map



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<sup>54</sup>SputnikTürkiye, Çin'den Irak'a koronavirüs yardımı,07.03.2020, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/ortadogu/202003071041552902-cinden-iraka-koronavirus-yardimi/>

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