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China's Middle East Foreign Policy: A Soft Power Approach and Human Right Issues

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Abstract. By strengthening its relationship with Middle Eastern countries, China continues to increase the security of its Middle Eastern oil imports. The “three ugly forces” of terrorism, national separatism, and religious extremism are something that the Chinese would like to fight against in terms of security. This article examines China's Middle East foreign policy in the Middle East, soft power business tactics, and human rights issues. Through an analytical and descriptive approach, data were analyzed utilizing the deductive technique of research. To provide a qualitative interpretation of the subject of this article, these data were then processed, validated, and reviewed using the theories of peaceful rise and peaceful development in foreign policy as a theoretical review. The results of this study showed that China promotes a style of Chinese diplomacy in which China will not interfere with domestic political matters or the human rights issues of other countries. China will not put strict requirements on humanitarian assistance or investment. Three fundamental concepts define China's relations with the Middle Eastern countries: sovereignty projection, the right to protect sovereignty, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. The novelty of this research focuses on China's soft power and human rights in the Middle East rather than on Joseph Nye's three pillars of soft power: political values, culture, and foreign policy.

Keywords. foreign policy, china's middle east, soft power, human rights

1. Introduction

China has interests in the Middle East for many reasons, such as the need to import oil, the ambition to increase power and influence, and desire to establish economic connections.¹ After the cold war ended in 1989, relations between China and the Middle East entered a new era, owing to China's rising international status. China's oil import growth rate dropped by 30% in 2005, owing partly to skyrocketing oil prices, and China's overall reliance on oil imports decreased significantly. The middle East currently supplies more than half of China's total oil imports. By 2015, this sector is estimated to account for 70% of China's oil imports.² In line with its “soft” foreign policy-based approach to handling problems in the Middle East, China

¹ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Yukiko Miyagi, eds., *The Emerging Middle East - East Asia Nexus* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315780177>.

² Massoud Daher, “China and the Middle East: Establishing a New Partnership,” *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 3, no. 1 (2009): 18–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19370679.2009.12023120>.

decides not to utilize its military power to meddle directly in regional crises. As a result, China's influence in the region is growing faster than that of the United States, whose capacity to settle Middle East disputes is increasingly being questioned by its friends in the region. Beijing, the region's leading foreign investor, maintains solid links with virtually all gulf countries, except for Bahrain.³

Energy has been a primary driver of China's spectacular economic growth.⁴ The Middle East is primarily seen by China as a source of energy supplies, a market for Chinese goods and investments, and a significant location for the connectivity and building of infrastructure.⁵ China has invested 177 billion dollars in the Middle East, including 70 billion in the economies of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.⁶ Despite an increase, investment flows between China and Middle Eastern nation continue to be smaller than those between China and EU-member nations. Despite being crucial for the Middle East's economy, China-Middle East trade and investment make up a small portion of China's overall trade and investment. China's commerce with the Middle East has often made up 6-7% of total trade in recent years, while investment makes up a far lower fraction of total trade.⁷

There are many reasons for the security gap in the region, including China's increasingly unpredictable, unilateral, and careless behaviour policies carried out in the US. Another factor contributing to regional instability is the growing rivalry and competition among regional for geopolitical dominance.⁸ There are concerns about how the Middle East fits into China's overall strategy given its expanding global influence and aggression in pursuing its goals. The question of whether China intends to displace the United States as the main security guarantor for various Middle Eastern nations and regimes has received a lot of attention. Obviously, this depends on whether the US leaves the area and whether Middle Eastern nations look for another guarantee. But it's crucial to ask if China is prepared and equipped to take on such a role.⁹ These issues have been brought about by Beijing's non-interference and neutrality-based Middle East policy. Many international pundits believe Beijing should alter its excessively "soft" style of behaviour in the Middle East because the situation there does not call for such a passive political stance and does not entirely match to China's position as the foremost global power. Despite these difficulties, China and the Middle Eastern nations continue to cooperate closely, and China continues to be the region's greatest consumer of its in-demand energy resources.¹⁰

China's political goal is to strengthen the security of its Middle Eastern oil imports by expanding its partnership with Saudi Arabia. In terms of security, the Chinese would like to

³ V. I. Batyuk and Yu V. Morozov, "Politics and Strategy of the United States, the Russian Federation, and China in the Middle East," *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 92, no. 4 (2022): S321–30, <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1019331622100021>.

⁴ Yuchao Zhu, "'Performance Legitimacy' and China's Political Adaptation Strategy," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16, no. 2 (2011): 123–40, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-011-9140-8>.

⁵ Jin Liangxiang, "China and Middle East Security Issues : Challenges , Perceptions and Positions," *Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)*, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26107>.

⁶ Batyuk and Morozov, "Politics and Strategy of the United States, the Russian Federation, and China in the Middle East."

⁷ Tim Niblock, "China and the Middle East: A Global Strategy Where the Middle East Has a Significant but Limited Place," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 14, no. 4 (2020): 481–504, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1847855>.

⁸ Liangxiang, "China and Middle East Security Issues : Challenges , Perceptions and Positions."

⁹ Niblock, "China and the Middle East: A Global Strategy Where the Middle East Has a Significant but Limited Place."

¹⁰ Batyuk and Morozov, "Politics and Strategy of the United States, the Russian Federation, and China in the Middle East."

combat the “three ugly forces” of terrorism, national separatism, and religious extremism. China has worked hard to maintain good relations with Riyadh since it is the intellectual heart of the Islamic world and requires its support to battle Chinese Muslim extremists. Concerning issues as Taiwan or the “One China Policy,” as well as its stance on Tibet and other domestic concerns in the international arena such as human rights, China seeks the Arab countries full support. Furthermore, it laid the groundwork for the growth of trade relations with Saudi Arabia, with the hope that this would encourage commerce with other Arab countries.¹¹ Chinese interactions with its Muslim minority and its worry about Islamic radicalism have a significant impact on its strategy in the Middle East.¹²

In order to examine the evolving relationship between China and the Middle East, this research initiative on “China’s Middle East foreign policy: A soft power approach and human right issues” also takes into account China’s broader engagements with the region in the social and cultural spheres as well as viewpoints on global security, energy, economics, and investments. The fundamental to a successful China policy, according to Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye’s¹³ paper is “getting Asia right.” Allies and partners must lie at the heart of any American strategy to influence China’s rise.¹⁴ According to Joseph Nye¹⁵ “thinking in terms of the US exerting dominance over others will not be sufficient. We need to start thinking about how we might share power to achieve common objectives. Rather than focus on Joseph Nye’s three pillars of soft power are: political values, culture, and foreign policy, novelty of this research focus on China’s soft power and human rights in the Middle East. Explore more China and the Middle East’s trade in energy and goods. Examine China’s business and human right issues in the Middle East. The secondary sources used to construct the data for this study included academic journal articles, publications, and internet sources. An analytical and descriptive technique was used to analyze the data utilizing the deductive method of study. These data were then processed, verified, and examined using the theories of peaceful rise and peaceful development in foreign policy as a theoretical review to provide a qualitative interpretation of the topic of this article.

2. Theories of Peaceful Rise and Peaceful Development in Foreign Policy

Political principles and foreign policy of government are other sources of soft power. According to classic realists, state-to-state ties are based on concepts of honour and reputation.¹⁶ One of the three types of foreign policy according to Hans J. Morgenthau is prestige. By “impressing other nations with the power one’s own nation actually possesses, with the power it believes, or with the power it wants the other nations to believe, it possesses,” this policy of prestige seeks to win over its adversaries.¹⁷ A country’s foreign policy is still vulnerable to change under the governments’ authority, even while political and cultural factors promote such

¹¹ Ehteshami and Miyagi, *The Emerging Middle East - East Asia Nexus*.

¹² Ehteshami and Miyagi.

¹³ Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, “The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Getting Asia Right through 2020,” *CSIS Report*, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.43sup-0696>.

¹⁴ Ely Ratner et al., “Rising to the China Challenge: Renewing American Competitiveness in the Indo-Pacific,” *CNAS* (Washington, 2019), [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1369-7021\(02\)05421-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1369-7021(02)05421-4).

¹⁵ Joseph Nye, “China Will Not Surpass America Any Time Soon: Exaggerated Fears About Growing Chinese Power Are Counter-Productive,” *Financial Times*, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/7f700ab4-306d-11e9-80d2-7b637a9e1ba1>.

¹⁶ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Sixth Edit (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1948), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3017382>.

¹⁷ Morgenthau.

a projection of power.¹⁸ Countries are supposed to pursue policies that advance their national interests; but, how those interests are defined is open to change.¹⁹ Since the state is regarded as a source of moral authority, soft power can affect foreign policy. Because other states' objectives seem unattainable in comparison, the state has a higher chance to use its agenda to prevent them from expressing other views. Nye defines soft power as a nation's ability to create conditions that lead to other countries forming preferences or defining their interests similarly to its own. Ideological and cultural attractiveness, as well as the rules and institutions of global regimes, are frequently the sources of this influence.²⁰

Nye believes that an effective foreign policy should prioritize cultural and public diplomacy, the distribution of public goods, multilateral collaboration, and the protection of human rights.²¹ In this regard, a strategy based on widely accepted values is more likely to encourage collaboration. A state's soft power can be boosted by foreign policies if they are seen as moral legitimate. Once a nation has amassed sufficient soft power, it can utilize it to its advantage by "preventing others from expressing particular opinions because they appear to be overly idealistic."²² Lundestad contends that over the latter part of the 20th century, this sense of shared ideologies served as the foundation for US-led Cold War alliances. For the US and its allies, these ideals included concepts of democracy, federation, and open trade.²³ The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States did, however, cause the breakdown of American soft power, much like unpopular strategies in Vietnam. China was portrayed as a hazardous state from an ideological standpoint by Mao Zedong's foreign policy.²⁴ Beijing's prior use of military force to address strategic issues wasn't well received. This argument was only made clear by its frequent conflicts in the South China Sea and its ownership of one of the Spratly Islands. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 is thought to have marked a turning point in Beijing's foreign policy, nevertheless.²⁵

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership after Mao modernized China's foreign policy by taking a less aggressive and more cooperative approach to dealing with global and regional issues.²⁶ China began changing its foreign policy in the 1980s with similar goal in mind, hoping to create a harmonious global community. The CCP revised its foreign policy principles in order to bring about a new world order by taking into account the lessons learned from its Mao Era foreign policy and most crucially the experience of the international communism movement.²⁷ In summary, Sheng Ding²⁸ explained that China's new model of desired international orders entails the following principles: (1) All nations have the right to

¹⁸ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.2307/40204149>.

¹⁹ Nye.

²⁰ Nye.

²¹ Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power and American Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2004): 255–70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20202345>.

²² Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.

²³ Nye.

²⁴ Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang, "Sources and Limits of Chinese 'Soft Power,'" *Survival* 48, no. 2 (2006): 17–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330600765377>.

²⁵ Chaudhry Saeed Ullah, "China's Soft Power: Changing the World Perception" (Naval Postgraduate School, 2015).

²⁶ Evan S. Medeiros and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 6 (2003): 22–35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20033754>.

²⁷ Sheng Ding, "Soft Power and the Rise of China: An Assessment of China's Soft Power in Its Modernization Process" (PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2006).

²⁸ Ding.

determine their own social, political, economic, and development pathways; none, especially great powers, should meddle in the internal affairs of other nations or force their values, ideologies, or growth models upon them; (2) Mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity; (3) equitable and peaceful dialogue as a means of resolving international conflicts; (4) equal participation rights for all states in global problem coordination; (5) reform of the current outmoded international economic order; and (6) major and crucial role for the UN in establishing the new international order.

China achieved significant success in its foreign relations during the 1980s and 1990s by following the same principles, although a few errors. Beijing not only succeeded in fostering a more hospitable international environment for its national economic structure, but also pushed for more liberal economic policy. In the twenty-first century, China's foreign condition has changed more. China now approaches bilateral ties with more flexibility, participates more in multilateral institutions, and takes security matters more seriously. "The revisions constitute an effort by Chinese leaders to rehabilitate their nation's post-Tiananmen image, preserve and advance their economic interests, and improve their security."²⁹

Chinese officials' numerous narratives that portrayed China as a country that seeks peace, aware that the world is concerned about China's ascent and its potential consequences. The first was President Jiang Zemin's 1997 release of China's "New Security Concept" to replace the country's "Old Cold war security outlook" According to this theory, "mutual trust and benefit, equality, interdependence, cooperative security, and international rules" should all be promoted.³⁰ Then, in the spring of 2003, senior party adviser Zheng Bijian proclaimed Beijing's goal of "peaceful ascent."³¹ Zheng claimed that China has been peacefully rising since 1978 and that this trend is expected to continue into the middle of the twenty-first century.³² Beijing sends the message that its expanding economy, combined with political and military force, will not only encourage peaceful trade, but will also contribute to global security and address transitional difficulties.³³

The importance of the peaceful rise theory, as promoted during the Hu Jintao era, was reflected in the Chinese government's desire to declare the growth of China's national strength and its impending rise to the status of a superpower in order to win over neighboring Asian nations to this public statement.³⁴ The peaceful rise concept has straightforward ideas. Zheng Bijian has presented four points to support his idea of China's peaceful ascent. First, given that the government must provide for a population of 1.3 billion people, China's rapid economic growth, which it accomplished in a very short amount of time, had to begin at a very low level, making it still not that substantial. As a result, over the next few decades, China must devote all of its efforts to internal growth. Second, China's growth policy is to participate more in the global community rather than to isolate itself from it. Third, China does not want to hurt other

²⁹ Ding.

³⁰ Evelyn Goh, "The Modes of China's Influence: Cases from Southeast Asia," *Asian Survey* 54, no. 5 (2014): 825–48, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2014.54.5.825>.

³¹ Elizabeth Economy, "China's Rise in Southeast Asia: Implications for the United States," *Japan Focus* 3, no. 10 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560500115184>.

³² Economy.

³³ Economy.

³⁴ Young Nam Cho and Jong Ho Jeong, "China's Soft Power: Discussions, Resources, and Prospects," *University of California Press* 48, no. 3 (2008): 453–72.

states while pursuing its own independent economic objectives. Fourth, the PRC's current economic expansion is promoting stability and growth across all of Asia.³⁵

Chinese researchers claim that the peaceful rise theory implies three changes to China's foreign policy: a move to neighbor-centered diplomacy in place of American-centered diplomacy; more focused diplomatic goals to assume the role of world leadership as opposed to merely obtaining an acceptable place in international society; and a shift from a diplomatic strategy that is more focused on economic development to one that is more focused on these three changes. In a nutshell, the peaceful rise thesis states symbolically a shift in China's worldwide strategy focus from internal to external.³⁶

The peaceful rise idea got further recognition after being addressed by Premier Wen Jiabao and then by Hu Jintao during the celebration of Mao Zedong's 110th birthday that same month. However, "peaceful development" has been used instead of "peaceful rising" from April 2004, and Hu and Wen have now adopted this new word. In April 2004, Hu Jintao used the phrase "peaceful development" rather than "peaceful rising" while discussing China's foreign policy during a speech at the Boao Forum. This was indicative of China's intention to refrain from using the term "peaceful rise" in official documents.³⁷

The Chinese State Council Information Office produced a White Paper outlining the "peaceful development theory" in December 2005. According to the document, peaceful development is necessary for China's modernization and growth because it would create a peaceful world and promote world peace. It continues by saying that in order to achieve this progress, China depended on its own capabilities and innovation while also gradually opening up and embracing globalization trends in an effort to share gains with other nations. Additionally, the pledge assures that China would pursue economic prosperity while adhering to the principles of cooperation, peace, and development.³⁸

There are not many differences between the peaceful rising theory and the peaceful development theory when we compare their respective theories' contents. Peaceful development is a new title for the peaceful rise hypothesis, with the addition of the phrase "harmonious world." This suggests that China hasn't completely given up on the ideas outlined in the peaceful rise hypothesis. However, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the word change from "peaceful rise" to "peaceful growth". It highlights China's ongoing reluctance to declare its ascent to the world because rising implies a change in power while developing does not.³⁹

3. China's Soft Power Discourse

In a book about the future of American power written in 1990, Joseph S. Nye developed the idea of soft power. He discovered that traditional metrics of economic and military resources were insufficient to explain behavior when attempting to evaluate relative power. They helped to illustrate how force and payment work, but not how attraction and persuasion might be used to get the desired results. Nye was motivated by this to explain what "soft power" is. Even while the idea is still very fresh, the behavior is not. People engage with one another on a daily basis using soft power. Few of us mostly get what we want by payment and force. Despite the fact that Nye created the idea in the context of a book on American dominance, it is not just American. Even if the term "soft power" was not popularized, ancient Chinese culture had a

³⁵ Cho and Jeong.

³⁶ Cho and Jeong.

³⁷ Cho and Jeong.

³⁸ Cho and Jeong.

³⁹ Cho and Jeong.

strong knowledge of it.⁴⁰ China's traditional culture has long been interesting. Confucian values such as social harmony, ritual, filial devotion, and compassionate rule flourished throughout East Asia. According to Henry Kissinger, "in the Chinese form of exceptionalism, China did not export its values but allowed others to come to seek them." However, in recent years, China has responded to the internet age by establishing hundreds of Confucius Institutes around the world to educate its language and culture.⁴¹

China's soft power, and more specifically its soft power strategy, has been painstakingly studied by Chinese scholars. Their research on soft power is multidisciplinary and includes areas of political science (primarily comparative and international politics), humanities (such as culture, education, and history), as well as topics and issues that fall under the general heading of "socialism with Chinese characteristics."⁴² Chinese political scientists, who concentrate on theories, conceptualizations, institutions, and actual policy cases, humanities scholars, who concentrate on the sources of Chinese soft power from a cultural and historical perspective, and proponents with political, ideological, and propaganda backgrounds, who are primarily connected to the "sinification" of Marxism, are the three main groups that dominate the discussion of Chinese soft power. Different people in each group have different opinions on issues like the specific steps Beijing should take to increase its soft power globally.⁴³

Despite strong debate among Chinese intellectuals about 'soft power,' "China has yet to build a comprehensive, coherent, national soft-power strategy, despite diverse actions toward this objective."⁴⁴ China's soft power strategy is still ad hoc at this point. Bonnie S. Glaser and Melissa E. Murphy disagree with Kurlantzick's claim that Chinese soft power is a "charm offensive" and believe it is more of a response to China's perceived threat.⁴⁵ They believe that Chinese leaders do not intend to start a rivalry with the West and the United States by presenting "socialist ideals as an alternative to Western values," but they do see this possibility in the future once China becomes more potent and plays a greater role on the global stage.⁴⁶ China's current goal is merely to provide a softer image through promoting its culture. The majority of intellectual perspectives, according to Glaser and Murphy, hold that culture is the key component of a state's authority. The Chinese leadership has accepted this strategy, which has bolstered support for the growth of China's cultural soft power assets at home and abroad.⁴⁷

China's strategic circles firmly hold that a state's standing is decided by its capacity to project both its soft power and its hard power to "keep beneficial position in international competition."⁴⁸ Soft power cannot be separated from China's ascent since any world power

⁴⁰ Joseph S. Nye, "China and Soft Power," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 19, no. 2 (2012): 151–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2012.706889>.

⁴¹ Nye.

⁴² Li Mingjiang, "China Debates Soft Power: Implications for Chinese Foreign Policy," in *Chinese Scholars and Foreign Policy: Debating International Relations*, ed. Huiyun Feng, Kai He, and Yan Xuetong (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429029738>.

⁴³ Mingjiang.

⁴⁴ Bonnie S Glaser and Melissa E Murphy, "Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Ongoing Debate," in *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: Competition and Cooperation in the Developing World, A Report of the CSIS Smart Power Initiative*, ed. Carola McGiffert (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019), 10–26, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315208671>.

⁴⁵ Glaser and Murphy.

⁴⁶ Glaser and Murphy.

⁴⁷ Glaser and Murphy.

⁴⁸ Li Mingjiang, "China Debates Soft Power," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, no. 2 (2008): 287–308, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pon011>.

must convey an engaging culture and social ideals to the publics of other countries. According to Luo Jianbo, “if a major power is unable to supply some guiding moral or cultural values of universal significance for international society, its major power position is unlikely to be recognized by other states, and even its own development is difficult to sustain.”⁴⁹ Therefore, if China wants to become a big power and gain acceptance from international community, it must promote attractive characteristics that are recognized by all human societies.⁵⁰ In contrast to the school of thought associated with Hu-Wen leadership, which holds that soft power should be used to foster favorable domestic conditions in order to achieve a peaceful rise through “harmonious society,” the first group of Chinese scholars holds that soft power should be projected toward the international community in order to become recognized as a great power.⁵¹ According to them, China must first address domestic difficulties in order to attain stability by “greater attention to culture, national cohesion, morals, and institutions.”⁵²

Various cultural characteristics of one state’s culture provide different levels of appeal compared to other states.⁵³ What is attractive on one country may be appealing to people in another country or select elements of society. “Culture is the set of values and activities that give a society meaning.”⁵⁴ Culture is generally separated into two categories: high culture and popular culture. If high culture appeals to society’s elites, popular culture appeals to the general populace.⁵⁵ Literature, the arts, and education are examples of high culture.⁵⁶ Most people believe that high culture more effective in terms of its contribution to soft power.⁵⁷

In “China’s Soft Power: Changing the World Perception,” Ullah⁵⁸ notes that there are two schools of thought about the sources of soft power and that there are disagreements based on how each party views the phenomenon. According to Nye, it is “the capacity to achieve what you desire through attraction as opposed to compulsion or payment. In his well-known book “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics,” Nye⁵⁹ emphasized that a country’s soft power lay in the three joints of its culture, political values, and foreign policy. Culture refers to the ideals that are rooted and have meaning in society. Literature, art, and education are examples of high culture. Because of the magnetic link and the tasks, it produces, when a country’s culture incorporates universal values and its programs promote those values and interests that are shared by others, it raises the possibility of bringing up the difficulties that are being asked. Asian countries also have emotional implicit soft power coffers. Ancient Asian peoples had a significant influence on the rest of the world for millennia through trade, dress, and gastronomy. Nye concentrates on culture, politics, and international relations as sources of soft power.⁶⁰

⁴⁹ Mingjiang.

⁵⁰ Ullah, “China’s Soft Power: Changing the World Perception.”

⁵¹ Mingjiang, “China Debates Soft Power.”

⁵² Mingjiang.

⁵³ Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.

⁵⁴ Nye.

⁵⁵ Joshua Kurlantzick, “China’s Charm: Implications of Chinese Soft Power,” *Carnegie Endowment Policy Brief* 47, no. June (2006): 1–7.

⁵⁶ Kurlantzick.

⁵⁷ Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.

⁵⁸ Ullah, “China’s Soft Power: Changing the World Perception.”

⁵⁹ Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.

⁶⁰ Jeanne L. Wilson, “Russia and China Respond to Soft Power: Interpretation and Readaptation of a Western Construct,” *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (2015): 287–300, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12095>.

According to Nye, the distribution of power is divided into military power, economic power, and soft power, and there is no room for their combination. Josh Kurlantzick, on the other hand, combines the fundamentals of economic power with soft power, integrating the two under soft power. According to Nye, favourable forces don't belong in the category of soft power because they don't take the form of "carrot" or "stick" forces. favourable conditions drive other countries to do commodities instead of luring them there.⁶¹

4. China's Soft Power and Human Rights in the Middle East

China's Middle East foreign policy refers to the growing relevance of geoeconomics, namely the foreign policy economic instruments that governments utilize to attain geopolitical aims. Geoeconomics is concerned with economic operations that have geopolitical elements, consequences, and settings. Geoeconomics is considered as the systematic use of economic instruments to attain geopolitical goals. In a nutshell state foreign policy focuses on how countries employ economic power to achieve desired geopolitical goals, namely the economic and financial tools they use to satisfy their geopolitical interests. Geoeconomics, according to Blackwill and Harris, "combines the logic of geopolitics, which is fundamentally based on zero interstate relations, with the tools of economics." Because of this, it is important to see a country's unique economic operations not as a way to attain economic gain using the logic of a non-zero-sum relationship, but rather as a way to pursue geopolitical goals and engage in geopolitical competition.⁶²

According to Yanzhong Huang and Sheng Ding,⁶³ China's development has been accompanied by mass attempts to establish soft power as well as hard power. Soft power assists Beijing in redrawing geopolitical ties in ways that would promote its emergences as a global power. This procedure is known as Nonetheless, this is compounded by a lack of soft power resources and inconsistent progress in projecting soft power abroad.⁶⁴ Furthermore, both domestically and internationally, Chinese nationalistic sentiments are aided by western mainstream media. Many Chinese claim that since 2000, Western media has not only displayed an anti-Beijing trend but also a bias and prejudice against the Chinese people. Some Chinese scholars claim that by supporting Western mainstream media's foreign policy objectives, they have agreed to support America's goal of isolating and restricting China. For instance, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), an independent media watchdog group, published a study in 2020 stating that despite numerous protest movements taking place around the world in 2019, Western mainstream media excessively and thoroughly covered events in Hong Kong.⁶⁵

Discussion about China's foreign policy in the context of soft power also explained by Professor Cipto in his book "China's Diplomacy in the Islamic World" that to improve relations with developing countries, China offers a model of Chinese diplomacy in which China will not interfere with domestic political affairs or the human rights conditions of other countries. China will not put forward strict conditions for providing foreign aid or investment.⁶⁶ Three essential

⁶¹ Ullah, "China's Soft Power: Changing the World Perception."

⁶² Martina Ponížilová, "Foreign Policy Activities of China in the Middle East: Establishing Energy Security or Being a Responsible Emerging Power?," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21, no. 6 (2019): 643–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1506292>.

⁶³ Yanzhong Huang and Sheng Ding, "Dragon's Underbelly: An Analysis of China's Soft Power," *East Asia* 23, no. 4 (2006): 22–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03179658>.

⁶⁴ Huang and Ding.

⁶⁵ Mohammad Hussaini, "The Historical Sources of Nationalism in the Contemporary China," *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 13, no. November (2020): 536–50, <https://techniumscience.com/index.php/socialsciences/article/view/332/124>.

⁶⁶ Bambang Cipto, *China's Diplomacy in the Islamic World*, Cetakan I (Yogyakarta: Simpang Nusantara, 2022).

principles; sovereignty projection, the right to protect sovereignty, and non-interference in other states' internal affairs-guide China's relations with Middle Eastern countries.⁶⁷This model of China's diplomacy is of course at odds with the Washington Agreement which requires tariff reductions, incentives for foreign investment, removal of subsidies, privatization of state enterprises. Chinese diplomacy in developing countries as Resource/Energy Diplomacy.⁶⁸

The increasing need for China's raw materials to support its growing industrial sector has made relations with developing countries unavoidable. Nickel, iron ore, and aluminium are abundant in developing countries. This makes developing countries play a strategic role in China's diplomacy. The need to develop relations with developing countries has made relations with the Muslim world inevitable given that many of them have oil and gas reserves. China's sizable demand for natural resources, especially oil and gas resources, forms a dynamic relationship with the Islamic world. Relations with Islamic countries grew rapidly amid Western suspicion of Muslim countries. It makes sense to research China's soft power, diplomacy, and investment in the Islamic world specially in the Middle Eastern countries considering the fact that on the one hand, Western countries practice an ideological approach in their diplomacy with the Islamic world while China tends to play a moderate and pragmatic player in dealing with the Islamic world. The different approaches adopted by the West and China in dealing with the Islamic world are the reasons why China's diplomacy in the Islamic world is a significant contribution to current and future international relations.⁶⁹

4.1 *China and the Middle East's Trade in Energy and Goods*

China's interest in the Middle East is influenced by its energy needs. China had its own oil supply up until the early 1990s, but since then it has been more interested in the Middle East. Growing cross-border investment trends indicate growing connections. Middle Eastern countries are more interested in China taking over from the US than China is. The Middle East's growing discontent with the United States corresponds with China's expanding presence there.⁷⁰

The International Energy Agency projects that by 2030, China will need to import 75% of its energy. Energy shortages could stymie China's rapid economic progress, according to Chinese analysts.⁷¹ In recent years, China has expanded the sources from which it obtains crude oil. Despite a significant rise over the previous ten years, oil imports fell for the first time since 2001 in 2021. 10.3 million barrels per day of petroleum were imported by China in 2021, down more than 500,000 barrels per day from 2020. China became the world's largest crude oil importer in 2017.⁷²

Saudi Arabia, which has long contributed significantly to China's imports of crude oil, surpassed all other countries as the top source of imports in 2021, accounting for 17% of total imports.⁷³ In early 2019, Saudi Aramco negotiated new long-term crude oil supply agreements

⁶⁷ Niblock, "China and the Middle East: A Global Strategy Where the Middle East Has a Significant but Limited Place."

⁶⁸ Cipto, *China's Diplomacy in the Islamic World*.

⁶⁹ Cipto.

⁷⁰ Jon B Alterman, "China's Soft Power in the Middle East," *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: Competition and Cooperation in the Developing World*, 2009, 63–76.

⁷¹ Alterman.

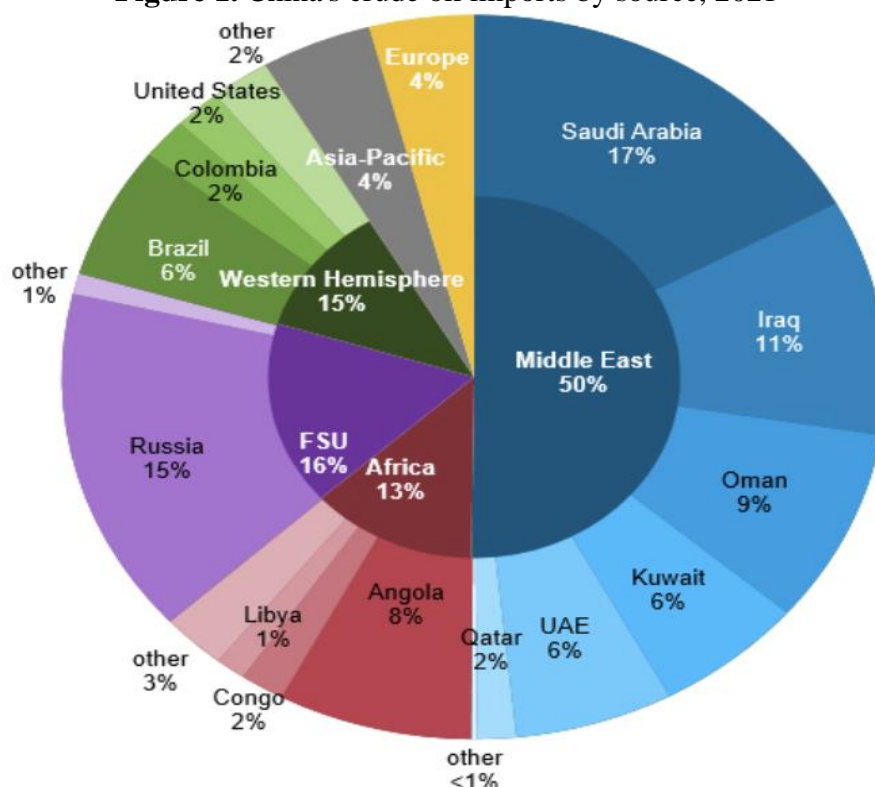
⁷² BP p.l.c., "FACTS Global Energy Group, Asia Pacific Databook 1 Crude Oil Balances," *BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, 2022, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2022-full-report.pdf>.

⁷³ US Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Executive Summary: China," 2022.

with Chinese firms. Imports from Saudi Arabia have increased by 86,000 b/d since then.⁷⁴ In 2021, 50% of all crude oil imports were from Middle Eastern nations, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman (Figure 1).⁷⁵

China’s energy imports from the Middle East are balanced by its exports of goods and services to that region, which have also grown quickly. These exports are the oil-based economies of the Middle East. The Middle Eastern oil producing countries are key customers of Chinese light manufacturing products, including autos, food, engineering, and labour services. Trade between the two countries has grown; since 2000, Chinese exports to the Middle East have expanded more than seven times while imports have increased five times.⁷⁶

Figure 1. China's crude oil imports by source, 2021



Source: Global Trade Tracker⁷⁷

4.2 China’s Business and Human Right Issues in the Middle East

In general, the Middle East is emerging into a more multipolar region. On one hand, the US has lost some of its hegemonic influence. A growing number of weak and failed states have emerged in the decade after the Arab uprisings.⁷⁸ According to Cavatorta, the region’s

⁷⁴ US Energy Information Administration.

⁷⁵ US Energy Information Administration.

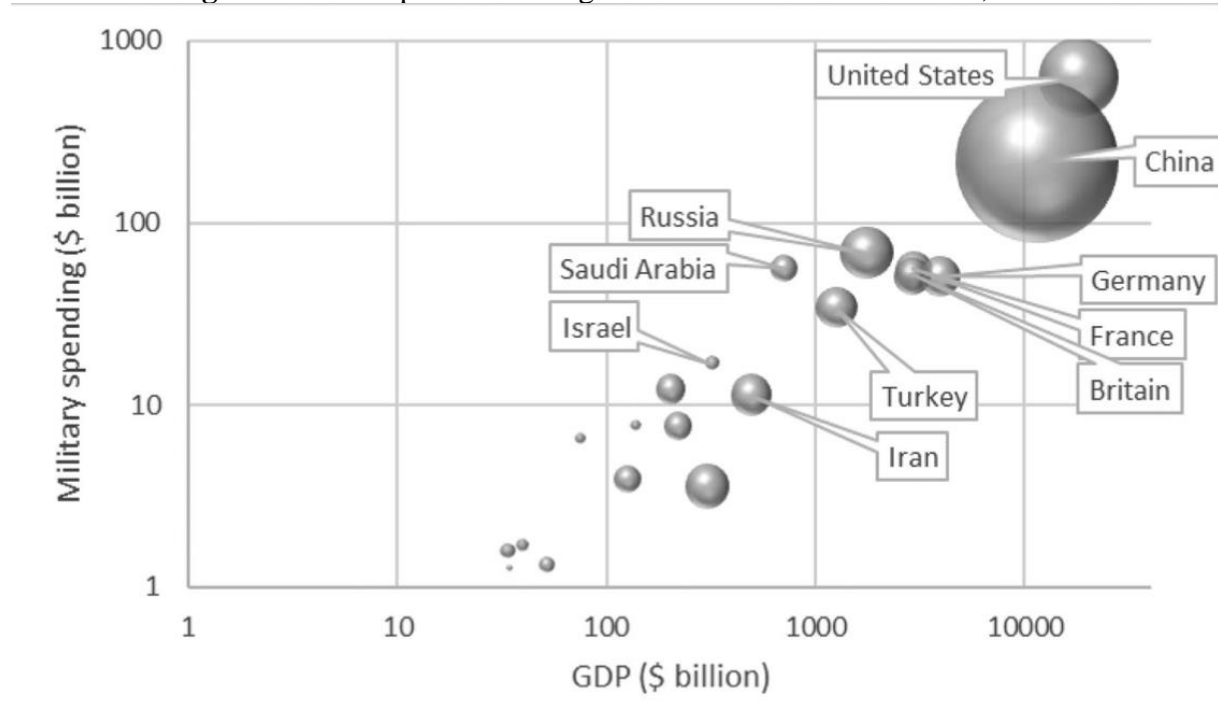
⁷⁶ Lee Hudson Teslik, “China-Gulf Economic Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, 2008, <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-gulf-economic-relations>.

⁷⁷ US Energy Information Administration, “Country Analysis Executive Summary: China.”

⁷⁸ Mehran Kamrava, “Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East,” *Ieee.Es*, 2021; Anna Sunik, “Regional Leadership in Authoritarian Contexts - Saudi Arabia ’ s New Military Interventionism as Part of Its Leadership Bid in the Middle East,” *Rising Powers Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2018): 65–85, [https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-64373-7%0ANutzungsbedingungen](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-64373-7%0ANutzungsbedingungen;); Mehran Kamrava, “Accessing the Multipolarity and

multipolarity makes it unstable because several of the regional powers have broadly comparable levels of power capability. As a result, it is difficult for one or more of them to keep the others at distance.⁷⁹ Furthermore, there are no strong and coherent alliance blocs among the major regional powers capable of effectively challenging the others. Instead, the region’s powers have a multiplicity of bilateral connections that are always altering.⁸⁰

Figure 2. Global powers and regional states in the Middle East, 2019



Source: World Bank⁸¹

Several states are particularly noticeable in this dynamic setting. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel are a few of them. They are the region’s biggest economic and military force (Figure 2). These could also include a few additional nations, including Qatar and the UAE, whose influence has increased over the previous ten years.⁸²

The Middle East is made up of variety of small and/ or weak governments as well as non-state actors like ISIS below the global and regional levels. China must compete with rivalry and tensions from more significant international and regional forces in these locations, which are reflected in proxy wars. Political authority has fallen in many states, and societies have

Instability in the Middle East,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, no. August (2018): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2018.08.003>.

⁷⁹ Guy Burton, “China’s Three Level Game in the Middle East,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2021): 189–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2021.1928412>.

⁸⁰ Burton.

⁸¹ Burton.

⁸² Burton; Peter Salisbury, “Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and National Security Policy,” *Chatham House Research Paper*, no. July (2020), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-07-01-risk-in-uae-salisbury.pdf>.

disintegrated; some of these breakdowns followed the 2011 uprisings, while others were caused by a prior lack of coherence.⁸³

Saudi Arabia and Iran have increased their support for the political parties centered on Saad Hariri and Hezbollah while the role of the Syrian state has decreased since 2011. Because of the power dynamics, neither side could overwhelm the other. Chinese-Palestinian ties have primarily focused on business during this time, with Tripoli being a potential location for Belt and Road initiatives including the construction of the Tripoli port and a railway connecting Beirut and Tripoli. However, since 2019, a growing divide between the state and the populace has been caused by a mounting economic crisis and political class demonstrations. Currently, China runs the risk of becoming linked with the elite as the political system changes.⁸⁴

Similar political impasses and external pressures have also persisted in the West Bank and Gaza, where Israel continues to be the last arbiter due to its occupation and what Halper has called its "matrix of control" over Palestinian land, sea, air, and water.⁸⁵ The two most powerful groups in the Palestinian political system, Fatah and Hamas, which respectively dominate the West Bank and Gaza, are still at odds with one another on the inside. Beijing, however, had only made a few generic pronouncements in support of a Palestinian state and the Oslo process, despite the fact that the two parties had unanimously committed to hold elections during the transfer of the US presidency (which have since been postponed). Furthermore, it's critical to consider the bigger picture of China's relationship with the Palestinians. Beijing has a long history of supporting the Palestinians, but its relationship with Israel may be more lucrative from a financial and economic standpoint.⁸⁶

Although Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown in 2011, Libya is still divided. By 2014, the nation was split, but this division covered up deeper divisions at the regional, tribal, and local levels. The Government of National Accord (GNA), which was recognized by the UN, was on one side, and an eastern government supported by General Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army force was on the other. He attempted a second assault against the GNA in 2019 with support from Egypt, the UAE, and Russia; Turkey stood behind the GNA.⁸⁷

A military standoff between the GNA and Haftar in the middle of 2020 set the stage for a ceasefire and political mediation. Chinese media supported the Political Dialogue Forum, which led to the establishment of a new interim government in February 2021 to oversee national elections in December. Despite the fact that foreign countries like Russia, Turkey, the UAE, and Egypt remained inside the country, the results were formally welcomed by the Chinese. As a result, their presence continued to be crucial for Chinese interests, especially if their businesses could actively participate in bidding for infrastructure projects should they become available.⁸⁸

China formally supports the Abdrabbah Mansur Hadi administration in Yemen, which Saudi Arabia has backed through direct military engagement in the conflict since 2015. By selling drones to Saudi Arabia and its partner, the UAE, who then deployed them in their military operations there, China has also contributed to the hostilities there.⁸⁹ Chinese support for Saudi Arabia's stance stands in stark contrast to the treatment of the Houthi rebels, who

⁸³ Burton, "China's Three Level Game in the Middle East."

⁸⁴ Burton.

⁸⁵ Jeff Halper, *An Israeli in Palestine: Resisting Dispossession, Redeeming Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 2008).

⁸⁶ Burton, "China's Three Level Game in the Middle East."

⁸⁷ Burton.

⁸⁸ Burton.

⁸⁹ Burton.

oppose Saudi presence and get only a tiny contribution in arms and funding from the Iranians.⁹⁰ However, the Chinese have not totally barred the Houthis access. There has been sporadic communication with the organization, which believes that it should be a part of any peace process. It praised President Biden's move to revoke his predecessor's classification of the group as a terrorist organization as a result, and it backed more active US mediation.⁹¹

Iran was able to increase its sway over political decision-makers from the Shia majority population in Iraq thanks to the political vacuum the US left there after the US invasion in 2003.⁹² Chinese capital benefited from the post-war environment as well, since numerous enterprises won tenders to build the energy sector.⁹³ Washington's decision-makers were irate and accused Beijing of "free-riding" as a result of this.⁹⁴

China's emphasis on business opportunities may have improved relations with the leadership of Iraq, but it left the nation ill-prepared to handle the security issue that arose in 2014 when ISIS grew and took control of parts of the country. More so than revisionist actors like Turkey or Iran, the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq posed a severe threat to the regional state structure. It wanted to completely replace the current state structure with a new, more religiously based majoritarian system of government that did not respect current state borders rather than just altering it.⁹⁵

China did not lead the international coalition devoted to ISIS's destruction, despite the existential threat it posed. Instead, the US and other nations took a more direct approach to combating the group, while China remained in the background and may have even provided operational and logistical support.⁹⁶ China also took a conflicting attitude in relation to other foreign powers operating in response to ISIS: while it denounced the US involvement in Syria, it tolerated the Russian presence on the grounds that Damascus had invited them in.⁹⁷

More lately, China has made an effort to distance itself from the conflict between the US and Iran over influence in Iraq. Beijing focused and pursuing business prospects and cooperation while the US and Iran engaged in tit-for-tat moves in late 2019 and early 2020. One was a 2019 deal that would use oil sales from Iraq to China to pay for the nation's participation in Belt and Road projects in the transportation and energy sectors.⁹⁸ An agreement between Baghdad and Zhenhua Oil firm at the end of 2020 was another more recent venture. The US was also put to the test by Zhenhua's connections to the Chinese government's arms

⁹⁰ Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen : A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 92, no. 3 (2016): 647–63, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12599>.

⁹¹ Burton, "China's Three Level Game in the Middle East."

⁹² Kayhan Barzegar and Stephen M. Walt, "Stephen M. Walt on the U.S., Iran, and the New Balance of Power in the Persian Gulf," Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2008, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/stephen-m-walt-us-iran-and-new-balance-power-persian-gulf>.

⁹³ Matt Schiavenza, "Who Won the Iraq War? China," *Atlantic*, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/03/who-won-the-iraq-war-china/274267/>.

⁹⁴ Burton, "China's Three Level Game in the Middle East."

⁹⁵ Burton.

⁹⁶ Peter Ford, "Why China Stays Quiet on Iraq, despite Being No. 1 Oil Investor," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 27, 2014, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2014/0627/Why-China-stays-quiet-on-Iraq-despite-being-no.-1-oil-investor>.

⁹⁷ Shannon Tiezzi, "US Air Strikes in Syria: China's Conundrum," *The Diplomat*, September 24, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/09/us-air-strikes-in-syria-chinas-conundrum/>.

⁹⁸ CMS Legal Services, "Belt and Road Initiative The View from the Middle East and North Africa," 2021.

manufacturer Norinco to determine how willingly Washington was willing to divorce commerce reasons from security ones.⁹⁹

Finally, there was strife in the Gulf between the monarchies of the Arab Gulf, particularly the blockade of Qatar from 2017 to 2021. Leading the assault, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates alleged that Qatar supported militant and terrorist organizations, received unfair media coverage from the Al Jazeera networks based in Doha, and had a soft spot for Iran. If the Saudis thought isolating Qatar would make it submit, they were wrong. Ironically, Qatar was driven by the Saudis' actions to seek commercial and diplomatic backing from Saudi rivals like Turkey and Iran in order to get over the restrictions imposed by the Saudis' blockade of its land border. Iran has thus increased its influence in Qatar, though not as much as it has in Syria.¹⁰⁰

China maintained a neutral public stance during the crisis. China's business links were arguably more slanted toward Saudi Arabia than Qatar itself in actuality, though. The fact that there was more trade and investment there than in Qatar was a major factor in this.¹⁰¹ China had a comprehensive strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia, whereas Qatar is the only country with whom it has such a partnership. Furthermore, Sheikh Emir Tamim Al Thani, who had hoped for stronger relations when he visited Beijing in February 2019, has been dissatisfied with China's lack of indications that will improve its relations with Qatar.¹⁰²

Sovereignty projection, the right to protect sovereignty, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states are essential elements in China's interactions with Middle Eastern countries. This part of strategy is critical for China's domestic interests, and it also projects an idea with which many governments in developing countries agree. The country's defense of its sovereignty includes the country's territorial and maritime rights, as well as the responsibility to defend them and the requirement that others acknowledge them.¹⁰³ In order to maintain its independence and capacity to fulfil its commitments in international relations, a state must maintain its sovereignty. Because of its inherent sovereignty, a state is able to determine its foreign policy, how it will interact with other nations, the kind of politics it will pursue, and the socioeconomic policies that will best suit its particular needs and circumstances. A state also has a duty to defend its borders. International law prevents interfering in another state's internal affairs, although a state may ask another to abide by UN resolutions and uphold human rights without using coercion in order to avoid being considered an intrusion. The same holds true for how a state handles minorities living within its borders because, according to international law, they have a right to fair treatment.¹⁰⁴

For Middle Eastern countries, recognition of their supposed domestic sovereign rights, or the ability to conduct oneself as they see fit within their sovereign territory, is critical. Both parties have reason to assume that the sovereignty notion offers an understanding foundation

⁹⁹ Simon Watkins, "The Real Reason Why Iraq Paused Its Major Oil Deal With China," March 1, 2021, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/General/The-Real-Reason-Why-Iraq-Paused-Its-Major-Oil-Deal-With-China.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Burton, "China's Three Level Game in the Middle East."

¹⁰¹ Burton.

¹⁰² Jonathan Fulton, "China's Changing Role in the Middle East," *Atlantic Council, Rafik Hariri Center for Middle East*, 2019.

¹⁰³ Niblock, "China and the Middle East: A Global Strategy Where the Middle East Has a Significant but Limited Place."

¹⁰⁴ Charles Okeke, "In Search of Consistency in International Law on the Right to Self-Determination, Non-Interference, and Territorial Integrity," *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 34, no. August (2022): 331–46, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v34i1.7006>.

for their partnership given their marginally different worldviews. Middle Eastern governments are reluctant to voice any aggressive concerns they may have about domestic developments in China because of the sovereignty idea such as the treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang.¹⁰⁵ Muslims in China are typically influenced by Islamic political and religious beliefs from the Middle East. The social stability and economic growth of Northwest China may face significant challenges if religious ideologies and minority separatism conflict. For instance, Saudi clerics advised the Saudi Royal Family to support Chinese Muslim people financially and diplomatically in response to the Chinese government's severe response to the 1997 Uyghur riots in Xinjiang city of Yinning. Former Saudi Arabian grand mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Baz, who is now deceased, had said, "We have a moral obligation to support our Muslim brothers".¹⁰⁶

5. Conclusion

China's significant demand for natural resources, particularly oil and gas, leads to a dynamic relationship with Islamic countries especially Middle Eastern countries. China's Middle East relations increased significantly amid western distrust of Muslim countries. It makes sense to investigate China soft power, diplomacy, investment, and human right issues in Middle Eastern countries, considering that Western countries use an ideological approach in their diplomacy with the Islamic world, whereas China plays a more moderate and pragmatic role in dealing with the Islamic world.

China would need to import 75% of its energy by 2030, according to the International Energy Agency. Chinese analysts claim that energy shortages could halt China's rapid economic growth. China has increased the number of sources from which it obtains crude oil in recent years. China imported 10.3 million barrels of petroleum per day in 2021, decrease of more than 500,000 barrels per day from previous year. China's energy imports from the Middle East are balanced by rapid growth in its exports of goods and services to that region.

Discussion of China's foreign policy in the context of soft power is further explained by Professor Cipto in his book, "China's diplomacy in the Islamic world," that China offers a model of Chinese diplomacy in which China will not interfere in the domestic political affairs of other countries in order to improve relations with developing nations. China won't put forth severe requirements for granting foreign aid or accepting foreign investment. China's relations with the Middle Eastern countries are governed by three key principles: sovereignty projection, the right to protect sovereignty, and non-interference in other governments' internal affairs. Muslims in China are usually inspired by Middle Eastern Islamic political and religious beliefs. If religious doctrines and minority separatism conflict, Northwest China's social stability and economic growth could face serious obstacles.

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¹⁰⁵ Niblock, "China and the Middle East: A Global Strategy Where the Middle East Has a Significant but Limited Place."

¹⁰⁶ Ehteshami and Miyagi, *The Emerging Middle East - East Asia Nexus*.

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