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doi.org/10.34765/sp.0422.a01

MIDDLE EAST IN THE ONE BELT ONE ROAD INITIATIVE: A PATHWAY OR A STRATEGIC PARTNER?

Summary

The article discusses the role of the countries of the Middle East and North Africa in the Chinese One Belt One Road (OBOR) project, which is the reactivation of the Silk Road. It frames the analysis in the context of the US-Chinese rivalry in the region and China's competitive advantage as a strategic partner of the Middle East and North African countries. The article emphasizes the importance of economic cooperation for both parties, which plays a key role in shaping OBOR in the region. One of the main is that China is a less troubling partner for the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, compared to the United States.

Keywords: Middle East, One Belt One Road, China.

JEL Codes: F02, F50

Research article.

BLISKI WSCHÓD W INICJATYWIE ONE BELT ONE ROAD: ŚCIEŻKA CZY PARTNER STRATEGICZNY?

Streszczenie

W artykule omówiono rolę państw Bliskiego Wschodu i Afryki Północnej w chińskim projekcie Jednego pasa i jednej drogi (One Belt One Road, OBOR), który stanowi reaktywację Jedwabnego Szlaku. Analizę usytuowano w kontekście rywalizacji amerykańsko-chińskiej w regionie oraz przewagi konkurencyjnej Chin jako strategicznego partnera państw Bliskiego Wschodu i Afryki Północnej. Podkreślono znaczenie współpracy o charakterze ekonomicznym dla obu stron, która odgrywa kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu OBOR w regionie. Jednym z głównych wniosków analizy jest to, że Chiny są mniej kłopotliwym wizerunkowo partnerem dla państw Bliskiego Wschodu i Afryki Północnej niż Stany Zjednoczone.

Słowa kluczowe: Bliski Wschód, Jeden pas i jedna droga, Chiny.

Kody JEL: F02, F50

Artykuł badawczy.

Introduction

If one had to name a global superpower with a long-lasting and far-reaching presence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, it would most probably be the United States of America. The US has been dominating the region economically and politically since since mid-20th century. The first type of domination has been enabled through numerous oil deals, which secured American energy interests and its position among other Western players. The second type of domination has been sealed by American support of the State of Israel and continued through a number of political actions in almost every country in the region. As of today, it would be hard to find a national or regional conflict that has been free from US influence, involvement or intervention (and sometimes even provocation)¹. This in turn, made the US the second biggest threat for the Middle Eastern public with the first being Israel (Burton 2018).

¹ The list would be too long to enumerate. E.g. Meernik (1996) analysed US interventions up to mid-90's.

Despite American visibility in the Middle East and its overwhelming political presence, another global superpower has slowly but continuously paved its way to the region – namely The People’s Republic of China. Unlike the US it managed to keep good relationships with all countries in MENA region, including strategic partnership with regional superpowers as diverse as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel. Due to its informed and deliberate policy it managed to maintain not only its strategic and economic interests in the region, but also gained support among local public. According to an old regional opinion poll of 2011 China has been most frequently selected as the most preferred superpower in the world (23% in favour against 7% who have chosen the US)². Interestingly while China is not a country one would like to live in, or to study (Telhamy 2010), people living in the Middle East have highly positive opinions about this country, and this applies not only to the Arabs, but also Israelis (Silver, Devlin, and Huang 2019). One could therefore say that China has managed to win maybe not the hearts of people living the Middle East, but definitely their minds.

The article aims to provide an overview of Chinese presence in the Middle East with a focus on the One Belt One Road initiative (OBOR) which – together with another instruments such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund – not only links China with the Middle East, but also constitutes the backbone of Chinese interests in the region. As Niv Horesh (2018, p. 5–6) states,

“Chinese foreign policy analysts have often taken pride in the fact that their country has committed zero mistakes in the Middle East over the past decades, while America has stumbled from disastrous military intervention to botched support for the Arab Spring”.

This quotation adds to the Sino-MENA relations a significant element, which is the US presence in the Middle East. The question however is, whether China actually wanted to replace the US, and engage more meaningfully in regional politics, or rather is satisfied with keeping a relatively low profile. This brings another question that needs to be answered – is MENA region a strategic part of OBOR initiative, or rather just serves as a link to European markets? This

² In this case European countries are much more preferred, 11% opted for China and just 1 percentage point less for the US (Telhamy 2011, p. 47).

article is descriptive and provides an overview of the state of the art of how OBOR initiative is located and perceived in the MENA region.

The First Encounter

The historical Silk Route³ (2nd/3rd century BCE – 15th century) comes to mind as a natural parallel to the current OBOR initiative. As a matter of fact the name of OBOR relates to the trans-Asian network of routes which connected Europe, Middle East, Africa and different parts of Asia. While its name referred to silk, it had been used for trading all possible commodities and benefited many merchants from all parts of the route.

The current initiative aims at re-establishing the route and set a logistical and infrastructural framework for Chinese economic expansion to the West, and thus was named as the New Silk Road, which finally became the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, or One Belt One Road – as used in this text), including Silk Road Economic Belt and a Maritime Silk Road.

However, there is another historical event, which can be brought as a framework for setting current Sino-MENA relations. The first encounter between the Arab and Chinese civilizations occurred by the mid-8th century at Talas river, where the Abbasid and Tang armies clashed. The Arabs won the battle and made the Chinese move away from Central Asia, but at the same time they have also left this area. This Sino-Arab encounter had an interesting symbolic dimension – namely, the introduction of paper outside China⁴. By that time the Chinese knew well how to produce paper but had used it for packing and clothing. The Arabs learned the technology of paper production, but managed to produce it from almost everything and began using it for writing. Thus, the Chinese were theoreticians, while the Arabs took a practical approach, and above all – managed to spread this Chinese idea across the world. This way, hand in hand, Arabs and Chinese made the first global cultural revolution

³ A lot of studies have been conducted on the Silk Route – its role, aspirations, and impact. For more information see e.g. Ghosh (2019), Liu (2010).

⁴ This story about learning paper production by Arabs from a Chinese hostage of the Talas battle has been disputed and claimed to be a myth by a number of scholars. In fact paper production has been known some time before the battle in the city of Samarkand, which had been conquered in early 8th century. Regardless of, whether it was in Samarkand or at Talas, paper production is the invention that linked together Arabs and Chinese. More at Cieciora (2014, p. 34–35).

– the use of paper made it possible to preserve and transfer information. Moreover, the paper revolution was transferred to Europe in the 12th century.

This historical encounter had in a way set the approach of both civilizations to each other. Firstly, the Chinese were never actually interested in reaching out to the Middle East, they were much more concerned about their own country and just beyond their border. PRC has still a limited experience and ambition of any diplomatic or military activity outside of Asia-Pacific (Scobell 2018, p. 17). Secondly, the Chinese had the know-how and developed a concept, which the Arabs were eager to use for their own purpose and benefit. Thirdly, together they had achieved a synergy and made a significant contribution to the world. Interestingly these three elements will be still visible in China's contemporary strategy towards MENA region, as well as in the way of using this opportunity by local countries in the region.

Avoiding or complementing the US?

The more China develops and expands, the more frequently it interacts with another global power-the United States of America. While mutual relations between both countries vary, they are neither declared rivals nor enemies. Middle East and North Africa is a region strategic for both countries. For the US it has been a place of its most political and military effort abroad, which has been reflected in the fact that since the 1950's there has been hardly any conflict in the Greater Middle East area without the direct or indirect involvement of the US. Making the Middle East a significant element of the OBOR initiative means for China a potential clash with the US, or facing the challenge of becoming one of the biggest players on its own terms and at its own costs (Alterman 2018, p. 37; and that is despite gradual retreat of the US from the MENA region that can be observed since the Arab Spring).

Experts and observers of Sino-Arab relations vary on whether China will be able to maintain its economic interests without interfering with the US in the Middle East. For Yasser Elnaggar, increasing economic presence by China means a significant change in regional power-balance and might have long-term implications for local political dynamics. He argues that China has become not only the biggest investor, but also the most sought one. China's activity in the MENA region and growing economic and strategic interests might get it involved into existing political conflicts (Elnaggar 2020). As the

matter of fact, according to some it was the case of assassination of Iranian general Ghasem Soleymani, which was supposed to be a provocation not against Iran, but China (Lee 2020). However, China managed to avoid being dragged into this conflict for it generally prefers economic involvement over war or politics beyond its borders, for if there is war, there is more trouble and less trade. According to Horesh (2018), China and the US maintain an equilibrium with neither party willing to undermine the position of the other⁵. China is dependent on MENA oil, which mining and transport is linked to the American presence in the region, making the presence and interests of these two superpowers in the region convergent (Horesh 2018, p. 3). Thus both global superpowers are interested in keeping Middle East and the surrounding marital routes safe and secure, even if for different reasons. For the US secure Middle East means that its political involvement in its internal affairs proved (finally) to make a positive change in the region, or just a slow hegemonic retreat (Yom 2020), while China needs to secure its economic interests (Sun and Zoubir 2015).

Moreover, there are some roles that China would definitely not like to play. Neither it is interested in being actively and visibly engaged in national and regional conflicts, nor in providing military support to its Middle Eastern allies – just as the US has been doing for the last decades (Foley 2018, p. 67). The case of Iraq was one of example. While China has been eager to do business with Iraq, which had created tensions with the US, after the war of 2003 these two superpowers started to share the same interest – providing security and stability in this country. However (again), they differed on the role that they played – the US actively supported its allies by providing guarantees and military assistance, while China has been passive (Burton 2018a, p. 158). In fact Chinese military presence is very modest and aims mostly at protecting its economic interests.

As Jon Alterman noticed, Chinese interests in MENA region are not only more recent, but also far narrower. Its involvement has been mostly economic – in terms of importing oil and gas (over 50% of Chinese oil import comes from the MENA region; [www5](#)), as well as related to commerce (exporting manufactured goods) and construction. However, China has two incentives that the US does not have, and that even with or without American political preoccupation with the Middle East. Firstly, China brings the capital and investment and offers a fair share in its global project that goes beyond the OBOR initiative.

⁵ Salman and Geearts (2015) describe China's policy in the MENA region as strategic hedging.

Thus, there is a hope for many Middle Eastern economies, which struggle with high corruption and unemployment, while for rich GCC countries it means a significant boost into their economic diversification (especially independence from oil and gas export) and competitive advantage. Secondly, unlike the US it is still a blank canvas for Middle Eastern countries, and – what is even more important – it has not (yet) done anything wrong to provoke anger or hatred among the local public. While Chinese popularity might to some extent stem from the fact that MENA societies (less so regimes) would like to free themselves from the US domination, it is still a benefit that China can use for its plans in the region (Alterman 2018, p. 41, 47).

As Chinese foreign policy follows its investment, one can expect that standing aside the various MENA conflicts will be a hard task (Dorsey 2010, p. 55). At the same time, Chinese political caution and hesitance has paid off well, and years of vibrant economic activity in the region that has been torn by long-lasing conflict wars, has proven that China can further play this game.

What is the real role of MENA in OBOR?

“Make trade, not war” is the motto of Chinese activity in the Middle East region (Wang 2018). A significant predicament to have meaningful trade relations is political stability. Thus trade and peace became two main objectives of Chinese presence in the region.

For MENA countries, PRC is the biggest trade partner (Wang 2018). Over 46% of China’s crude oil import comes from the MENA region with Saudi Arabia being the top supplier at 16.8% (www1); moreover, Qatar supplies 11% of China’s natural gas import (Sugiura 2018). China’s trade volume with MENA countries had increased six fold in the last decade. This illustrates how important the region is for Chinese expansion. However, if one adds other regions to the picture – for instance, China’s closer neighbour, Central Asia – the increase has been similar or even bigger (Scobell 2018, p. 13–14). In other words, China’s economic expansion is a global one, with MENA region being one of the elements on its way.

Some authors claim that China’s interests in MENA region are less than they seem. For instance, Shichor (2018, p. 38f) indicates that Middle Eastern AIIB members contributed proportionally twice as much as is their share in China’s trade volume. This might indicate that the role of the Middle East as

the strategic region of the OBOR initiative is less than expected by local partners. Out of all MENA countries, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stands out as the biggest oil supplier and so the biggest trading partner of China. Saudi Arabia has introduced Chinese language as the third language to be taught at schools and China is one of the key strategic partners in the newly developed Saudi Vision of 2030⁶ (Anderson 2020). In a similar manner UAE wanted to be a part of Chinese Silk Route initiative as early as 2015 (Towsend 2015), and since that time is still considering their mutual relations to be at their best (www2). It seems therefore, that some MENA countries are willing to be included, and they have the capacities to offer China economic benefits, and it is up to China to decide how far does it go.

According to Scobell, Chinese interest in MENA region is limited to maintain its economic and infrastructural position. While it has issued a white paper on Africa, devoted to issues crucial for Chinese interests on this continent, it has only published an Arab Policy Paper in 2016, which contained only one piece of political information – namely willingness to support an independent Palestinian state with capital in East Jerusalem (Scobell 2008, p. 18). However, since then China has never visibly supported the Palestinian cause and as a matter of fact the two state solutions seems to be now a mere dream from a (not so) distant past. In a similar manner, Iran might not formally count on Chinese support, even if Sino-Iranian relations started to grow in recent years (Caba-Maria 2021). China was unwilling to risk the new US sanctions and have been limiting its trade with Iran, just like most of its other remaining trading partners. While China supported the 2015 nuclear deal and opposed the US secondary sanctions, it has not done more than the European Union for maintaining bilateral trade, and so rescuing Iran from the misery (Batmanghelidj 2020).

Comparing China and the Middle East in economic or demographic terms will not bring any meaningful results, due to the fact that China is much bigger. Maybe that is why the Middle East cannot be an equally important player for PRC unlike the PRC plays a crucial role for most countries of MENA region. Still Middle Eastern countries can use the capital and economic resources offered by China for their own purpose and benefit. They should however not count on any vital Chinese political support in case of emergency. Firstly, China has accepted the Middle East the way it is, and does not intend

⁶ Saudi Vision 2030 is a strategic framework that aims to transform the oil-dependant Saudi economy into a modern knowledge-oriented one (Nurunnabi 2017).

to consider any changes. Secondly, political changes seem not to interfere with Chinese economic agenda and due to its global position it can always find a way through regardless of what is happening in selected countries in the region. In other words, if trading with Iran is not acceptable and might result in enduring US sanctions, there are many other trading partners in the Middle East waiting to strengthen their ties with PRC.

The bone of (non-)contention

One more dimension puts MENA countries and China into one boat. They both score low on a variety of indexes that aim to measure the rule of law, human rights, freedom of press and other issues central for Western-styled democracies. These issues have been crucial for American policy towards MENA and China, but also other Western countries raised their voices on a numerous occasions on neglecting human rights, limiting personal freedom, or hardship of selected ethnic or national groups. In case of Middle Eastern countries these are the poorly paid labour migrants from Asia-Pacific working predominantly in the GCC countries, whereas in China – the Uyghur Muslim.

Uyghurs are one numerous China's Muslim ethnic minorities of Turkic origin, who have been living in the Xinjiang region and are Muslim. In the beginning of the 21st century the situation of Uyghurs has significantly deteriorated. Chinese authorities have been using the global war against terror narratives in order to suppress Uyghur ethnic and religious activity. Firstly it has been the war on terror after 11/09 terrorist attacks in the US, but then policies aimed at taming Uyghur cultural autonomy intensified in 2014 and 2017. As a result Uyghur men were prohibited to wear long beards, and females – veiling (www3); Islamic religious infrastructure, including mosques, was limited or even destroyed; there are also reports about special re-education camps for Muslim inhabitants of Xinjiang. It is worth mentioning that Uyghurs of Xinjiang have never traditionally belonged to the type of fundamentalist or Wahhabi Islam, as it was simply not the kind of Islam they have been practicing since 11th century. Their comeback to visibly Islamic identity is rather a way of opposing Chinese regime.

Treatment of Uyghurs in China has led 22 countries to issue a joint statement at the UN in order to stop arbitrary detentions and human rights violations against Chinese Muslims in Xinjiang region (www4). Some human

rights experts go even further and talk about ethnocide of Uyghurs in China. Interestingly, none of the 22 signatory countries was an Islamic majority country, not to mention the conservative and powerful GCC countries, including the custodian of the two holy mosques, Saudi Arabia. As a matter of fact it has never expressed any meaningful concern about local Muslim population in China. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was able to condemn human rights violation against Muslims in Asia-Pacific, including the repression of Rohingya in Myanmar (Ramani 2018). However, it has never touched the problematic issue of Uyghurs. It seems that the Uyghur issue does not fit into the perfect image of Sino-Arab relations. In a similar manner, much less powerful Iran was also not eager to support Uyghurs, even if it supported another Muslim ethnic group in need – the Palestinians.

Having its own issues at home, the Chinese are also reluctant to educate Middle Easterners on governance or democracy – just like the US has been trying for decades. While China could definitely seek its competitive advantage by showing the superiority of its civilization (which has a far longer history than the American one, and Arab one as well), it never had any desire to do so in the Middle East (nor elsewhere globally). As the matter of fact, non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states had been one of the Chinese “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” agenda (Alterman 2018, p. 45–46). Moreover, its approach to MENA region is more state-related and state-led (unlike the US which tends to empower civil society and the private sector to act as a counterbalance against the state). That makes China very unlikely to raise the voice against any Middle Eastern regime, while any activity of social movements or demonstrations in the region will only be looked upon with anxiety. As the Uyghur case indicates, some of these social movements can also be (mis)used in Chinese internal actions towards its own Muslim population.

Conclusions

Intensified economic relations between China and MENA countries seem to benefit everyone. For China, the Middle East is the region that connects China to Europe as a link between Asia and Europe – both land-wise through different infrastructural projects, and within the Maritime Silk Road venture, which consists of ports and related costal infrastructure. They bring benefits for MENA countries by increased investment flows and joint ventures in sectors

not only related directly to OBOR (roads, pipelines, railways and supporting infrastructure), but also reaching further into energy sector, real estate, or commerce. For MENA countries it means not only financial flows, but also the know-how which can boost diversification and competitiveness of local economies. For oil-rich GCC Chinese investment and ideas bring a new impetus into local strategies that aim at securing their economic future. For resources-poor MENA countries it offers new jobs needed on local labour markets.

In other words, both parties offer what the other needs. China has adequate funding, technology and a global vision. MENA countries have the location, energy and the will. Unlike the other superpower – the US – neither is willing to teach the other democracy, nor provoke national or regional conflicts. Moreover, paradoxically America's strategic mistakes in the Middle East and Central Asia work for the benefit of China: instead of focusing more on the Far East, American foreign and security policy is concerned with what is going on in MENA region (Isbrekken 2019).

About a decade ago, Ben Simpfendorfer (2009, p. 4–5) analysed how Arab Middle East had started to turn its back on the West and rediscovered China. Now one can see how strong the relations between the US and MENA countries are. One thing however is true: that both entities – China and the Arab Middle East are rapidly growing and developing on their own terms, and coming together under the OBOR umbrella makes their development only more solid and faster. Thus the story of Talas battle seems to repeat the same pattern. Both parties know their limits, so they do not get beyond the borders, nor try to exercise too much pressure on each other. Both know their good sides, as well as the good sides of their partners. As in the past, China delivers the know-how and technology, while the practically-oriented MENA region provides it with location and fuel to keep it going. Only the last part differs – this time it is the Chinese who will distribute their goods and services on their own; they do not need the Arab merchants to spread their ideas any longer.

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