

Sino-GCC Relations in the Age of China “Go Global” Strategy

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The Persian Gulf as a crucial region has been in the center of the global powers' strategies. China, as a growing international power, in the framework of “Go Global” strategy, has cemented its multidimensional ties with the Persian Gulf countries, particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies during the last three decades. China has established comprehensive strategic relations with the GCC states. The GCC sultanates have also attempted to deepen their collaboration with China in different fields. The bilateral relations between China and GCC countries mainly focused on energy, economy, trade, finance, relatively politics, security, military, culture and recently COVID-19. In recent years, the Chinese Belt and Road project has deepened the relationship between China and GCC countries and has effectively contributed to the Chinese “Go Global” strategy.

Keywords: China, the Persian Gulf, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Energy, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), COVID-19

Introduction

The Persian Gulf has played an influential role in the global powers policy during the history and in the modern time particularly in the post-Cold War era. Accordingly, the history of the Persian Gulf region has always been characterized by competition among the world powers. The region has been an arena for intervention by major global powers during its history. This is mainly because of the strategic and geopolitical significant position of the region, in particular, the region's enormous oil and gas resources. The international powers have always defended their politico-economic and security interests in the Persian Gulf. The interests of several contemporary global powers intersect in this region from the United States of America and European powers, Russia to emerging powers in Asia namely China and India and neighboring powers.

China as a growing global power has concentrated on this region in its “Go Global” policy during the last three decades. China's Persian Gulf strategy is based on building multidimensional relations with all regional states, regardless of existing rivalries. When it comes to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the Chinese approach is mainly driven by its voracious energy appetite and particularly, Beijing's ambitious expansion through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China-GCC relations are evolving within a context that is characterized by global and regional geopolitical power transitions and China “Go Global” strategy. Accordingly, during the last three decades, China has established comprehensive strategic relations with the GCC states. Based on China growing need for energy and Chinese huge productions the GCC countries also view China as a great partner and the sultanates have attempted to deepen their collaboration with Beijing in different fields, including economy, trade, politics,

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security, military, and culture.

This paper aims to explore China relations with the GCC countries in the Persian Gulf. The main question to be addressed in this paper is: How Sino-GCC relations have been shaped and what are the major escorts for China and GCC countries collaboration? The main discussion of the paper is that Chinese Persian Gulf strategy is mainly building on multidimensional ties and, under the BRI, the relations between China and the region particularly the GCC states will be developed in the coming years.

The Importance of the Persian Gulf: A Brief Assessment

During the history and particularly since the 19th century, the Persian Gulf has been one of the most strategically important regions in the international system. This is mainly due to two reasons:

1. Strategically and geopolitically for the great sea powers not to allow the Eurasian land power access to the ports in the Persian Gulf (and later to gain control of the oil resources) (see Figure 1);
2. Due to its vast energy resources (oil and gas).



Figure 1. Persian Gulf Map (Source: WorldAAtlas, 2020).

Accordingly, the Persian Gulf has been always in the center of the great powers global policy. As Macris and Kelly (2012) had noted in their edited book *Imperial Crossroads: The Great Powers and the Persian Gulf*, for centuries, the world's great powers, along with their fleets, armies, and intelligence services, have been

drawn to the Persian Gulf region.

Table 1

The Persian Gulf Proved Oil Reserves 2019

No.	Country	Thousands million barrels	Thousands million tonnes	Share of world total (%)
1	Saudi Arabia	297.7	40.9	17.2
2	Iran	155.6	21.4	9.0
3	Iraq	147.2	19.9	8.5
4	Kuwait	101.5	14.0	5.9
5	United Arab Emirates (UAE)	97.8	13.0	5.7
6	Qatar	25.2	2.6	1.5
7	Oman	5.4	0.7	0.3
	Total	830.4	112.5	48.1

Note. Source: BP (2019).

The geopolitical and geostrategic sensitivity of the region is not covered by anyone. During the history, each of the global great powers has sought to increase and maintain its influence over this region.

China is one of the global powers that have focused on the Persian Gulf region particularly during the last three decades. The Chinese government has significantly enhanced China position and interests in the Persian Gulf region over the past three decades, making it an important newcomer in regional dynamics. Indeed, as a growing global power, Beijing has expanded, in some cases dramatically, its diplomatic contacts, economic ties, strategic relations, security, and arms sales to the region's governments.

Due to its increasing global presence that is driven by growth in Chinese economy and energy demand, and its expanding political involvement globally, China has attempted to implement its intended arrangements in the Persian Gulf region. Yet, the relationship between China and the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf in particular has been deeply influenced by the international system and regional patterns, as well as the adjustments of Beijing's own developmental and strategies during the last three decades and particularly in recent years.

As for the Persian Gulf countries particularly, the Arab states, in recent years and specially, following the Arab Uprisings in 2011, these governments increasingly have looked East for new economic and political partners, in particular, China. In addition, the oil and gas rich Persian Gulf Arab states are in need of diversifying their economies encouraging them to look for strong investors (Andersen & Jiang, 2018).

China Relations With the Persian Gulf Region: With Emphasis on GCC

In the post-Cold War era, the promise of major geopolitical shifts in the international system has led China to play a more influential role in the Persian Gulf region. Moreover, a quiet shift in geopolitics has been taking place, with East Asia and the Middle East drawing closer together (see Figure 2). In addition, China's economic development has been the top priority on Beijing's national agenda since the late 1970s and this has been a driving force behind Beijing's strategies towards the Persian Gulf region. The Chinese government has embarked on a "Go Global" strategy to funnel its significant foreign exchange resource to international investments in Asia Pacific, the Americas, Europe, Middle East, and Africa. In other words, as China's global role grows, its relations with states outside of its traditional sphere of interests is developing. This is certainly the case of the Persian Gulf states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab

Emirates (UAE), which together comprise the GCC (with about 60 million populations, see Table 2). Mutual relations between China and the region were further strengthened when diplomatic ties between Beijing and the region's governments were established. Beijing's levels of interdependence with these states have increased dramatically in recent years, spanning a wide range of fields and interests.



Figure 2. China and the Persian Gulf (Source: Wood, 2017).

Table 2

The GCC Countries' Populations

No.	Country	Population
1	Saudi Arabia	34,813,871
2	United Arab Emirates	9,890,402
3	Oman	5,106,626
4	Kuwait	4,270,571
5	Qatar	2,881,053
6	Bahrain	1,701,575
	Total	58,664,098

Note. Source: World Population Review (2020).

The Chinese Persian Gulf strategy is based on building multidimensional ties with all the region's countries, regardless of existing rivalries. Beijing has always tried to follow a balance policy in the region. Thus, one can argue that, in the long term, China's strategic balancing of powers in the Persian Gulf might be the steppingstone for a broader engagement (Gurol & Scita, 2020).

In the Persian Gulf, energy policy is typically viewed as the nexus of Chinese booming relations with the region's states. In fact, one can assume that China's energy security is linked directly to its oil imports from the Persian Gulf. In other words, energy cooperation is the dominant aspect of Chinese expanding relations with

the Persian Gulf governments. Generally, with its booming economy, China's energy trade with the Persian Gulf countries carries crucial weight for Beijing's overall energy security. Indeed, in the Persian Gulf region, Chinese approach is mainly driven by its voracious energy appetite, in particular, its ambitious expansion through the Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative was first introduced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in the fall 2013. The Chinese BRI strategy has become China's most important lofty design to engage with the Middle East, in particular, the Persian Gulf. China's Middle East, in particular, the Persian Gulf's partnership diplomacy has provided a platform for deepening and expanding the cooperation between China and the countries of the region under the framework of the BRI. The strategy signifies a new stage of China's "Going Global" initiative, which encourages Chinese firms to go abroad in search of new markets or investment opportunities. In other words, The launch of this "New Silk Road" programme represents Beijing's most significant diplomatic and economic action in the globe and the Persian Gulf region as well (Chaziza, 2020a).

Indeed, the Chinese government is embarking on a strategic approach to the Persian Gulf in the context of BRI, which has evolved into a top national strategy in China. Beijing is stepping up efforts to build two transcontinental new Silk Road frameworks that connect Asia, Africa, and Europe in trade, investment, infrastructure, and people-to-people exchange, originally called the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road". In spring 2015, China's top economic planning agency, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), released a new action plan outlining key details of the strategy, highlighted by the building of land and maritime "economic corridors". These were expected to be prioritized in China's 13th Five-Year Plan, which would run from 2016 to 2020 and guide national investment strategy throughout that period (Cui, 2015).

The new Silk Road has received active responses from the Persian Gulf leaderships, embodied by their enthusiastic participation in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)¹; Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait have all signed up as founding members. Membership in the AIIB guarantees these nations a fast track to China's investment funds and will unite them under a common economic interest together with Chinese increasing commitments. Accordingly, the Persian Gulf has become vital for China's grand strategy against the backdrop of its ambitious BRI. As Chinese government heads West, the Persian Gulf governments are looking East. Considering the adaptive strategy undertaken by China and the region's countries, bilateral and multilateral ties are undergoing a major shift, from energy-centered relations to multidimensional strategic partnerships (Cui, 2015).

Although energy is a key to understanding China's upgraded involvement in the Persian Gulf, Beijing's relationship with the region is much deeper and broader. In other words, significantly, Sino-Persian Gulf relations have moved far beyond the hydrocarbon sector, although energy clearly remains important. Sustained efforts have been made by the Chinese government to advance the "four action plans", namely, cooperation in four major fields of promoting stability, identifying new forms of cooperation, conducting production capacity cooperation, and deepening friendship with the Persian Gulf states (Wang, 2018).

Notably, China increasingly attempts to engage with the region through two multilateral mechanisms. The first institutional framework is the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), which was launched in

¹ The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is a multilateral development bank with a mission to improve social and economic outcomes in Asia.

2004 in Cairo. In June 2014, at the sixth Ministerial Conference of the CASC, President Xi Jinping proposed the establishment of a “1 + 2 + 3” pattern of cooperation: energy cooperation as the core; then infrastructure construction plus trade and investment facilitation as two wings; and three new areas of high tech cooperation—nuclear energy, space satellites, and other new energy initiatives. In the next 10 years, President Xi underscored that efforts should be made to increase the bilateral trade volume from the USD 240 billion of 2013 to USD 600 billion. The second framework is the China-GCC Strategic Dialogue, initiated in 2010 and targeted at building a strategic partnership. While both sides agreed to accelerate the pace of establishing a free trade area, China had asserted its desire to play a more active role in regional affairs, such as maintaining the Persian Gulf stability and combating the Islamic State (ISIS) (Koch, 2013).

Of course, one can assume that politically, Beijing, to some extent, has, so far, been reluctant to become fully engaged in the regional challenges. Yet, China’s interests in the Persian Gulf region have been evolving; and in the 21st century, they cover geopolitical, geostratigical, economic, trade energy security and nontraditional security interests. One can assume that the Persian Gulf Arab states are important to China global policy and play crucial roles because of their geostrategic location, huge reserve of oil and gas, fast and steady growth of economy with rapid expansion of market for consumer, and merchandise goods which China has a plenty of them.

To boost Chinese relations with the Persian Gulf region, generally, a number of actions have taken place:

1. Establishment of a number of institutions to support China-Persian Gulf strategic partnership. These institutions are normally between China and individual Arab countries or the countries as a region. Notably, China increasingly attempts to engage with the region through two multilateral mechanisms. The first institutional framework is the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASC), which was launched in 2004 in Cairo. According to the “Declaration on CASC” and the “Action Plan of CASC”, CASC serves as a platform for negotiating the terms of China’s engagement with Arab states, including the Persian Gulf Arab states. One of its prominent and recent initiatives is the “1 + 2 + 3” cooperation pattern, which lays out the framework of Sino-Persian Gulf interaction. Under the framework, energy is the top priority, infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation are two focuses and three new high-tech areas, namely nuclear energy, space satellite and new energy, are key areas to instigate change (Xinhua, 2016).

Another important institution is the China-GCC Strategic Dialogue, which was established in 2010 to upgrade Sino-Persian Gulf ties by upgrading the relationship to the strategic level. There are also China-GCC Cooperation Forum, China-GCC Trade and Economic Joint Committee, China-Arab States Economic and Trade Forum, and China-GCC Countries Forum on Economic Trade Cooperation.

These institutions have served as a significant platform for Sino-Persian Gulf strategic relationship. By the way, these kinds of institutions have been introduced more with the implementation of the BRI in the Persian Gulf region. Generally, the regional governments have always participated in the support of Chinese initiated institutions.

2. Cooperation in the field of peace and security; China’s ultimate military and security goals and objectives in the region are to be gradually involved in the multi-billion dollar military, security and strategic sectors of arms market not by challenging or going into direct conflict with the West, particularly to America. In a policy paper issued by the Chinese administration in January 2016, it was emphasized that,

We will deepen China-Arab military cooperation and exchange. We will strengthen exchange of visits of military

officials, expand military personnel exchange, deepen cooperation on weapons, equipment and various specialized technologies, and carry out joint military exercises. We will continue to support the development of national defence and military forces of Arab States to maintain peace and security of the region. (Xinhua, 2016)

3. Beijing is also focusing on getting involved in new and strategic sectors, like nuclear energy, aerospace, communication, and infrastructure in the Persian Gulf countries. China has advanced aerospace technology, complete scientific research system as well as a complete set of industrial facilities (Xinhua, 2016).

Accordingly, Beijing can effectively help the Persian Gulf societies to develop outer space technology. At present, China and the Arab states have reached a consensus in projects, such as the China-Arab technology transfer centre, and the Training Centre for peaceful use of nuclear energy in Arab, clean energy training centre in Arab, and the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System (BDS) has landing in the Arab world, showing the sincere wish and a huge potential of the cooperation between the two sides (Lokhande, 2017).

4. Building cultural relationship, China has expanded its cultural ties with the region's nations. China has partnered with universities and other educational institutions in the Persian Gulf countries. Beijing has established three Confucius Institutes in the region; one at the University of Dubai, the second one in Abu Dhabi and the third one is in Bahrain (Kirk, 2015).

5. BRI strategy has become China's most important lofty design to engage with the Persian Gulf region. Accordingly, the new Silk Road is an important guide for China's Persian Gulf diplomacy, which indicates that Chinese government will play a more proactive role in this region. The Persian Gulf indeed has become a significant pivot in China's maritime "Silk Road" initiative, something that further strengthens the region's location and its unique position on the world map and brings greater economic and development gains to region's monarchies. Undoubtedly, Chinese Belt and Road strategy will substantially shape Beijing's engagements with the Persian Gulf region (Cui 2015).

6. In the age of COVID-19, China ties with the GCC countries have been focused on medical and related supplements needs and both sides have tried to assist each other. In other words, the surprising effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has been to foster comradeship between China and the Persian Gulf states in combating a common disease (Zi, 2020). Indeed, COVID-19 is having a strong impact well beyond intra-Persian Gulf relations. Through the "Health Silk Road" diplomacy, the pandemic has created conditions for a more focused multilateral engagement of China with the Persian Gulf (Kamel, 2020). All in all, COVID-19 has created new diplomatic opportunities for more interactions between China and the Persian Gulf governments including GCC members. In other words, COVID-19 is bridging China and GCC countries through the "Health Silk Road", encompassing cooperation in combating the virus as a common enemy (Khan, 2020).

While the global pandemic looks set to worsen in the near future, negatively affecting states in the Middle East, at the government level, we will see these countries working closer together with China for their common interest of bringing the pandemic to an early end.

Certainly, the Persian Gulf holds a unique position in Chinese new policy framework. In the wake of Arab uprisings, the Persian Gulf governments were pressured into boosting economic growth to maintain social stability. Thus, comprehensive and upgraded Chinese engagement will provide new impetus for Persian Gulf economic growth (Fulton, 2019a; 2019b).

China's partnership strategy includes a scale of relations, ranging from a friendly cooperative partnership at the bottom to a comprehensive strategic partnership at the high end (Chaziza, 2020a). Each of the five categories of relations features specific priorities, signaling the level of importance Beijing attaches to that state.

China's levels of strategic partnership diplomacy are (from highest to lowest):

1. Comprehensive strategic partnership involves the full pursuit of cooperation and development on regional and international affairs.
2. Strategic partnership coordinates more closely on regional and international affairs, including military.
3. Comprehensive cooperative partnership maintains the momentum of high-level exchanges, enhanced contacts at various levels, and increased mutual understanding on issues of common interest.
4. Cooperative partnership develops cooperation on bilateral issues, based on mutual respect and benefit.
5. Friendly cooperative partnership strengthens cooperation on bilateral issues, such as trade (Chaziza, 2019).

In the Persian Gulf, China partnership strategy includes seven relationships, spread across the region, that fall into three broad categories in line with their importance. The first category comprises comprehensive strategic partnerships with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The second covers strategic partnerships with Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. The third comprises friendly cooperative partnerships with the region's smallest state: Bahrain.

China-Saudi Arabia Strategic Relations

China relations with Saudi Arabia started to improve during the 1980s due to economic reforms in China which emphasised the modernisation and industrialisation and required Beijing to look for new sources of energy, turning its attention to the Persian Gulf particularly, Saudi Arabia. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 brought Saudi Arabia closer to China as China, Saudi Arabia, and the United States created the "Triple Alliance" to counter the Soviet efforts in Afghanistan. The turning point of Sino-Saudi relations took place in 1990 whereby diplomatic relations between the two nations were established. In fact, Saudi Arabia was the last GCC countries which established relations with the People's Republic of China in July 1990 and, within the next decades, the relations between the two nations grew into a strategic friendship in 2008 and a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016. Chinese and Saudi high representatives pay frequent official visits to each other's countries and both governments see each other as trustworthy political and economic partners with special focus on oil relations.

Riyadh viewed China as a reliable partner and a strategic market for Saudi oil exports which also provides large investments in oil facilities and infrastructure (Garlick & Havlova, 2020).

Saudi Sultanate also views the "Chinese alternative" as an important part of its hedging strategy to counterbalance the US influence in the country: Saudi Arabia appreciates the Chinese politics of non-intervention into internal affairs as long as the latter do not interfere with Chinese economic and business interests (MacGillivray, 2019). The Chinese willingness, to supply Saudi Arabia with military equipment, including assisting it with its nuclear programme, is important to Saudi Arabia (Al-Tamimi, 2012).

For Beijing, Saudi Arabia is viewed as the largest economy in the Arab world which is a reliable large-volume oil supplier since its position in the region, to some extent, is stable and not subject to international isolation and sanctions, like Iran. Riyadh is perceived as a reliable political partner now supporting the "One China" policy. China strategic relations with Saudi Arabia are mainly focused on the following areas:

1. Oil plays the most important role in China ties with Saudi Arabia. In March 2019, the Saudi oil exports to China even surpassed those of Russia (Reuters, 2019). China pays special attention to the comprehensive

strategic development of its Saudi energy relations, focusing on Chinese investments in refineries in Saudi Arabia, Saudi investments in oil facilities in China, and Chinese participation in geological surveys in Saudi Arabia. Cooperation and joint investments between the Chinese state-owned Sinopec company and the Saudi oil company Aramco include joint exploration of natural gas in Section B in the Rub Alkhali Basin since 2004 (Garlick & Havlova, 2020). Beijing investments in Saudi Kingdom include development of the Ghawar oil field and the Yanbu joint refinery project of Aramco and Sinopec at the Red Sea launched in 2012. This project is significant for the Chinese government given the regional instability in the Persian Gulf as it enables it to export oil from Saudi west coast, without having to pass via the contested Hormuz Strait, therefore, avoiding the regional escalations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi kingdom (Lidarev, 2017).

2. In addition to oil, energy cooperation also includes Chinese assistance to the Saudi nuclear programme. Beijing is helping Saudi Arabia to improve its nuclear project. China assistance for Saudis to build nuclear reactors is based on the Sino-Saudi agreement from 2016: The first should be functioning by 2022 and 15 more by 2032. Although their purpose is announced as peaceful nuclear power with the aim to create an alternative source of energy to oil, it seems, as Saudi Arabia and Iran are regional rivals, Saudis also have political importance in hedging against the Iranian nuclear programme (Garlick & Havlova, 2020; Heiden & Kriger, 2018). Yet, one can assume that China has always sought to balance ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

3. Trade relations between China and Saudi Arabia have improved significantly since the 1990s: Whereas the bilateral trade in 1990 amounted to USD 1.2 billion, by 2015, it had risen to USD 74 billion (Olimat, 2016), although by 2017 total trade volume had dipped to USD 50.1 billion due to lower oil prices (World Integrated Trade Solution [WITS], 2019).

In addition to oil and natural gas, China import mostly petrochemicals, raw materials, and minerals from Saudi Sultanate. In fact, one can assume that China with its growing economy is the top country for non-oil exports for Saudi country and the top partner state for Riyadh imports as well.

4. Security is another important part of Sino-Saudi strategic relations. Political relations intensified after the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, when both Chinese and Saudi governments joined the US war on terror in Afghanistan, and after the “Arab uprising” which both states opposed on principles, with Saudi Sultanate fearing instability in the Persian Gulf and Beijing fearing the rise of radicalism in Xinjiang (Fulton, 2019a).

In addition, military relations are one of the important parts of Beijing-Riyadh security relations. The origins of Sino-Saudi military cooperation date back to 1985—five years before the establishment of official diplomatic relations—with the purchase by Saudi Arabia from China of 36 CSS-2 “East Wind” intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) and nine launchers (Kechichian, 2016).

The second concrete manifestation of Beijing-Riyadh military cooperation took place in 1988 when Saudi Arabia and China managed to conclude a secret military deal for Chinese supply of 50-DF-3S missiles to Saudi Arabia by China in 1988 due to the Israeli pressure on the United States not to deliver specialised military equipment to Saudi Arabia (Garlick & Havlova, 2020).

China’s position as a supplier of weapons to Saudi Arabia has improved since the 1990s, with Saudi Arabia purchasing Dongfeng Ballistic Missiles from China in 2007 and PLZ-45 155/45 mm self-propelled howitzers in 2008. Saudi Arabia is reportedly also interested in buying Chinese fighter jets (Garlick & Havlova, 2020). Yet, Beijing is not likely to surpass the United States as the major supplier of Saudi military equipment as the Chinese and Saudi military ties still remains rather low as Beijing is only the fifth largest supplier of

military equipment to Saudi Arabia after America, Russian federation, France, and UK. The military cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia was upgraded to a higher level in 2016 when Saudi Special Forces went for a two-week antiterrorism training in China as the first Arab country to participate in such training (Fulton, 2019a). Military cooperation also includes Sino-Saudi joint combat against international extremism, including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Xinjiang, despite the fact that mistreatment of Muslims in China is frequently criticised by the Saudis (Garlick & Havlova, 2020).

5. Cultural relationship; changes in mutual perception have been intensified by increased cultural cooperation between the two nations since the 1990s. Indeed, China and Saudi Arabia have carried out fruitful cooperation in cultural and people-to-people exchanges, such as language and culture, tourism, art and civilizations and heritage protection, student exchange (Tu, 2020).

6. Sino-Saudi relations in the framework of the Chinese BRI; situated at a strategic juncture point of BRI's two main routes. Saudi Arabia has a significant role to play in the BRI project, as a key driver of regional development. The Saudis and Chinese have partnered on the construction of BRI and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China's opening of a branch in Riyadh in 2015.

Indeed, China and Saudi comprehensive strategic partnership in energy, industry, trade, technology, defence, and culture reflects the importance of Saudi Arabia for the Chinese BRI. As it was stressed by the Saudi officials, the objectives of the Chinese BRI are fully in line with Riyadh Vision 2030 adopted in 2016 with the aim to modernise Saudi Arabia, diversify its economy, and reduce its dependency on energy (Garlick & Havlova, 2020). This position was reaffirmed at the third annual meeting of the China-Saudi Arabia High-Level Joint Committee meeting by the Chinese Vice-Premier Han Zheng and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman in Beijing in February 2019. During these meetings, both China and Saudi Arabia emphasized the importance of deepening their cooperation on trade, transportation, and cargo logistics, with the Chinese leader stating that "China and Saudi Arabia should strengthen the synergy of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Saudi Vision 2030, enhance pragmatic cooperation on energy, infrastructure construction, finance, and high tech" (Port Technology, 2019).

In the framework of the BRI projects, Saudi Arabian companies are also investing in the north-western Hui Muslim provinces in China. Beijing investments in Saudi Sultanate as a part of the BRI strategy include construction projects, infrastructure building, investments in joint research, and training facilities in telecommunications. Chinese exports to Saudi kingdom focus mainly on information technology machinery, infrastructure, health services, construction industry, car industry, banking and telecommunication. In 2015, there were 158 Chinese companies established in the Saudi market and about 20,000 Chinese expats living in Saudi Arabia (Olimat, 2016). The most significant projects implemented by Chinese companies in Saudi Arabia included the agreement concluded in 2009 to construct the Mecca Light Metro (MLM) by the China Railroad Construction Company. The MLM was put into operation in only 16 months, providing a significant ease of transport for millions of Muslims joining the 2011 hajj. The project became a major success in the Muslim world and its cultural contribution to Sino-Saudi cooperation thus clearly exceeded its economic value (Garlick & Havlova, 2020).

7. Cooperation in the age of COVID-19; the COVID-19 pandemic has hurt Saudi Arabia very seriously. The pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca and Medina has been suspended indefinitely. As oil demand has plummeted, so too have oil prices, and the sultanate economy is in depression. Accordingly, Riyadh has turned to China to purchase nine million test kits to fight the virus, and 500 Chinese medical experts have come to

Saudi to run six laboratories (Riedl, 2020).

The general relations between both countries thus remain cordial and Saudi Arabia represents one of the cornerstones for implementation of the BRI in the Persian Gulf.

China-UAE Relations

Diplomatic ties between China and UAE were established in November 1984. The UAE embassy in China was opened in Beijing in 1985, a Chinese consulate was opened in Dubai in 1988 and two UAE consulates were opened in Hong Kong and Shanghai. During May 1990, visit to China Sheikh Zayed presented a roadmap for the development of a long-term strategic relationship between UAE and China.

Two countries signed across a wide range of sectors, including conventional and nuclear energy, trade cooperation, financial services, tourism, education, aviation, science, technology and artificial intelligence. This kind of deep, comprehensive involvement is built on a foundation not simply of common politico-economic interests, but shared values and mutual trust. Both the UAE kingdom and Chinese government firmly believe that peace, stability, trade, and prosperity go hand in hand in the exercise of constructive international relations.

When it comes to relations between the UAE and China, those foundation stones are firmly cemented in place, allowing both nations to upgrade their current strategic partnership that has been in place since 2012 into an even closer comprehensive strategic tie. It is the natural culmination of working together across many fields, supporting common goals, and being determined that well-being and strategic economic ties are the basis for building peace, security and stability (Gulf News, 2019).

The friendship between China and the UAE was consolidated after the visit of President Xi to the UAE in July 2018, Beijing and the UAE upgraded their bilateral relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership, China's highest level of diplomatic relations (Fulton, 2019b). This comprehensive strategic partnership, China-UAE relations in the Belt and Road era, was based on their trust and common interests.

Relations between China and the UAE are mostly based on the following fields:

1. Embellishment of strategic partnership between China and the UAE in 2012 which was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership level in 2018 based on their trust and common global goals. Chinese government and the UAE Emirates are brought together by many common interests, such as achieving prosperity and stability, sustainable development, growth, as well as establishing bilateral relations based on the traditional values of peace, tolerance, dialogue, and openness, to establish security and stability, promote cooperation with the international community, and match to the principles of equality, understanding, and mutual respect, in light of current global developments (Wam, 2019).

2. The UAE is major China's trade gateway to the Middle East and Africa. More than 70 percent of China's goods and exports to the Persian Gulf, Africa and West Asia go through this emirate.

3. The UAE is home to the largest Chinese community; the Chinese community living in the UAE, numbering nearly 300,000, is the largest Chinese expat community in the Middle East. Over 4,000 Chinese companies, 300 trade agencies, 5,000 trademarks, and 15 corporations are operating on the Emirati stock markets, and 817 Chinese investors are active on the Abu Dhabi and Dubai stock markets, with a turnover of UAE 900 million dirhams. This in addition is large Chinese investments in the UAE (Al Jaber, 2019). It is said that over 100 schools in the UAE will soon offer Mandarin (Al Jaber, 2019).

4. Energy cooperation is another aspect of China and the UAE strategic relations. In other words, another example of the strategic transformation in the China-UAE relationship is the growing energy cooperation

between the two nations.

5. The closer strategic ties between China and the UAE have developed in the framework of China's inclusive Belt and Road Initiative, a strategy that considers the UAE a key Middle Eastern link to an increasingly influential trading bloc (Fulton, 2019b). By building relationships with Persian Gulf societies, such as the UAE through the Belt and Road mechanism of investment in infrastructure and logistics, China hopes to solidify its continuing share in the spoils of this oil-rich region.

In view of China's new "Silk Road" initiative, such eminent relations have prompted Beijing to view the UAE as a strategic partner in an international project. Indeed, the UAE has become a significant pivot in China's maritime "Silk Road" initiative, something that further strengthens the UAE's location and its unique position on the world map and brings greater economic and development gains to the Emirati nation.

6. Cooperation between China and the UAE in the framework of fighting against common disease—corona virus. After the appearance of COVID-19, there has been a good cooperation between the two governments particularly in developing the vaccine. From mid-July 2020, Sinopharm's China National Biotec Group (CNBG) and Abu Dhabi-based artificial intelligence and cloud computing company Group 42 (G42) as a partnership started working on the development of the vaccine (Barrington & Cornwell, 2020). The result of such collaboration for developing the vaccine was satisfactory. On November 3, 2020, the Prime Minister of the UAE Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum received a COVID-19 vaccine.

The friendship between the two countries was consolidated after the visit of President Xi to the UAE in July 2018, when their strategic partnership was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership, based on their mutual interests. Accordingly the Chinese government and the UAE government agreed to continue their cooperation, focusing mutual interests, both sides global position, trade and finance, energy, security, military and defence, cultural integration and BRI projects. The two sides affirms their commitment to continuing their efforts to strengthen joint cooperation in all domains under the joint comprehensive strategic partnership and the special friendship (Bashir, 2019).

China Relations With Kuwait

Among the GCC countries, Kuwait has the longest relationship with China. In 1971, Kuwait became the first Persian Gulf state officially to recognize Chinese Communist government. Accordingly, the diplomatic relations between the two countries established in the year 1971. This earned the emirate much goodwill with the post-1949 political order in Beijing. Likewise, the Chinese government came to the defense of Kuwaiti sovereignty at the outset of Iraq's 1990 invasion. However, it should be noted that China and Kuwait direct civil trade goes back to 1955 and investments and trade between the two countries have grown over the years (Maromore, 2018). For years, there has been a growing understanding among Kuwaiti officials, businessmen, and intellectuals of the need to look towards China to achieve greater diversification in global trade relationships and take advantage of all benefits that come with deepening cooperation with Beijing, particularly as China continues to ascend geopolitically in the Persian Gulf and across the world. As China's "Go Outward" and Kuwait's "Look East" foreign policies continue to result in the deepening of Sino-Kuwaiti ties, there is every reason to conclude that bilateral relations will strengthen across a host of domains from investment to strategic relationship, to counter-terrorism and energy to tourism in the coming years (Cafiero, 2018).

Politically, Kuwait has a long tradition of playing an effective mediating role in disputes throughout the Arab world, including both civil wars (Lebanon, Yemen, etc.) and between different states/groups

(Egypt-Libya; Oman-South Yemen; Bahrain-Qatar; Jordan-Palestinian Liberation Organization, etc.) (Zayat, 2019). Today, Kuwaiti Sultanate stands out among Arab nations as a uniquely diplomatic state. Kuwait, for example, hosted peace talks concerning Yemen, bringing Houthi representatives to Kuwait City in 2016. The Kingdom reached out to Tehran in early 2017, and the Kuwait emir engaged in shuttle diplomacy amid the post-June 2017 Qatar crisis (Al-Arabiya, 2017).

These actions illustrate the wealthy Arab country's sustained emphasis on diplomacy in its foreign policy, which marks a crucial contrast to Saudi Arabia and the UAE's more militarized approaches to regional crises. Accordingly, the Chinese administration is willing to strengthen its strategic relations with this Arab state in the Persian Gulf region. Consequently, as President Xi Jinping has stated China and Kuwait have remained "tried and true friends" since diplomatic relations between the two states were established in 1971 (Cafiero, 2018).

The friendly cooperative relations between the two countries in the fields of politics, economy, culture, and military have ever since gained a steady development. China views Kuwait as a key partner to cooperate under the Belt and Road Initiative and maintain regional peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region, said Xi, calling on both sides to deepen political mutual trust and firmly support each other's core interests (Xinhua, 2018a).

Sino-Kuwait multidimensional ties are focused on the following issues:

1. Energy is one of the major areas in which Kuwait and China are set to deepen their partnership and bring bilateral cooperation to new heights (Albawaba, 2018).

2. The long-term vision of China, its role and importance, coupled with the need to achieve strategic partnerships, attained a long and satisfying path in bringing together giant projects in the framework of bilateral cooperation with Kuwait. Some expert Kuwaiti economists affirmed the signing of several fundamental agreements between Kuwait and China ensures and strengthens the institutional mechanisms on an economic basis (Al-Awandhi & Al-Ghanim, 2018).

In fact, the Chinese and Kuwaiti bilateral cooperation is a good example of the distinguished bilateral ties based on strategic partnership, which strongly points to a promising future in the framework of understanding attitudes and directions.

3. The most important strategic relations between China and Kuwait is formed through the Chinese BRI. In fact, as the first Arab state to partner with BRI, Kuwait is set to play an increasingly important role in China's grand vision for the Middle East. As the wealthy Arabian kingdom, Kuwait positions itself as a significant Arab partner to Beijing's Belt and Road strategy.

- A. As Kuwait's Vision 2035 is planned to transform Kuwait into a global financial and trade hub in 2035, the sultanate views the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative as complimenting its own grandiose plans for the future. Kuwait's Vision 2035, also known as the "New Kuwait", which aims to end the country's extreme economic dependence on its hydrocarbon sector, is about diversifying Kuwait's economy and establishing the emirate as a hub for commerce, culture, logistics, finance, tourism, and other sectors in the northern Persian Gulf.

- B. "Silk City", a key pillar of Kuwait's Vision 2035 which has been developing since 2014, is a plan to establish a new megacity to be integrated into the Boubyan island to form a state-of-the-art port and economic zone. Kuwait's vision to have "Silk City" put the sultanate further on the geopolitical map as a major commercial hub will require significant Chinese/Asian investment, a potential that Kuwaiti and Chinese officials have addressed (Cafiero, 2018).

- C. Chinese maritime Silk Road project, extending across the Indian Ocean, to Africa and up through the

dual channels of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, represents an enormous opportunity which can help reinvigorate Kuwait's position in regional and global supply chains and enhance its international significance and appeal (Fowdy, 2018).

It is said that the project of reviving the Silk Road will restore Kuwait to its leading role in the commercial and economic fields within the region, especially as it enjoys a crucial geopolitical location. The Chinese and Kuwaitis have found a consensus between the Kuwait's Vision 2035 and China's BRI to revive the Silk Road, in addition to creating a vibrant trade region to serve other countries via land and sea, which will contribute to prosperity of the global economy. The Chinese administration has displayed full and clear cooperation on ways to benefit from the Kuwaiti islands and economic feasibility of Kuwait and the region.

Board Chairman of Global Foundations Corporation Meshari Al-Marshad has stressed that the economic belt initiative (of the Land Silk Road and Sea Silk Road) is in line with the vision of Kuwait 2035, to transform Kuwait into a global financial and trade hub in future, and reflecting new and ambitious prospects for reviving the historic Silk Road (Al-Awandhi & Al-Ghanim, 2018).

4. In the age of COVID-19, China dispatched a medical expert team to aid Kuwait's COVID-19 response efforts and invited officials and medical experts of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Health and the Kuwaiti Army to attend several video conferences held by the Chinese side to discuss COVID-19 response and exchange experience. Chinese companies and the Chinese community in Kuwait actively donated medical supplies to our Kuwaiti friends.

Despite difficulties, some Chinese companies even handed over their staff quarters to the Kuwaiti side to be transformed into quarantine sites in order to support Kuwait's fight against COVID-19. All these instances speak volumes about the determination of our two countries and peoples to uphold the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind and work for hand in hand to combat the epidemic.

These impressive examples, embodying the mutual support between China and Kuwait during the COVID-19 epidemic, have demonstrated once again that the profound chin-Kuwait friendship has withstood the test of time and will be always full of vitality (Belt and Road News, 2020).

China and Oman Relations

The traditional relations between China and Oman have a history of more than 1,200 years. The ancient Silk Route has played a crucial role in building the strong ties between the two nations, which not only was the path of merchants, but also philosophers, artists, architects, and others. There was a massive exchange of knowledge, besides trade. Sino-Omani diplomatic relations in modern time established in May 1978 and bilateral relations between the two countries have developed since then.

By the early 1980s, Beijing began to view Oman not only in terms of its strategic significance but also as a country with abundant oil resources. The need to secure long-term energy supplies led the Chinese government to revamp its foreign policy towards the region, and in 1983, Oman became the first Arab nation to export oil to China (Rakhmat, 2014).

Oman is also attractive to China's government for its consumer market and its lucrative investment opportunities. Besides Oman's free trade zones, its relatively flexible investment policies and its strategic and geopolitical position appeal to Chinese investors. Moreover, ties with Muscat give Beijing a platform from which it can extend its influence in the wider Middle East. China's unprecedented economic growth has made trade with the Persian Gulf countries including Oman central to its global policy. Accordingly, Beijing has

plans to boost its investment in the region with the recent signing of the 2014-2017 China-GCC Strategic Action Plan, which Omani Sultanate fully supports (Rakhmat, 2014).

China strategic ties with Omani Kingdom have been formed around the following issues:

1. Energy field is a crucial area in Chinese-Omani strategic relations. As mentioned, Oman was the first Arab country to export oil to China. Over the years, energy cooperation has been the primary axis around which Sino-Omani relations revolve. Crude oil accounted for 92.4% of Oman's total exports to China in 2018. Accordingly, China is the world's largest consumer for Oman's oil, accounting for more than half of its petroleum exports. Between 2000 and 2017, China's share of Oman's crude oil exports increased from 35.2% to 82.5% (Mogielnicki, 2020).

Although, the oil business unquestionably dominates China-Oman ties, but relations between the two nations have expanded well beyond hydrocarbons.

2. China and Oman have established a strategic partnership between the two countries on May 2018. In the related document in May 2018, it was stressed that based on the demands of developing China-Oman relations and the common will to enhance the level of their ties, the two heads of state decided to establish a strategic partnership between the two countries (Xinhua, 2018b).

3. Cooperation between Muscat and Beijing also focused on security. When warships of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) deployed to the Gulf of Aden at the end of 2008, the Omani port of Salalah became the expeditionary force's primary logistical facility. Salalah proved to be ideally situated as PLAN units carried out joint exercises in the fall of 2014, first with Iran and then with Tanzania (Lawson, 2018).

4. The trade between the two countries has a strong complementarity and a promising growth. China has always been Oman's largest trading partner in recent years. From January to June 2020, the trade volume between China and Oman is USD 9.15 billion of which China's exports are USD 1.27 billion and imports are USD 7.88 billion (Chanda, 2020).

5. The Belt and Road Initiative opens up new opportunities not only for economic cooperation, but also people-to-people exchange of the two countries (Al Abri, 2019). This is a new platform for practical cooperation between China and Oman in various fields. As Oman situated closer to East Africa, India, Iran, Pakistan, Yemen, and the greater Indian Ocean region than other GCC states, it will be of immense strategic value to the Chinese BRI plans. The Omani Sultanate is positioned to play a significant role in China's efforts to revive ancient maritime trade routes in lands which Oman once ruled as the center of an Indian Ocean empire encompassing countries linked to China via BRI. Within this context, Muscat has fully embraced BRI. Moreover, as a stable country, Oman's cohesion and security can only raise Beijing's interest in the sultanate (Cafiero & Wagner, 2017). More importantly, Chinese BRI and Oman's 2040 Vision have a high degree of compatibility.

6. As for the pandemic, China has played an important role in helping Oman tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. In the initial months, several flights from Oman brought crucial medical supplies from China.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in Oman in March, China has actively shared scientific research data and pandemic prevention experience with Oman, invited Omani experts to participate in medical webinars, and actively supported Oman's pandemic prevention work. In early June 2020 a large number of anti-pandemic materials including the testing kits, masks and protective clothing donated by the Chinese government arrived in Oman. (Chanda, 2020)

China and Qatar Relationships

Diplomatic relations between China and Qatar are formed in July 1988. Qatar is currently a strategic ally

of China, with relationship between the two countries growing stronger.

Generally, Sino-Qatari relations have experienced three main stages: the first from July 1988 beginning of diplomatic relations between the two nations until 1999. The two countries in the first stage tried to figure out cooperation potential and opportunities in different fields, especially energy and petrochemicals and specialized delegations in energy and trade visited each country. The second phase was inaugurated by visit of Qatar's emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani to China with a new concept toward Asia. The visit laid a strong foundation for bilateral relations whereas the two countries signed many agreements covering politico-economic, cultural and other kinds of cooperation. The third stage, which can be viewed as the most significant phase in history of bilateral ties, began in November 2014, when Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani visited China. The bilateral relations thus entered a new era embarking on strategic partnership in a joint declaration amidst domestic, regional, and global attention.

After the 2014 diplomatic rift, which Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt briefly withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar over its Arab Spring policies, Doha has since pursued a vigorous policy of diversified economic and diplomatic relations, strategically hedging against future tensions from its larger and powerful Arab neighbouring countries (Hauslohne, 2014). Accordingly, Qatar has attempted to expand its bilateral relations with China in different fields:

1. In 2014, during President Xi Jinping's visit to Qatar, the two countries upgraded their relationship to strategic partner, a status that recognized Qatar's role not only as an economic partner but also as a security partner. In his speech at the signing of the joint statement on the establishment of the relationship, Xi Jinping stressed the opportunities to improve military exchanges and work together to combat terrorism (Wood, 2017). China's measures to formalise strategic partnerships with Qatar includes seven major areas for cooperation: policy coordination, connectivity, trade and investments, energy cooperation, financial cooperation, military ties, tourism and cultural ties (Chaziza, 2020b).

2. Security cooperation is one significant aspect of China-Qatar strategic relations. In a summit on September 2017, China and Qatar formally agreed to cooperate in counter-terrorism measures. Accordingly, Chinese government and Qatari kingdom signed a deal that formalized joint efforts between Doha and Beijing to curb funding to terrorist groups, and increased Qatar-China coordination against terrorism in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region. China's decision to increase its security partnership with Qatar can be explained by four strategic factors:

A. China views Qatar as a lucrative destination for military technology exports. As China is a major importer of Qatari liquefied natural gas (LNG), Beijing is keen to improve its balance of trade with Doha through military technology sales.

B. China possesses normative solidarity with Qatar in the security sphere, as Qatar is the Arab country that is most willing to negotiate with Islamist non-state actors without preconditions. As China believes that promoting all-inclusive diplomatic dialogue helps resolve international security crises. Beijing normally views Qatar as a highly useful partner in the Arab world.

C. The Chinese government believes that enhancing counterterrorism cooperation with Qatar will cause Doha to prevent its Islamist allies from threatening the security of China's Muslim majority Xinjiang province.

China's strengthened security partnership with Qatar bolsters its case to act as a mediator in the rapidly intensifying GCC security crisis. China's official commitment to supporting the cohesion of the GCC has been

a central tenet of Beijing's Middle East strategy since Wen Jiabao's 2012 visit to Qatar (Ramani, 2017).

One should bear in mind while China's economic and security links with Qatar remain significantly smaller than those with Saudi Arabia, Beijing's decision to strengthen its security ties with Doha can be explained by normative synergies, threat containment desires, and China's growing interest in extra-regional diplomacy (Ramani, 2017; Iqtait, 2018).

3. China has established a renminbi clearing center in Qatar in April 2015. The centre is thought to be beneficial for facilitating cross-regional trade between the Persian Gulf and Asia, as cross-border trade and investment in renminbi have experienced recent development. It is the first center in the Middle East to offer local financial institutions access to Chinese renminbi and foreign exchange markets. It also aims to facilitate greater cross-border use of the RMB and provide more opportunities to expand trade. In fact, establishing an onshore center providing access to RMB-based financial products and exchanges in Qatari Emirate strengthens financial relations between Beijing and the MENA region and fosters the widespread use of the renminbi in the region, enabling China to do business with the region on its own terms (Rakhmat, 2019).

Qatar can also benefit from the internationalization of the RMB, strengthening links that already exist with China. This latest initiative will also bolster Doha as a regional and international financial center. Qatar has benefited from Asian economic growth; the clearing center will strengthen that link. China itself is an emerging trading partner of Qatar, which makes it quite reasonable for the latter to diversify part of its large pool of foreign reserves away from US dollars. The center will also make new financial products, denominated in RMB, available to Qatari and the Persian Gulf investors.

The establishment of the renminbi clearing center in Doha must also be viewed in a geopolitical context. It is another important step for China in creating a new multi-polar international order, with an increasing concentration on Asia and international value chains emerging from the Silk Road Economic Belt. The internationalization of the RMB is an important element in the financial infrastructure for Asian capital markets. With the center initiative, Qatar and other countries in the Middle East are invited to participate in establishing the new global economic order and play their own role in the Silk Road initiatives (Rakhmat, 2015).

4. As Qatar has enormous natural gas sources, it is the second-largest natural gas provider to China, after Australia, supplying more than 20% of its needs. Qatar Petroleum, the country's state-owned oil and gas company, has joint ventures with several Chinese counterparts, including exploration, production, and refining projects in Qatar and China (Iqtait, 2018). The central theme of cooperation between the two nations lies in the energy sector; here the strategic significance of Qatar to China's security will be shaped by Qatar's uninterrupted and expanding supply of natural gas to fuel China's rising demand for energy.

In addition to energy, trade volume between China and Qatar has been increasing in recent years, reaching USD 11 billion in 2019.

5. Strategic relations in the framework of the Chinese BRI; joint efforts for cooperation in promoting the Belt and Road program are made by Qatar foreign ministry and National Development and Reform Commission in China (Chaziza, 2020b). Regarding China-Qatar ties in the framework of the BRI in a High-level Video Conference on Belt and Road International Cooperation in June 30, 2020, Chinese Ambassador to Qatar, Zhou Jian, stressed that the Chinese administration is keen to strengthen the integration of "Belt and Road" initiative with the Qatar's "2030 National Vision" strategy, forging a "four-pillar" of China-Qatar pragmatic cooperation featuring energy, infrastructure, financial investment, and high-tech. He

emphasized that the BRI “will deepen our energy cooperation and expand LNG trade, taking full advantages of the complementarities in supply and demand between our two countries, and explore further cooperation in both the upstream and downstream field of the entire industry chain” (The Peninsula, 2020).

6. In the age of COVID-19, both Chinese and Qatari governments have trusted and supported each other and worked together in combating the virus. The pandemic has given prominence to the “contactless economy”, expanding space for China-Qatar cooperation in the new industries and business formats. China Ambassador to Qatar, Zhou Jian in September 2020 in Doha highlighted Beijing firmly believes that collective fight against the pandemic will deepen the friendship between China and Qatar, and our bilateral cooperation will embrace brighter prospects (Aguilar, 2020).

The Qatari-Chinese relationship is expected to continue to deepen, strengthened by a complex network of interdependence based on energy, investments, and security cooperation. It is part of Qatar’s policy of strategic hedging, fostering relations with a diverse list of allies outside of the increasingly fractured GCC (Iqtait, 2018).

Sino-Bahraini Relations

A tiny sultanate of Bahrain is located in the heart of the Persian Gulf and this has made it attractive to China global policy. As the Persian Gulf region becomes increasingly important for Beijing, the Chinese are trying to strengthen their relationship with Bahrain. China and Bahrain established their official relations in 1989. The relations have been built mostly on economic foundations, but as they become increasingly multifaceted, there is a corresponding growth of strategic considerations. Close scrutiny shows that Beijing’s friendly cooperative relations with Manama are based on mutual complementary commercial interests (integration of the BRI framework and BEV 2030) and Bahrain’s strategic geographical location.

As China’s relationship with the Persian Gulf countries revolves around energy demand and the new Silk Road strategy, Bahraini and Chinese economic interests and geopolitical stakes converge across this new strategy. The Bahraini Kingdom is ideally positioned to play a vital role in China’s BRI.

Chinese strategic relationships with Qatar are generally focused on the following fields:

1. Bahrain has strategic geopolitical value for Chinese new Silk Road strategy in comparison to other GCC states;

A. Bahrain is a gateway to the Persian Gulf and one of the key Persian Gulf countries along the new Silk Road route, enabling it to serve as a transportation hub for the region (Olimat, 2016). The country is surrounded by several of the Middle East’s large oil fields and commands a strategic position amid the Persian Gulf’s shipping lanes, which is the access route for much of the Western world’s oil to the open ocean. Bahrain stands at the crossroads of China’s new Silk Road strategy; an important nexus for trade, investment, science, and cultural exchanges between the Arab nations and Chinese and the greater Asian, African, and European worlds.

B. The emirate benefits from a strategic geopolitical position on the crossroads of African, Asian, and European markets at the heart of the GCC market, which is currently valued at approximately USD 2.2 trillion. China has already become the GCC region’s largest trading partner; bilateral trade now exceeds USD 260 billion per year, and is projected to reach USD 350 billion in the next decade (Chaziza, 2020c).

C. The kingdom, known as “the Pearl of the Persian Gulf”, is an important port on the ancient maritime Silk Road. The relationship is deeply rooted in shared history, geography, culture, and economic exchanges.

D. Bahrain is also one of the modern and dynamic countries within the top-ranking business environment in the Middle East region (al-Mukharriq, 2018). Its open and liberal lifestyle, unique market access, world-class

regulatory environment, and highly competitive taxation system, combined with the lowest operating costs in the region, high quality of life, and a technologically literate population make the Kingdom an ideal access point for Chinese companies to this USD 1.5 trillion GCC market (Chaziza, 2020c). For Chinese investors seeking business opportunities in the Persian Gulf and Africa, Bahrain can be a commercial hub of operations. Bahrain ranks first among the Persian Gulf states in Doing Business 2020, including with the highest number of regulatory reforms. The low cost of doing business in Bahrain is a significant incentive for Chinese and foreign investors seeking a competitive advantage and gateway to large regional markets (World Bank Group, 2019).

E. Beijing cooperative relations with Manama include four major areas for collaboration under the Chinese BRI: policy coordination, connectivity, trade and investments, and people-to-people bond. Inevitably, each partner addresses the new Silk Road framework through its own perspective and the consequences for its own national interests and international status. Therefore, in realizing the shared vision, the two countries have very different attitudes (Chaziza, 2020c). Nonetheless, Bahrain Economic Vision (BEV) 2030 and the BRI have converged on a joint economic development path, and their synergetic strategy will bring new opportunities for both partners. In July 2018, Bahrain and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to develop the Belt and Road project jointly. It seems under this big picture, the comprehensive cooperation between Beijing and Manama is bound to face great and historical opportunity, especially with the integration and implementation of the BRI and BEV 2030 (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Bahrain, 2016).

2. Bahrain also has a unique role as the leading financial hub in the Middle East, for both conventional and Islamic banking. Most of the world's largest banks have operations in Bahrain from which China can do business throughout the Middle East and African region, and indeed, the rest of the world. Bahrain is the region's banking center because of its strategic location, its highly qualified labor force, its excellent communications, and not least, its robust regulatory system and reliable Central Bank. In support of the BRI projects, the Bahrain's financial institutions are well situated and capable of working with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the New Silk Road Fund, and the New Development Bank (Alabdulla, 2019).

Bahrain could potentially serve as a hub for economic expansion in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia.

3. Although Bahrain has fewer natural resources than other Persian Gulf states, Manama offers China a way to access untapped consumer markets for its exports, and lucrative investment opportunities. Bahrain also could potentially serve as a regional hub for economic expansion in the Middle East and a logistics center for the growing Sino-GCC trade flows (Chaziza, 2020c).

4. China is working with the Bahraini government to help Manama to fight against COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinopharm, which is in Phase III trials, in addition to UAE is also with Bahrain. Phase III trials are currently underway in Bahrain (Al-Monitor, 2020).

As the Persian Gulf region becomes increasingly essential for Chinese new Silk Road strategy, China is expected to strengthen its friendly cooperative relations with Bahrain and other local governments in the coming years.

Conclusion

As the Persian Gulf is one of the most crucial regions in the international system, it attracts the global powers attentions. Each power has sought to maximize its presence in this region during the different periods.

In the post-Cold War era, the Persian Gulf has played an essential role in the international arena. The region has been in the center of the United States, European powers, Russia and the Asian emerging powers, namely, China and India.

In the new era, the promise of major geopolitical shifts in the global system has led China to play a more influential role in the Persian Gulf. The relationship between China and GCC is considered an important component in the multidimensional relationship between Beijing and the Persian Gulf. The vast economic growth in China makes the demand of energy increased while the GCC societies need a stable energy market for their economic development, since energy is their major industry. Cooperation in the field of energy becomes the core of bilateral ties cooperation, which is reflected in trade, investment and construction projects. Yet, China-GCC relations have moved far beyond the hydrocarbon sector. Among the GCC countries Saudi Arabia due to its large energy and economic capacity plays more important role in Sino-GCC relationship. The UAE as a major China's trade gateway to the Middle East and Africa and as a home to the largest Chinese community, Chinese people and companies has a especial position in China Persian Gulf strategy. Among the GCC countries, Kuwait has the longest relationship with China. Beijing views Kuwait as a key partner to cooperate under the Belt and Road Initiative and maintain regional peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region. The Omani Sultanate due to its free trade zones, its relatively flexible investment policies and its strategic and geopolitical position is situated in the center of Chinese regional policy. China and Qatar relationship is deepened, and strengthened by a complex network of interdependence based on energy, finance investments, and security cooperation. The establishment of the renminbi clearing center in Qatar is viewed in a geopolitical context which is an important step for China in creating a new multi-polar international order.

Bahrain is situated in a strategic geopolitical position on the crossroads of African, Asian, and European markets at the heart of the GCC market. In addition, Bahrain also has a unique role as the leading financial hub in the Middle East. These have led China to strengthen its ties with this emirate.

The GCC countries have become a key area to implement China's Persian Gulf policy. Energy, trade, finance, security, and relatively politics have great role in Sino-GCC relations. In recent years, the BRI has become the main focus of strategic and economic involvement between China and Persian Gulf Monarchies. It has deepened the relationship between the two sides and has effectively contributed to the Chinese "Go Global" Strategy. In 2020, in the age of COVID-19, China and GCC countries have worked together in the framework of the "Health Silk Road", encompassing cooperation in combating the virus as a common enemy.

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