



University of Dundee

China's Energy Diplomacy Towards the Middle East in the BRI Era

Liao, Janet Xuanli

Published in:

Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa

DOI:

[10.4324/9781003048404-4](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003048404-4)

Publication date:

2023

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Liao, J. X. (2023). China's Energy Diplomacy Towards the Middle East in the BRI Era: Energy Security Versus Geopolitics. In Y. H. Zoubir (Ed.), *Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa* (1 ed., Vol. 1, pp. 25-39). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003048404-4>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

2. China's Energy Diplomacy towards the Middle East in the BRI Era: Energy Security Versus Geopolitics

Janet Xuanli Liao

Abstract

China's energy diplomacy towards the Middle East was started from the mid-1990s, after the country became a net oil importer in 1993. Driven by the concern of stable oil supply at the time, Beijing's dealing with the region was to avoid taking side from the complex power struggles, and to rely on the United States to ensure regional stability. However, following China's growing potential, especially with the launch of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) since 2013, Beijing's engagements with the Middle East have not only gone beyond traditional fuel of oil and gas into cleaner energy sectors, its energy diplomacy has also been embedded with geopolitical features. The chapter has selected two regional powers – Saudi Arabia and Iran – as case-studies to show the changes and the rationale of Beijing's energy diplomacy prior and under the BRI era. It attempts to answer two main questions: what are the key factors behind the changes of China's energy diplomacy towards the Middle East? And, what are the likely implications of Beijing's new approach on regional stability of the Persian Gulf and its BRI? The analysis will look into the interactions between China's energy diplomacy, Sino-US competitions and domestic politics of the chosen countries, in order to identify the key variables behind China's dealing with these countries, and to predict the trend of China's dealing with the Middle East as well as the geopolitical implications.

1. Introduction

China's energy diplomacy towards the Middle East was started from the mid-1990s, after the country became a net oil importer in 1993. Driven by the concern over security of oil supply, Beijing's strategy towards the region was once to avoid taking side from the complex power struggles, but to rely on the United States to ensure regional stability (Andrews-Speed et al, 2002). Following China's growing potential and the launch of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) since 2013, however, its engagements with the Middle East have shown notable changes over the past decade. Coupled with policy changes of the United States and the major powers in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, China's energy diplomacy has become more sophisticated and impactful.

The questions to be addressed by this article are two-fold: what has been changed in China's energy diplomacy towards the Middle East under the BRI era? And, what are the likely implications of Beijing's new strategy on power balance and regional stability of the Middle East? Two regional powers – Saudi Arabia and Iran – will be taken as case-studies to show China's changing position over the past decade. The selection of the cases was partially based on their significance in China's energy diplomacy in the region, and it was also due to the delicate relationships between the two powers and with the United States. In Garlick and Havlova's (2020, 4) words, Beijing "aims to establish and maintain ties with Iran, but not at the expense of damaging its relations with US-backed Saudi Arabia".

The discussion below comprises of four sections. Section two reviews China's energy diplomacy towards the Middle East over the past decade, to present the context of the later analysis. It aims to show the remaining significance of the Middle East oil in China's energy security agenda but will also portray China's growing political influence associated with the BRI. The two sections followed will investigate, respectively, China's energy diplomacy towards Saudi Arabia and Iran, under the BRI era, to show the changing features in Beijing's new approach towards the Gulf region. The final part is the conclusion.

2. Middle East and China's Oil Supply: from the 1990s to the "BRI" Era

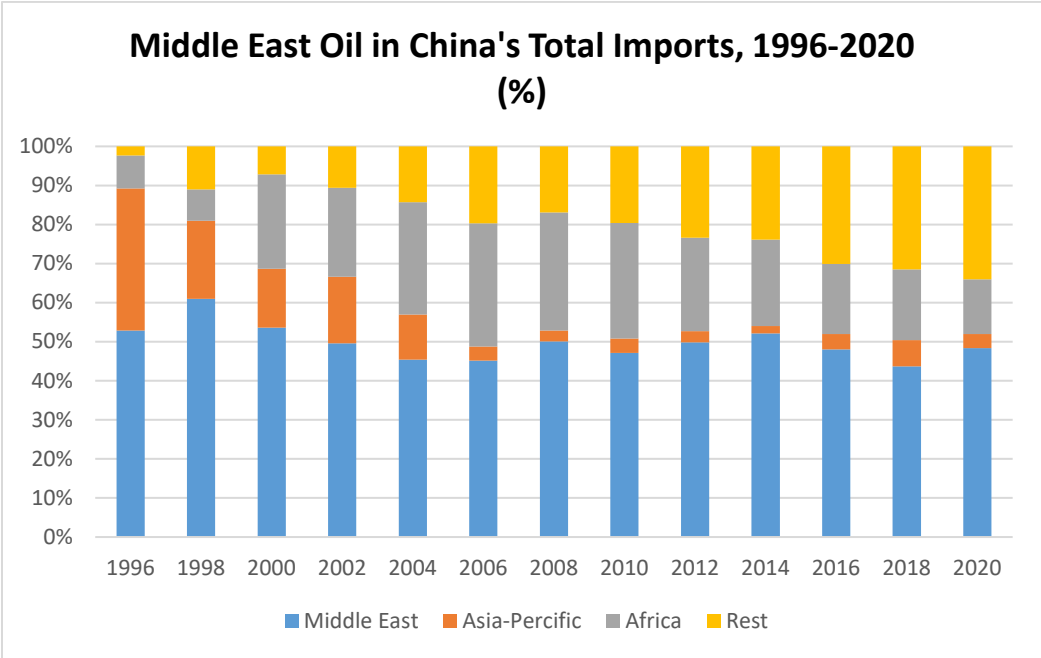
Compared with the other regions China sought for oil supplies from the mid 1990s, such as the Southeast Asia, Russia and Central Asia, the Middle East was distant geographically and strange in cultural and religious terms, and therefore, had long been peripheral to China's overall map of interests. In the early 1970s, China formed diplomatic ties with a few Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, but not until Beginning of 1992, did China establish diplomatic relations with all the Middle Eastern countries. Underpinned by the strategy to "get along with everyone", China's dealing with the region at the initial stage was focused on economic and energy cooperation, while the United States was expected to take responsibility for regional order and stability (Zhang, 1999; Chen, 2018, 18-19; Guzansky and Lavi, 2020). But China's growing economic strength since the early 1990s made its energy engagements with the Middle East alarming to many, over its likelihood to challenge the US position as the "principal external security guarantor of the region" (Andrews-Speed et al, 2002, 65 & 90), long before it stretched political mussels.

Following the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 – the Silk Road Economic Belt and the and the New Maritime Silk Road – China’s potential to contest the US dominance in the Middle East seems to have become more a reality than a theoretical hypothesis. As China’s most ambitious foreign policy scheme, the BRI was aimed to link China to Central and South Asia and onward to Europe via land and maritime connections, respectively. It was estimated that over \$1 trillion of investment would be made via BRI on hundreds of infrastructure projects in more than 60 countries (Chatzky and McBride, 2020). Sitting at the juncture of Asia, Africa, and Europe, the Middle East occupies an unique position at the intersection of the BRI, especially with some vital maritime chokepoints, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Bab al-Mandab, and the Suez Canal. To facilitate the success of the BRI and further ensure its oil supply, Beijing has paid greater attention to the Middle East going beyond energy supply. Between 2013 and 2019, China made \$93.3 billion (bn) investments in the region mostly in the energy sector (\$52.8bn), followed by transport (\$18.6bn), real estate (\$18.4bn), and utility (3.5bn) (Chaziza, 2020a). To date, China has surpassed the United States to be the top trading partner in the Middle East, and is also the largest external source of direct foreign investment (Ghasseminejad, 2021).

For China, the Middle East remains a vital player in oil provision: it was Beijing’s top oil supplier in 1996 and has remained so 25 years later. During this period, China’s GDP has grown 18 times from \$863.75 bn in 1996 to \$15.42 trillion in 2020 (*Trading Economics* 2021; *Xinhua* 2021), while its oil imports have increased nearly 24 times, from 22.62 million tonnes (mts) to 540mts (Tian, 1997, 8; V boshi619, 2021). Holding 48 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves

and 32 percent of the total oil output, the Middle East has supplied around 50% of China’s total crude imports and the highest reached over 60%, as indicated in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1

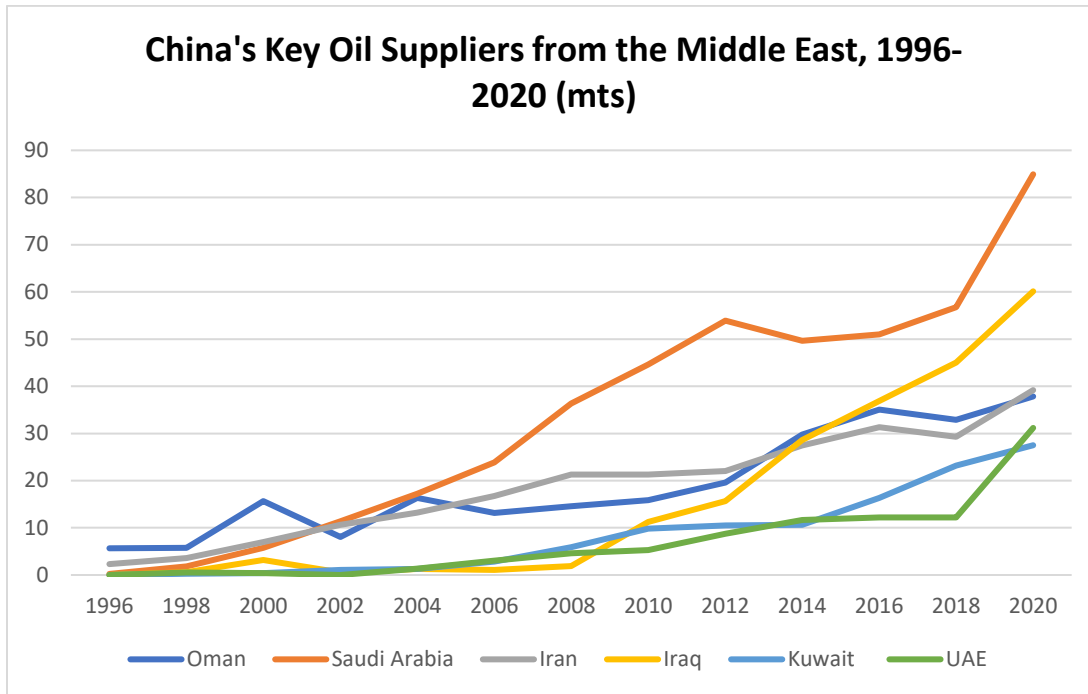


Sources: the figures for 1996 – 2016 were adapted from Tian, 1997, 2001, 2007, 2013 and 2018; those for 2018 and 2020 were adapted from Kunlun Consultancy, 2019 and V boshi619, 2021, respectively.

The key suppliers from the region varied to a certain extent, as shown in Figure 2.2. Saudi Arabia, for instance, supplied little crude oil to China initially but became its top supplier from 2002 and has remained so ever since. Oman used to be China’s top supplier but lost such a position to Saudi Arabia pretty soon, and stayed as secondary supplier, together with Iran and, more recently, Iraq. In the old days, Beijing aimed to separate politics and business for the security of oil supply, so the significance of the Gulf states was largely based on their capacity of oil supplies. Since the BRI era, Beijing has more often combined energy and politics in its dealing with the Middle East countries, but has still tried to work with all the countries without

taking a side to avoid heavy involvement in regional disputes (Sun and Wang, 2020). Beijing has also chosen two regional giants Saudi Arabia and Iran as strategic partners, despite the varieties in their capacity of oil provision and political ambitions.

Figure 2.2



Sources: the figures for 1996 – 2016 were adapted from Tian, 1997, 2001, 2007, 2013 and 2018; those for 2018 and 2020 were adapted from Kunlun Consultancy, 2019 and V boshi619, 2021, respectively.

On 19 -23 January 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping paid his first state visit to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran. Xi emphasized the need to further strengthen Sino-Arab relations and signed a comprehensive strategic partnership with the two regional rivalries, Saudi Arabia and Iran, in the same week (Perlez, 2016; Fulton, 2000a). Prior to President Xi’s departure, the Chinese government issued its first “Arab Policy Paper”, on 13 January, outlining Beijing’s broad policy goals toward the region. These goals included the so-called “1+2+3” formula, centring around

(1) energy cooperation as the core; (2) infrastructure, trade, and investment; and (3) high-tech fields like clean energy and aerospace. Other initiatives include concluding a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council and Chinese efforts to combat terrorism (Wille, 2016). In July 2018, President Xi again visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE), when the two sides signed 13 agreements and MoU relating to financial, business and trade issues, including an approval for the first Chinese state-owned financial services firm to set up in Abu Dhabi Global Market, a financial centre. The Abu Dhabi National Oil Company and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) also agreed to explore joint business opportunities within the country (Carvalho, 2018).

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing has stepped up vaccine diplomacy to its Middle East partners. On 9 December 2020, UAE became the first country in the world to approve a vaccine developed by China National Pharmaceutical Group Corporation (Sinopharm). Bahrain followed the suit and approved the vaccine on 13 December. In May 2020, Dubai and Huawei announced an initiative to expand cooperation in artificial intelligence and digital transformation (Fulton, 2020a). China has also endorsed the low-carbon initiatives of the Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia's "2030 vision", though its investment in the renewable sector is still limited.

3. China's Energy Diplomacy Towards Saudi Arabia

Oil Trade Involving Little Politics: the 1990s - 2014

Saudi Arabia has the world's second largest oil reserves and is also a strong economic and political power in the Persian Gulf, but China did not establish diplomatic relationship with the Kingdom until July 1990. Prior to that Saudi was a strong opponent of communism and kept diplomatic relations with Taiwan, though unofficial ties were there after China's "Open Door" policy in 1979 (Al-tamimi, 2012, 4). Since China turned into a net oil importer in 1993, a more concrete relationship started to take shape bilaterally, though their oil trade did not progress as well as expected initially, as China had constrained refinery capacity in handling Saudi's "sour" crude. Thanks to the "strategic oil partnership" proposed by Chinese President Jiang Zemin, in his first state visit to Saudi Arabia in October 1999, the two sides signed a "Strategic Oil Cooperation agreement" and agreed to open domestic refinery sectors for each other's investment. As a result, three joint-venture refineries were built and became operational, between 2008 and 2014, in China's Qingdao (Sinopec and Aramco) and Fujian (Sinopec, Aramco and ExxonMobil), and in Saudi Yanbu (Sinopec and Aramco) (Liao, 2015, 96-98). In the meantime, the "Look East" policy adopted by the Saudi government in post "9.11" era also helped fortify the Sino-Saudi partnership, making Saudi Arabia as China's No. 1 crude supplier from 2002 (Al-tamimi, 2012, 3 & 5).

The bilateral energy cooperation was further enhanced by official visits of top leaders from both countries. In January 2006, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud visited China, the first foreign visit since his crown succession and the first visit by a Saudi monarch to the People's Republic since their diplomatic establishment in 1990. During his two-day visit, King Abdullah was well received by Chinese President Hu Jintao and other high-ranking leaders, and the two sides signed a series of agreements on economic, technical and energy cooperation, including a \$1.7 bn

investment by State-controlled Saudi Basic Industries Corp (SABIC) in an ethylene complex owned by the China Petroleum & Chemical Corp. (Sinopec) in Tianjin (*Xinhua*, 2006a; *Reuters*, 2008). Three months later in April 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao paid a three-day state visit to Riyadh on his five-nation tour. Hu was happy to see the smooth development of the bilateral ties, especially that Saudi Arabia already turned China's largest trading partner from the Middle East (*Xinhua*, 2006b).

In June 2008, coinciding with Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping's first official visit to Saudi Arabia, SABIC and Sinopec signed a deal in Riyadh to expand the earlier agreed investment from \$1.7bn to 4bn, making SABIC's first major investment in China more sophisticated, to cover the whole production of ethylene and all downstream products, instead of a partial involvement. This also helped release Sinopec's refining losses due to Chinese government's cap of domestic fuel prices, which did not match the rapid increase of international crude prices, from \$80 per barrel in 2006 to above \$130 per barrel in 2008. According to Zhang Xiaodong, a Middle East expert with China Academy of Social Sciences, "Having both oil trade ties and investment in oil-related businesses like this will be a solid partnership" (*Reuters*, 2008). On 14 January 2012, Saudi Aramco and Sinopec established a joint venture Yanbu Aramco Sinopec Refinery (Yasref), holding a 62.5% and a 37.5% share, respectively. Involving an investment of \$10bn, Yasref was Sinopec's first international downstream investment. The project had a designed capacity to process 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) of Arabian Heavy crude oil and producing high-quality transportation fuels (*HP*, 2016; Valori, 2016).

China and Saudi Arabia in the BRI Era

China's dealing with Saudi Arabia since the BRI era has involved more political elements, though oil trade still centres bilateral relationship. After the declined oil imports by the United States following the shale revolution, Saudi Arabia became increasingly relying on trade with China to compensate for the loss and to maintain its market share. In 2014, Saudi was already China's largest oil supplier whose crude accounted for 16 percent of China's oil imports. The record low oil prices in late 2014 deepened Saudi reliance on Chinese market even further, as it led the Kingdom to a deficit of over 360 billion riyals in 2015 (Wille, 2016). When Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud assumed power in January 2015, he decided to reform the Saudi economy by cooperating with non-OPEC countries via OPEC+ mechanism, listing Saudi Aramco at international stock markets, and developing renewable energy. He also focused on developing relations with the "key minority" countries globally and building semi-alliance regionally to contain Iran (Chen, 2020).

Against such a background, Chinese President Xi Jinping's tour visit to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran, on 19-23 January 2016, was viewed of strategic significance to those powers and for China's "Belt and Road Initiative". During Xi's visit, Beijing upgraded its ties with both Saudi Arabia and Iran to "comprehensive strategic partnership", despite their rivalries since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. As a matter of fact, the Saudi-Iran tensions were escalated on 2nd January 2016, when Iranian protesters stormed to Saudi embassy in Tehran over executions of a Shiite cleric on terrorism charges, which had broken the bilateral diplomatic relations. As President Xi stucked on his agenda of the visit, many was wondering whether Beijing would mediate the Saudi-Iranian tensions.

In contrast to its previous position of staying away from regional politics, Chinese Ambassador to Tehran Pang Sen explicitly stated that China would be willing to play a role in restoring peace and stability in the Middle East. According to Gordon Kwan, head of oil and gas research at Nomura, “China wants some reassurance that tensions in the Middle East will not continue to escalate, especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran” (*Tehran Times*, 2016; Wille, 2016). King Salman and President Xi also agreed that the two countries should cooperate under the BRI framework, and jointly inaugurated the new Yasref refinery. President Xi defined Yanbu as the regional point of arrival of the Silk Road and the axis of the new Saudi industrialization (Valori, 2016). Equally keen to help the Saudi regime move away from oil-centric economy, the China Nuclear Engineering Group Corp. (CNEC) agreed to conduct research on high-temperature gas-cooled (HTGR) nuclear reactor technology with the Saudi government, which would allow CNEC to export its HTGR nuclear technology to Saudi, and 16 nuclear power plants were expected to be constructed by 2032 (Lim, 2016).

On 15-18 March 2017, King Salman paid a state visit to China at President Xi’s invitation, after his tour to Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan. Faced with post-JCPOA Iran who held a more robust regional role on the one hand, and President Trump’s vague policy towards the Middle East on the other, Saudi Arabia had worries on both strategic and economic grounds. King Salman’s unprecedented long trip indicated how eager he wanted to build ties with new friends in order to rely less on Washington, yet building ties with Japan side by side with China also showed his intention to avoid over-reliance on Beijing as well (Malik, 2017). Still, Saudi Arabia did make efforts to please China politically, by backing up China’s policy in dealing with the Muslim

minority Uighurs in Xinjiang at the international stage. In July 2019, Saudi Arabia was among the 37 countries that sent the United Nations a letter of support for China and praised it for “remarkable achievements in the field of human rights.” (Guzansky & Lavi, 2020) The Kingdom continued to expand its investment in the Chinese market as well. In February 2019, when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited Beijing, a joint venture was signed between the Saudi Aramco and North Industries Group Corp. (Norinco) and Panjin Sincen to develop a fully integrated refining and petrochemical complex – the Huajin Aramco Petrochemical Co. – in China’s Liaojing Province. Involving an investment of \$10bn, the project was the largest Sino-foreign JV to date, including a 300,000-b/d refinery, a 1.5mths/yr ethylene cracker, and 1.3mths/yr paraxylene unit. The Saudi Aramco was to supply up to 70% of the crude required and held 35% of the stakes, with Norinco and Panjin holding 36% and 29% stakes, respectively (OGJ, 2019).

It was a bit unfortunate to see the Saudi Aramco suspending the \$10bn petrochemical investment, in August 2020, due to uncertainty of the market prospect caused by COVID-19 pandemic (Bloomberg, 2020), but the bilateral cooperation kept growing and deepening. In late 2020, Saudi Telecom announced a partnership with China’s Alibaba Cloud to help the kingdom build its cloud computing infrastructure (Guzansky & Lavi, 2020; Kantor, 2021). In April 2021, Saudi Arabia announced to sell 1% of Aramco’s stake (around \$19bn) and a pipeline of 160 projects across 16 sectors, aiming to raise around \$55 bn over the next four years, to increase revenue and reduce government budget deficit. This was a part of the privatisation programme launched by the Saudi Council of Economic and Development Affairs to achieve the objectives of Vision 2030. Therefore, it was unsurprising to see some major Chinese investors reportedly in talks with

the Saudis to buy a stake, including Sovereign wealth fund China Investment Corporation (CIC) (*CNBC*, 2021).

Beijing's closer ties with Riyadh, especially the cooperation on nuclear technology, caused concerns in the U.S. Congress, where a bipartisan group of lawmakers expressed alarm about Saudi nuclear energy plans and the intentions behind. Despite the Saudi Energy Ministry denying "categorically" having built a uranium ore facility, China's growing presence in the Middle East and its BRI scheme were unbearable by Washington. In May 2021, the US Senate advanced legislation designed to counter China's growing global influence, including in the Middle East. The legislation included \$300m for a "Countering Chinese Influence" fund, and \$100m in funding for journalists and media companies to "raise awareness of and increase transparency regarding the negative impact of activities related to the Belt and Road Initiative" (*WSJ*, 2020; Farooq, 2021).

To be sure, Riyadh has no intention to see its relationship with Beijing damaging ties with Washington, as there is no substitute for the US presence in the Gulf to halt Iranian expansion. In the meantime, China is unable and unwilling to displace the United States as a strategic guarantor for the security of the Arab Gulf countries either. But a more confident and assertive Beijing might try to fill the void and strengthen its relations with Riyadh at the expense of the United States, while the Saudis perhaps also wish to use its relations with China to leverage over Washington (Guzansky & Lavi, 2020).

4. China's Energy Diplomacy Towards Iran

China's energy diplomacy towards Iran since the 1990s has triggered numerous controversies and suspicions, probably more than any other oil suppliers, especially after the surfacing of Iran's nuclear programme. There are two main factors responsible for this situation: one was China's dealing with the Iranian nuclear crisis, and the other was the Sino-Iranian "comprehensive strategic partnership" that came into being in early 2021. If Beijing's dealing with Tehran in the early years could be said a choice that it was compelled to make, then the latest development of the bilateral relationship is certainly a preference taken by China.

China's Dealing with Iran Prior to the 2015 JPCOA: Playing A Dual Game?

Iran was one of the first Middle Eastern countries to establish diplomatic relations with China in August 1971, and it also supported China's entry to the United Nations in October the same year to replace the Nationalist government in Taiwan (Liao, 2015: 100). Yet the cordial relationship did not last long, due to Ayatollah Khomeini's policy on "Neither East, nor West – but the Islamic Republic" after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 (Therme, 2019). When China sought for oil supplies from the Middle East in the 1990s, Iran soon became an important supplier due not much to politics but rather to Iran's status as fourth largest oil reserves in the world. Between 1993 and 2000, oil from Iran grew ten-fold in China's crude imports, from 67,900 tonnes to 7mts, and the two sides also signed a series of treaties on trade promotion and petroleum cooperation around the time (Liao, 2015: 100). Washington was unhappy to see Beijing's dealing with Iran, who was listed by President G.W. Bush as a part of "Axis of Evil" in 2002, but China's refrained attitude at the time seemed to help the two powers avoid further tensions.

In August 2002, Iran's secret nuclear programme was revealed, which caused concerns from the international community about Iran's likelihood in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which Iran signed in July 1968 and ratified in February 1970, a month before it came into force (*USIP*, 2020). Between February 2003 and November 2004, IAEA made inspections to Iran's nuclear sites and reported the discovery of highly enriched uranium. Soon after, EU3+3 (Britain, France and Germany, USA, Russia and China) held a series of meetings with Iran asking it to suspend all nuclear related activities, and the United Nations Security Council also passed a number of Resolutions, between 2006 and 2009, demanding Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment, plus sanctions against Iran's noncompliance (*SCR*, 2020). Yet, little effect could be seen from the process, in which Beijing aligned with the other powers politically, to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, as it never blocked the UNSC efforts against Tehran.

In the meantime, China resisted the US pressure to isolate Iran and continued its energy trade and cooperation with Iran to secure its own energy interest. Since 2004, the state-owned China National Petroleum Corp. (CNPC) started operating in Iran's oil and gas sectors, together with China Petroleum & Chemical Corp. (Sinopec), and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC). As shown in Table 2.1 below, Beijing committed nearly \$130 investment in Iran's oil and gas sector between 2004 and 2011, partially due to forced withdrawal of Western oil majors, such as Japan's Inpex and French oil major Total. Taking Inpex as an example, who invested 75% of a \$2 bn plan to Iran's Azadegan, in 2004, one of the largest oil fields in the world. But after being listed by the US as one of the 41 firms dealing with Iran's oil and gas sectors, Inpex reduced its stake to 10% in 2006 and withdrew from Iran completely in 2010 (*UANI*, 2021). This enabled CNPC to sign two deals with NIOC in 2009 and 2011, respectively, on developing the North and

South Azadegan oilfields to increase oil outputs, plus a technical service contract on oil field upgrading. According to Leverett & Leverett (2011), Beijing’s move was a part of the US-China tacit compromise whereby China would agree to the US-led multilateral sanctions against Iran, while America would agree to refrain from applying unilateral sanctions against major Chinese corporations.

Table 2.1: Chinese Energy Related Investments in Iran, 2004-2021

Year	Company	Investment amount (US\$)	Content of the Agreements
2004	Zhuhai Zhenrong	\$20 bn	Importing 110mts of LNG over 25 years;
2004	Sinopec & NIOC	\$70 bn	Sinopec helps develop Yadavaran oilfields & buy 150k bpd of oil/yr for 25 yrs & 250mts of LNG for 30 yrs.
2007	Sinopec & NIOC	\$2 bn	Develop Phase 2: North Yadavaran oil field
2007	CNOOC & NIOC	\$16 bn	Agreement reached for CNOOC to help develop North Pars field but the contract was not signed due to US pressure.
2009	CNPC & NIOC	\$1.76 bn	Help increase North Azadegan oil fields’ outputs to 115k bpd within 6 yrs.
2009	CNPC & NIOC	\$4.7 bn	Help develop Phase 11 of South Pars but pulled out in 2012 without much progress made.
2009	Chinese Consortium	\$2-3 bn	Help develop capacities of Abadan & Persian Gulf Star refineries
2011	CNPC & NIOC	\$2.5 bn	Help develop the South Azadegan oilfields’ output from 55k bpd to 600k bpd.
2017	Total, CNPC & Petropars (Iran)	\$4.8 bn	Help develop Phase 11 of South Pars gas field, but Total had to pull out in Aug 2018, selling its 50.1% stake to CNPC in Nov 2018. Yet CNPC also pulled out in June 2019 to avoid US sanctions.
2021	Governments deal	\$400 bn	The deal was agreed in 2019 but was signed in 2021. Amongst the total, \$280 bn would be invested in Iran’s oil, gas & petrochemicals sectors. The rest would be invested in dozens of fields, e.g. banking, telecom, ports, railways, health care & info technology, over 25 years, in exchange for Iranian discounted oil supply.

Sources: adapted by author from various sources, including *China Daily*, 2004; *Tehran Times*, 2011; Liao, 2015; *New York Times*, 2021.

Therefore, despite an MoU reached between CNOOC and National Iranian Oil Co. (NIOC) on developing of North Pars gas field, in late 2006, CNOOC decided in February 2008 to cancel the signing of the \$16 bn contract at the last minute (*AGOC*, 2008), against Iran's non-compliance with two UNSC Resolutions (Res 1737 and Res 1747). After the IAEA report, on 8 November 2011, with "credible" details showing that Iran already obtained some of the expertise needed to build nuclear weapons, "should it decide to do so", the EU decided in January 2012 to ban oil imports from Iran starting 1st of July as part of measures to ratchet up the pressure on Iran's nuclear programme. Beijing followed suit immediately and nearly halved its oil imports from Tehran in 2012, and CNPC as well pulled out from the South Pars Phase 11 (SP11) in July 2012 (*ACA*, 2011; *Bloomberg*, 2012a & 2012b). China might be playing a dual game in Iran (Garver, 2010), but it was largely aimed to secure its energy supply while preventing Iran from violating its NPT obligations, rather than pursuing geopolitical advantages as some assumed.

China and Iran in the BRI Era: "No East, No West but China?"

After a decade of negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was finally reached on 14 July 2015. Under which Iran agreed to limit its sensitive nuclear activities and allow in international inspectors, in return for the lifting of sanctions imposed previously that costed the country more than \$160bn in oil revenue from 2012 to 2016 alone. The deal would also allow Iran to gain access to more than \$100bn in assets frozen overseas and to resume selling oil on international markets and using the global financial system for trade (*BBC*, 2019). On 16 January 2016, the IAEA submitted a report to the UNSC

confirming that Iran had taken the steps required under the JCPOA for nuclear related sanctions to be lifted (*SCR*, 2020).

Being Iran's largest crude market since 2007 (receiving 40% of Iran's crude exports), China was happy to see Iran returning to the international oil market, although this could mean that China had to face more competitions from international oil majors (Perlez, 2016). More importantly, with the "Belt and Road" scheme in operation, China's has granted more emphasis on Iran politically, due not only to its important geopolitical position, but also to the shared antipathy by the two countries toward Western domination of the world order (Wille, 2016). Therefore, a week after the lift of international sanctions, on January 22-23, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Tehran as the last stop of his tour in the Middle East. During Xi's visit, the two sides signed 17 agreements for cooperation in areas of energy, trade and industry, etc., and also agreed to increase the bilateral trade by 10-fold in the next decade to \$600 bn. Prior to this, China was already Iran's top trading partner, with bilateral trade surpassing \$50bn in 2014 (*CNBC*, 2016).

China also resumed its energy activities with Iran soon afterwards. In November 2016, CNPC joined an agreement signed by French oil major Total on SP11 project, the first Western energy investment in Iran since the lift of international sanctions earlier of the year. The SP11 project have a production capacity of 1.8 bcf/d and would be pursued in two phases with an estimated investment at \$4.8 billion. Total would hold a 50.1% interest, with CNPC taking 30% interest and Iran's Petropars holding the rest (Dittrick, 2016). NIOC also planned to begin supplying its domestic market in 2021 with the country's first-ever international petroleum contract (IPC), which would be applicable to SP11, to "prompt other IOCs to re-enter the country's upstream

sector” (Dunnahoe, 2017). Before long, US President Donald Trump abandoned the JCPOA deal in May 2018 unilaterally and reinstated sanctions targeting Iran in August. Consequently, Total decided to withdraw in August 2018 and sold its 50.1% stake to CNPC in November. CNPC also had to pull out in June 2019 to avoid likely sanctions (*UANI*, 2021).

Following a visit by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to Beijing, in August 2019, China announced that it planned to incorporate Iran into the BRI with a pledged \$400 bn of investment in different 17 projects, covering several fields of nuclear energy, port, trade and transport. Amongst which \$280 bn would be invested in Iran’s oil, gas and petrochemicals sectors, where Chinese firms would be given the first refusal to bid on any and all petrochemical projects in Iran. The rest \$120bn would be used to upgrade Iran’s transport and manufacturing infrastructure. In return, Iran was to provide China heavily discounted oil required by its huge economy (*South Front*, 2019; Talwar, 2020). The deal was confirmed on Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s visit to Tehran, on 26 March 2021, when he signed an agreement with Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif, according to *New York Times* (2021).

Interestingly, both Tehran and Beijing took a low profile on the agreement. Monshipouri and Heiran-Nia (2020, 159-160), for instance, argued that Iran’s “Look East” policy was forced upon by Trump’s “maximum pressure”, as the Rouhani government would prefer a balanced relationship with both the West and East. They also saw the deal benefiting more to Tehran’s ruling elites rather than to the public. China did not officially confirm that it was on the verge of an agreement with Iran either, trying to maintain a balance between Riyadh and Tehran. Just days before word of the China-Iran agreement leaked, Chinese and Arab League foreign ministers adopted the Amman Declaration, with Arab states endorsing China’s central foreign policy concept of “a

community with a shared future for mankind.” Indeed, China’s combined trade with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel in 2018 was 3.5 times greater than its trade with Iran (\$123 bn vs \$35 bn) (Vakil, 2021). While China remains Iran’s top oil importer, Chinese firms have not increased investment, imports, or exports at the exponential levels pledged in 2016. In fact, Chinese investment has decreased substantially since then. Some concluded that the Sino-Iranian deal would not mean a massive shift in China’s international policy, and the deal was unlikely to fundamentally threaten the balance of power in the Middle East as well (Figueroa, 2021).

5. Conclusions

China’s energy diplomacy towards the Middle East has gone through a history of nearly 30 years by now. Employing a strategy of getting along with everyone in the region, China has made the Middle East not only the most important source of its oil and gas supply, but also a crucial frontline for its BRI strategy. China has managed to develop a comprehensive strategic partnership with two regional rivals – Saudi Arabia and Iran – who are competing for both regional leadership and oil markets, their dealing with the United States also vary greatly. China has attempted to build solid trade and energy relationship with both powers, while maintaining a balance between them. Beijing has also learnt from this process that it is not always possible to stay away from regional politics, especially with its growing influence and the fading US interest in the Middle East.

As its growing presence in the Middle East has been viewed as achieved at the cost of American national security interests (Farooq, 2021), China has tried to pursue strategically hedged approach to build up an economic and political presence without challenging the US dominance in the region,

in particular, in security domain (Fulton, 2000a). Under the BRI era, energy supply may still be a crucial pillar in China's diplomacy in the Middle East, but it is no longer in dominance. Regardless whether the BRI ambition could succeed in the end, due to the controversies triggered so far, the coverage of China's energy diplomacy has gone far beyond oil and gas supplies, and will have geopolitical implications to the region and even the whole world.

Finally, it is difficult to predict what could come out from the renegotiations, resumed on 6 April in Vienna, between Iran and P4+1 (the US has not been involved in the talks directly) on resuming the 2015 JCPOA that was abandoned by President Trump in 2018. Despite Iran's continued uranium enrichment and intensified power struggles within Iran and United States, some hope towards a new deal did appear when the US dropped a handful of sanctions targeting Iran's energy sector, on 11 June, as evidence of Washington's "good faith approach" (Manson, 2021). However, when the hardliner Ebrahim Raisi was elected as Iranian President on 19 June, things have become less promising. Given its economic and political ties with Iran, China's position is of special significance. Unless China is prepared to align with Iran to confront with the United States and Western countries, which will do more damage than benefits to its BRI strategy, Beijing should play its potential to push Iran behaving itself. This would not only allow Iran to enjoy energy cooperation with a wider world, but could also enhance China's geopolitical significance in the Middle East, and thus serve the purpose of its BRI ambition.

Bibliography

- ACA (Arms Control Association) (2011). "The IAEA's Iran Report: Assessment and Implications". November 8. <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2011-11/iaeas-iran-report-assessment-implications>.
- AGOC (*Alexander's Gas & Oil Connections*) (2008). "CNOOC and NIOC agree on development plan for North Pars gas field". November 12. gasandoil.com/news/middle_east/60640cbb2f6b96c196a0f7cf47b8ae0b.
- Al-tamimi, N. (2012). "China - Saudi Arabia Relations: Economic Partnership or Strategic Alliance?" https://www.academia.edu/4101698/China_Saudi_Arabia_Relations_Economic_Partnership_or_Strategic_Alliance_Durham_University_UK.
- Anderlini, J. (2020). "China's Middle East strategy comes at a cost to the US". *Financial Times*, September 9. <https://www.ft.com/content/e20ae4b9-bc22-4cb5-aaf6-b67c885c845c>.
- Avdaliani, E. (2020). "Why Iran Is Turning East". August 26, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/iran-china-deal/>.
- Bao, C. (2018). "China's Promotion of the BRI in Saudi Arabia: Status, Risks and Responses". *Arab World Studies* (in Chinese), No. 4: 74-89.
- BBC (2019). "Iran nuclear deal: Key details". June 11. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-33521655>.
- Bloomberg (2012a). "EU Agrees to Ban Iran Oil Imports to Target Nuclear Program". January 23. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-01-22/european-union-likely-to-agree-on-iranian-oil-ban>.
- Bloomberg (2012b). "Iran Crude Supplies to China Fall for Fourth Month in March". April 23. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-04-23/china-crude-oil-imports-from-iran-drop-54-on-year-customs-says>.
- Bloomberg (2020). "Saudi Aramco Suspends \$10 Billion China Oil Refinery Venture". August 21. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-21/saudi-aramco-suspends-10-billion-china-oil-refinery-venture>.
- Bloomberg (2021). "China Needs to Hit Peak Oil Long Before It Reaches Net-Zero Emissions". February 9. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-02-09/china-needs-to-hit-peak-oil-long-before-it-reaches-net-zero-emissions>.
- Bozorgmehr, N. et al. (2021). "Iran to increase uranium enrichment in blow to nuclear talks". April 13. <https://www.ft.com/content/218bd3ad-c5ad-4990-bb15-dca90bdcf7d0>.

- Byman, D. L. (2016). "Shifting U.S. interests in the Middle East," March 2. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/03/02/shifting-u-s-interests-in-the-middle-east/>.
- Calabrese, J. (2020). China-Iran Relations: The Not-So-Special "Special Relationship". March 16. <https://jamestown.org/program/china-iran-relations-the-not-so-special-special-relationship/>.
- Carvalho, S. (2018). "Xi's visit to UAE highlights China's rising interest in Middle East". July 20. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-china-idUSKBN1KA26k>.
- Chatzky, A. and McBride, J. (2020). "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative." January 28, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.
- Chaziza, M. (2020a). "China's New Silk Road Strategy and the Middle East". March 8. <https://besacenter.org/china-silk-road-middle-east/>.
- Chaziza, M. (2020b). "Religious and Cultural Obstacles to China's BRI in the Middle East". June 12. <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/china-middle-east-obstacles/>.
- Chen, J. (2020). "Saudi Arabia's Diplomatic Transformation under King Salman: Ambition, Policy and Means," *Arab World Studies*, No.1: 62-82.
- Chen, X. (2018). "China in the Post-Hegemonic Middle East: A Wary Dragon?" <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/11/22/china-in-the-post-hegemonic-middle-east-a-wary-dragon/>.
- China Daily*, (2004). "China, Iran sign biggest oil & gas deal". October 31. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-10/31/content_387140.htm.
- CNBC, (2016). "China tilts to Iran as Xi caps visit with 17 accords". January 25. <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/01/25/china-tilts-to-iran-as-xi-caps-visit-with-17-accords.html>.
- Deng, Y. (2021). "Why has China expressed its willingness to mediate the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts?" (in Chinese) 1st June, <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001092703>.
- Dittrick, P. (2016). "Total signs deal to help develop Iran's South Pars gas field". November 8. <https://www.ogj.com/drilling-production/article/17249971/total-signs-deal-to-help-develop-irans-south-pars-gas-field>.
- Dunnahoe, T. (2017). "Total, NIOC to develop Phase 11 of South Pars gas field". July 3. <http://www.ogj.com/articles/2017/07/total-nioc-to-develop-phase-11-of-south-pars-gas-field.html>.
- Farooq, U. A. (2021). "US Senate attempts to curb China's Middle East influence". May 28. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/china-middle-east-us-bill-seeks-counter-growing-influence>.

FARS News (2008). “Iran, CNOOC reach deal to develop north Pars gas field” November 17. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8708271561>.

Figueroa, M. (2021). “China-Iran Relations: The Myth of Massive Investment”. April 6. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/china-iran-relations-the-myth-of-massive-investment/>.

Fulton, J. (2020a). “China’s making inroads in the Middle East. The Trump administration isn’t happy”. June 3. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/06/03/chinas-making-inroads-middle-east-trump-administration-isnt-happy/>.

Fulton, J. (2020b). *Strangers to strategic partners: Thirty years of Sino-Saudi relations*, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Sino-Saudi-Relations_WEB.pdf.

Fulton, J. (2020c). “China-Saudi Arabia Relations Through the ‘1+2+3’ Cooperation Pattern”, *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 14 (4): 516–527.

Gardner, D. (2020). “Wary US watches for signs of Chinese-Iranian alliance”. July 29. <https://www.ft.com/content/defa9de2-d4cd-4f7e-b987-4a8b6038bd37>.

Garlick, J. and Havlová, R (2020). “The dragon dithers: assessing the cautious implementation of China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Iran”. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1822197>.

Garver, J. W. (2010). “Is China Playing a Dual Game in Iran?” *The Washington Quarterly*, 34(1): 75-88.

Ghasseminejad, S. (2021). “Biden’s Persian Gulf policy benefits China”. March 23. <https://thefrontierpost.com/bidens-persian-gulf-policy-benefits-china/>.

Guzansky, Y. and Lavi G. (2020). “Saudi Arabia-China Relations: A Brave Friendship or Useful Leverage?” *Policy Analysis*, Vol. 23(2): 108-114.

Hirsh, M. (2021). “Iran-U.S. Nuclear Talks on a Hair Trigger”. June 22. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/22/iran-us-nuclear-talks-jcpoa-ebrahim-raisi-biden/>.

HP (*Hydrocarbon Processing*) (2016). “Aramco, Sinopec inaugurate YASREF refinery, pledge more cooperation”. January 22. <https://www.hydrocarbonprocessing.com/news/2016/01/aramco-sinopec-inaugurate-yasref-refinery-pledge-more-cooperation>.

Huwaidin, M. B. (2002). *China’s Relations with Arabia and the Gulf 1949-1999*, London and New York: Routledge Curzon.

Kantor, A. (2021). “Cloud becomes new front line between China and the west”. May 18. <https://www.ft.com/content/ddc4d6ff-13dc-449d-a4ca-9ad3d1d6a184>.

Khoday, K. (2017). “Emerging Asia and the Middle East: The New Energy Silk Road”. Oct 3. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/emerging-asia-and-middle-east-new-energy-silk-road>.

Knipp, K. (2020). “The Covid-19 and Iran-China Relations”. March 7. <https://www.dw.com/zh/>.

Kunlun Consultancy (2019). “Sources and amount of China’s oil imports in 2018”. June 8. https://www.sohu.com/a/319212399_653376 (in Chinese).

Leverett, F. and Leverett, H. M. (2011), “U.S. sanctions and China’s Iran policy”. July 30. <http://www.campaigniran.org/casmii/index.php?q=node/11576>.

Liao, X. (2015). “China’s energy diplomacy towards the Middle East: a blessing or curse for the world?” in *The Emerging Middle East – East Asia Nexus*, edited by A. Ehteshami and Y. Miyagi, London and New York: Routledge: 94-109.

Lim, A. C. (2016). “Middle East and China’s ‘Belt And Road’: Xi Jinping’s 2016 State Visits To Saudi Arabia, Egypt And Iran – Analysis”. January 30. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/30012016-middle-east-and-chinas-belt-and-road-xi-jinpings-2016-state-visits-to-saudi-arabia-egypt-and-iran-analysis>.

Lu, R. (2020), “The Changing World Petroleum System and Oil Power on the US-Saudi-Aramco Triangle”. *Arab World Studies* (in Chinese), No. 1: 23-42.

Malik, S. (2017). “King Salman's visit to China”. March 15. http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2017-03/15/content_40455690.htm.

Mann, Y. and Yellinek, R. (2021). “The New Chinese Oil Benchmark: Implications for the Middle East”. *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 27(4): 143-156.

Manson, K. (2021). “US lifts some sanctions targeting Iran’s energy sector”. [June 11. https://www.ft.com/content/35c02c0a-2565-4f07-b40d-5510a4f0c12a](https://www.ft.com/content/35c02c0a-2565-4f07-b40d-5510a4f0c12a).

Monshipouri, M. and Heiran-Nia, J. (2020). “China’s Iran Strategy: What Is at Stake?” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 27 (4): 157-172.

New York Times (NYT) (2021). “China, With \$400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deepen Influence in Mideast”, March 27, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/middleeast/china-iran-deal.html>.

OGJ (Oil & Gas Journal) (2019). “Aramco forms combine for \$10-billion Chinese refining complex”. February 22. <https://www.ogj.com/refining-processing/refining/optimization/article/17279636/aramco-forms-combine-for-10billion-chinese-refining-complex>.

Perlez, J. (2016). “President Xi Jinping of China Is All Business in Middle East Visit”. Jan. 30. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/world/asia/xi-jinping-visits-saudi-iran.html>.

Qian, X. (2014). “The Strategic Pillar for the ‘Belt and Road’ Strategy: China and the Middle Eastern Energy Cooperation”. *Arab World Studies* (in Chinese) No.3: 44-57.

Reuters (2008). “UPDATE 1-Saudi SABIC to expand China petchem JV -source”. June 18. <https://www.reuters.com/article/sabic-sinopec-idUSPEK4672020080618>.

Reuters (2016). “Saudi Arabia keen to expand China energy investments”. July 2. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-china-oil-idUSKCN0ZI07U/>.

Riedel, B. (2020). “Saudi Arabia’s relations with China: Functional, but not strategic”. July 20. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/saudi-arabias-relations-with-china-functional-but-not-strategic/>.

Scobell, A. and Nader, A. (2016). *China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon*. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1229.html.

Scott, E. (2016). “Defying Expectations: China’s Iran Trade and Investments”. April 06. <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/defying-expectations-china%E2%80%99s-iran-trade-investments>.

SCR (Security Council Report) (2020). “Chronology of Events: Iran”. September 2. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/chronology/iran.php>.

Shahla, A. (2021). “China Signs 25-Year Deal With Iran in Challenge to the U.S.” March 27. <https://www.bloomberquint.com/global-economics/china-signs-25-year-deal-with-iran-in-challenge-to-the-u-s>.

South Front (2019). “Iran and China to Start 25-Year Strategic Partnership with 400 billion in Investments”. September 18. <https://southfront.org/iran-and-china-to-start-25-year-strategic-partnership-with-400-billion-in-investments/>.

Sun, D. (2020). “China’s partnership diplomacy in the Middle East.” March 24. <https://theasiadialogue.com/2020/03/24/chinas-partnership-diplomacy-in-the-middle-east/>.

Sun, D. and Wang, Y. (2020) “Overall Integration: On China-Saudi Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Abstract”. *Arab World Studies* (in Chinese), No. 4: 28-54.

Talwar, P. (2020). “China Is Getting Mired in the Middle East”. August 17. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/17/china-is-getting-mired-in-the-middle-east/>.

Tehran Times (2011). “China to invest \$2.5b in Iran’s Azadegan oilfield”. March 17. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/237748/China-to-invest-2-5b-in-Iran-s-Azadegan-oilfield/>.

Tehran Times (2016). “Xi Jinping’s Iran visit is of ‘historic significance’: ambassador”. January 20. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/252338/Xi-Jinping-s-Iran-visit-is-of-historic-significance-ambassador>.

Therme, C. (2019). “Iran's ‘Neither East Nor West’ Slogan Today”. February 8. https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/commentary_therme_08.02.2018.pdf.

Tian, C. “An analysis of China’s oil imports and exports” (In Chinese), *International Petroleum Economics*, No 3, 1997, 2001, 2007, 2013 and 2018.

Torfeh, M. (2019). “The promise of Chinese investment brings Iran in from the cold”. September 11. <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/the-promise-of-chinese-investment-brings-iran-in-from-the-cold-29686#>.

Trading Economics (2021). “[China GDP Annual Growth Rate, 1996-2021](https://tradingeconomics.com/china/gdp-growth-annual)”.

Umbach, F. (2019). “China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Its Energy-Security Dimensions”. *Working Paper 320*. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/WP320.pdf>.

UANI (United Against Nuclear Iran) (2021). “Inpex”. February 16. <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/company/inpex>.

USIP (United States Institute of Peace), (2020). “Iran and the NPT”. January 22. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/index.php/blog/2020/jan/22/iran-and-npt>.

V boshi619 (2021). “Sources and amount of China’s oil imports in 2020” ([in Chinese](#)). May 21. <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/349387814>.

Vakil, S. (2021). “Stability in the Middle East Requires More Than a Deal With Iran”. *Foreign Affairs*, February 22. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-02-22/stability-middle-east-requires-more-deal-iran>.

Valori, G. E. (2016). “President Xi Jinping’s travel to the Middle East”. February 12. <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2016/02/12/president-xi-jinping-s-travel-to-the-middle-east/>.

WSJ (Wall Street Journal) (2020). “Saudi Arabia, With China’s Help, Expands Its Nuclear Program”. August 4. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-with-chinas-help-expands-its-nuclear-program-11596575671>.

Ward, A. (2018). “China poised to profit as Europe companies feel Iran pain”. May 9. <https://www.ft.com/content/b29aaf7a-5387-11e8-b24e-cad6aa67e23e>.

Wille, D. (2016). “Xi Jinping’s visit to the Middle East: what’s in store for Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran?” January 27. <https://globalriskinsights.com/2016/01/xi-jinpings-visit-to-the-middle-east-whats-in-store-for-saudi-arabia-egypt-and-iran/>.

Xinhua (2006a). “Ambassador Underlines Significance of Saudi King's Visit.” January 23. <https://www.china.org.cn/english/2006/Jan/156090.htm>.

Xinhua (2006b). “President Hu arrives in Saudi Arabia for state visit”. April 22.
https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-04/22/content_574220.htm.

Xinhua (2021). “China's GDP expands 2.3% in 2020”, January 18.
https://www.china.org.cn/business/2021-01/18/content_77127004.htm.

Xu, X. (2020). “China and the Middle East: Cross-Investment in the Energy Sector”.
<https://mepc.org/journal/china-and-middle-east-cross-investment-energy-sector>.

Zhang, R. (2020). “China, Saudi Arabia celebrate 30 years of ties”. July 22.
https://www.china.org.cn/world/2020-07/22/content_76300679.htm.

Zhang, X. (1999). “China’s Interests in the Middle East: Present and Future”.
<https://mepc.org/journal/chinas-interests-middle-east-present-and-future>.