

Playing the Long Game: The Rise of China in the Middle East

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Abstract

Chinese presence in the Middle East has increased over the past several years amid concerted efforts by the PRC to cement itself as a global superpower. This thesis will examine China's economic and geopolitical activities in the Middle East through the lens of three case studies: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. These countries are similar in several ways; they are majority Muslim and Arab, they are considered autocratic, and they generally align with each other's foreign policy. However, each country differs in political structure, topography, natural resources, and key issues affecting their domestic politics. All three countries have enhanced their relationships with China over the past decade, and each country has its own unique objectives it expects to meet through such cooperation. Likewise, China expects to reap its own rewards through these interactions. This thesis will ultimately explore the reasons China has invested so many resources into the Middle East while illustrating the ways in which the PRC's economic and geopolitical ambitions have become intertwined.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The People's Republic of China has been an emerging actor in Middle Eastern affairs over the past several decades. While much of its presence in region has been felt economically through trade and investment, Chinese activity is increasingly seen at a geopolitical level as well. 2023 has been a particularly eventful year for the PRC in the Middle East. In March, China brokered a normalization agreement between longtime adversaries Saudi Arabia and Iran. The two Middle Eastern superpowers, along with Egypt, the UAE, and several other countries, were later invited to join BRICS¹ during the bloc's annual summit in August. These events, concurrent with strained relations between the United States and several of its regional allies, have raised the question of whether China was supplanting the USA as the dominant external power in the Middle East. But although China's recent maneuvers have made international headlines, they were only the latest of the PRC's many forays into the region.

While China is just one of many outside powers to intervene in Middle Eastern affairs, its geopolitical approach in comparison to other actors has been rather unique. Western actors in the Middle East have historically colonized and carved up the region, Britain and France being notable examples of this over the 19th and 20th centuries. The two largest outside actors in the Middle East today, the United States of America and the Russian Federation, tend to pick favorites among the region's regimes, providing them diplomatic and military support and backing them to the hilt against their enemies. On the other hand, China takes a neutral stance on many of the region's conflicts and proxy wars. The PRC does not bolster certain regimes at the expense of others, and it notably shies away from using the word "allies" when describing relations with other states. Instead China claims to view every state as a prospective economic partner, and it conducts its foreign policy in a manner that places emphasis on mutual economic

¹ The BRICS bloc is comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa

development. This philosophy has resonated with many Middle Eastern governments, including traditionally pro-west regimes seeking to hedge against a US-dominated global order.

The majority of China's ambitions in the Middle East are unsurprisingly economic in nature. After all, China's economic dominance on the global stage has been a much-discussed topic since the turn of the millennia. However, many of the PRC's objectives see overlap between the economic and the geopolitical. The clearest example of such overlap is China's infamous Belt and Road Initiative. Launched in 2013, the BRI has incorporated over 125 countries and 29 international organizations. It has been called by the Center for Strategic and International Studies "the most significant and ambitious strategic initiative of the twenty-first century so far." The BRI is primarily centered around infrastructure and economic development with the goal of connecting the economies of Asia, Africa, and Europe (Dunne, 2021). It would provide China increased access to global markets while strengthening diplomatic relations between the PRC and any countries hosting BRI-linked projects. The Middle East is especially relevant to the BRI, as it serves as a bridge between Europe, Asia, and Africa. For this reason, China has devoted much effort to increasing its presence in the region.

Because of the relative novelty of China's activities in the Middle East, the amount of literature on the subject is quite limited. Professor Jonathan Fulton's book, *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies*, examines China's interactions with the Gulf Cooperation Council. The GCC has been integral to China's plans in the Middle East, though it is hardly the full extent of China's ambitions. Virtually every state in the Middle East has signed on to the BRI. This does not necessarily mean, however, that everyone in the region views Chinese investment as equally important. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of China's closest regional partners, while in Kuwait elements of the BRI have seen stiff opposition from members of its parliament (Zhu,

2022). Nonetheless, much of the Middle East sees China's project as an opportunity for economic diversification and development.

Over the course of this paper, I will be examining China's involvement in three Middle Eastern states – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. The three cases are similar in several notable ways; they are majority Arab, they maintain close economic and security ties with the United States, they aspire to modernize their economies through government-led developmental agendas (i.e. Egypt Vision 2030), and they have embraced warmer relations with the PRC over the past several years. However, the cases also differ in regime type, geography, natural resources, and domestic opinion of the Chinese government. As such, China's designs for each country differ as well.

Egypt has historically had good relations with the PRC. Under Nasser, Egypt became the first Arab and African country to recognize China in 1956. Serving as a gateway between the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe, and also containing the Suez Canal, Egypt is vital to Chinese economic activity both regionally and worldwide (Al-Anani, 2023). Likewise, Egypt views China as a critical partner amid a period of economic turmoil, a crisis which shows little signs of improvement in the near future. Egyptian President Sisi has eagerly cooperated with China on projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative in the hopes of stabilizing Egypt's economy and spurring economic growth. However, Egyptian public opinion of China remains mixed. Polling from the Arab Barometer shows Egyptian support for stronger economic relations with China is a meager 30%, by far the lowest in the region according to the same survey (Robbins, 2020). Public opinion may not matter to President Sisi, however, as Egypt's authoritarian leader sees in China a reliable partner that, unlike his western allies, is willing to ignore his questionable record on human rights.

My second case, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, only recognized the PRC in 1990. However, the Saudi kingdom has since developed into one of China's closest partners in the Middle East today. Saudi Arabia has been a major supporter of China's regional ambitions, taking an interest in the BRI since its launch in 2013. Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates, leads the Gulf Cooperation Council in overall investment from China (Zhu, 2022). Recent Chinese involvement in Saudi Arabia has gone beyond economic investment. The brokering of a normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran was a major geopolitical victory for China, one that illustrated how close the Sino-Saudi relationship has developed over 21st century. Cooperation is only expected to intensify going forward, especially as the Saudi kingdom is set to join BRICS in early 2024.

Lastly, I will examine the State of Kuwait. Another early supporter of the BRI, Kuwait views the project's goals in alignment with its own Kuwait Vision 2035 initiative. Kuwait, much like Saudi Arabia, hopes that Chinese investment will diversify its economy and move the country away from oil extraction (Khedr, 2021). The Emirs of Kuwait have been openly supportive of these ambitions, although the government remains internally divided. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Kuwait has an elected parliament which wields a degree of power in domestic affairs, and many conservative Islamist MPs remain distrustful of China and economic globalization as a whole (Castelier, 2019). Though Kuwait intends to move forward with its plans, it nonetheless must navigate opposition in a way that other countries in the region do not.

The majority of China's global activities are conducted with long-term objectives in mind. The Belt and Road Initiative, for instance, has an expected completion year of 2049. While this means the PRC's influence has yet to reach its projected height, it also means there is plenty of time for China to falter. Indeed, there is much debate about whether endeavors like the

BRI are already losing momentum. Allegations of neocolonialism and so-called “debt trap diplomacy” have been a blight on the BRI’s international reputation, while China has been accused of offering predatory loans to developing countries which lack the ability to repay them (Ezrati, 2023). Despite these allegations, dozens of states across the developing world still see cooperation with the PRC as essential to their prosperity.

Inevitably, China will see more tangible results in certain states than others. The PRC therefore has different goals in mind for each of its prospective partners. Broadly speaking, China’s goals can be divided into two categories: economic and geopolitical. The former is seen openly through actions such as the construction of ports, direct foreign investment, and hosts of bilateral agreements on trade. The latter, meanwhile, is more subtle, for it rarely entails overt military action. Rather, Chinese geopolitical goals are often accomplished through diplomacy behind closed doors, mediation in conflict, and the dissemination of pro-CCP propaganda throughout the state media of its partners. The line between the economic and geopolitical has become increasingly blurred, however, as China ramps up its global activity.

The Middle East has become a hotspot for Chinese influence not only because of its geographic significance, but because much of the region operates in ways that are conducive to the PRC’s objectives. The authoritarian nature of many Middle Eastern countries, coupled with a strong desire to modernize economically, makes them ideal locations for the implementation of Chinese projects like the BRI. Through my three case studies, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, I will examine how China has used their internal structures to its advantage, as well as the manner in which the geopolitical and economic have become intertwined.

CHAPTER II: CHINA AND EGYPT

My first case, Egypt, has a longstanding relationship with China that goes back to the Cold War. Egypt became the first Arab and African country to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1956 during the presidency of Gamal Abdul Nasser, and China returned the favor shortly after by sending aid during the Suez Crisis. Over the next decade or so, Egypt and China were each major participants in the Non-Alignment Movement, and they signed numerous agreements to enhance trade and technological development (Al-Anani, 2023). At the time, Egypt and China seemed like natural allies. They were ideologically aligned on issues such as decolonization, anti-imperialism, and opposing any sort of global hegemony (Interesse, 2022). However, with the death of Nasser in 1970, Egypt's foreign policy underwent a significant westward shift.

Egyptian President Anwar El-Sadat, Nasser's successor, made a conscious decision to realign his country's foreign policy. As a result, the 1970s saw a strain in Sino-Egyptian relations as the latter drew closer to the west. Egypt recognized the State of Israel in 1979 and quickly became a key strategic partner for the United States (Ghafar, 2022). However, China remained invested in its relationship with Egypt. Relations between the two countries improved remarkably during the presidency of Hosni Mubarak, who took power in 1981 after Sadat's assassination. In 1999, China and Egypt entered into a strategic partnership agreement (Interesse, 2022). This development would pave the way for increased Chinese investment in Egypt going into the 21st century.

The early 2000s saw a major increase in Chinese-based projects within Egypt. After the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, relations were not strained by the incoming Islamist government. Indeed, President Mohammad Morsi's tenure saw a major expansion of cooperation with China.

Trade increased 40% between 2008 and 2012, and Morsi met personally with Chinese officials to discuss various infrastructure projects. In 2013, however, Morsi was overthrown in a military coup. Though his tenure as president was short-lived, his pro-China policy would be continued by his successor and current Egyptian president, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. President Sisi signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement in 2014, enhancing the agreement from 1999. Sisi has since been to China on numerous occasions for the purpose of signing bilateral agreements (Al-Anani, 2023). Ten years have now passed since the coup, and China and Egypt are closer than ever before. Egypt accepted an invitation to join the China-dominated BRICS during the bloc's 2023 summit in South Africa, and it is set to officially become a member in January 2024 (Sabry, 2023). Egypt's membership in BRICS all but confirms the country's intentions to realign its foreign policy around China.

Broadly speaking, Egypt's partnership with China has developed with three objectives in mind: financial stability, economic development, and regime security. The first two objectives go hand in hand, as the second cannot transpire without the first. Egypt looks to China for assistance in stabilizing its currency, especially as its financial crisis deepened over the past few years. Egypt has also been actively involved in the Belt and Road Initiative, which promises to usher its participants into the developed world through the creation of key infrastructure such as ports and industrial zones. Lastly, the Sisi regime sees in China a way to relieve western pressure to enact political reform. The PRC has remained silent amid Sisi's human rights abuses, keeping with its promise of noninterference in domestic affairs. In this regard, the current Egyptian government sees China as necessary for its own survival.

Perhaps the most pressing issue facing Egypt today is that of financial instability. Economic woes have plagued Egypt for many years, exacerbated by political unrest and the

Covid-19 pandemic. The global shock following Russia's invasion of Ukraine proved to be a tipping point, and Egypt plunged deep into financial crisis as investors withdrew millions from the country. The Egyptian pound has depreciated by roughly 50% against the US dollar since March 2022, while Egypt's debt has risen to roughly 95% of its GDP (Lewis, 2023). In July 2023, Egypt reported a crippling inflation rate of 38.2%. To remedy the situation, Egypt received additional relief from the International Monetary Fund in the form of a \$3 billion loan package. However, a shortage of dollars has hampered Egypt's ability to repay its heavy debts to the IMF (Sabry, 2023). For this reason, Egypt has sought alternatives to the dollar-centric financial system.

Egypt views cooperation with China as imperative to alleviating its financial burdens. Even before the current crisis, the Sisi regime took measures throughout the 2010s to hedge against the dollar with the Chinese Yuan, or RMB. The People's Bank of China and the Central Bank of Egypt signed a currency swap agreement in 2016 in an effort to stabilize the Egyptian pound. The China Development Bank additionally provided Egypt with loans equivalent to \$1.4 billion. In 2017, Egypt became the first Middle Eastern country to receive financial assistance from the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), an amount equivalent to \$210 million (Interesse, 2022). As Egypt's economy worsened, its government continued to double down on its pro-China approach.

Egypt joined the BRICS New Development Bank in February 2023, just months before its official invitation to the bloc. BRICS membership offers significant benefits to Egypt, allowing it to use the pound in trade settlements as opposed to the US dollar, thus lowering transaction costs and facilitating economic cooperation. Economists believe BRICS membership could alleviate the strain on Egypt's economy over the long term by attracting further investment

and reducing its crippling debt. However, it is far from an immediate solution, and Egypt is not expected to get a free ride. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a fellow BRICS invitee, has indicated it will no longer provide loans to Egypt without the promise of economic reform (Gbadamosi, 2023). Egypt currently faces a massive trade imbalance with fellow BRICS members. While Egyptian exports to BRICS nations totaled \$4.9 billion in 2022, Egyptian imports from BRICS nations totaled \$26.4 billion. (Sabry, 2023). Redressing its lopsided trade deficit is a crucial step Egypt must take to improve its credibility among fellow BRICS nations.

Though Egypt faces economic uncertainty, this has not deterred China from investing heavily in the Egyptian economy. Chinese investment in Egypt has increased by 317% between 2017 and 2022. Data from the Central Bank of Egypt shows that China was Egypt's second largest trading partner in fiscal year 2022, behind only the United Arab Emirates (Farid & Maher, 2023). Egypt remains an instrumental part of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. Situated in northeastern Africa, Egypt serves as a bridge between the African and Asian continents. Its Suez Canal links the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, making it a crucial waterway for all global trade. Egypt's large population of 100 million people also offers China a significant consumer base. Even prior to the official launch of the BRI in 2013, China and Egypt laid the groundwork for increased economic cooperation. The Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone (SETC-Zone) was established between the two countries in 2008, serving as a major hub for Chinese products and companies (Al-Anani, 2023). China and Egypt have since cooperated on countless major infrastructure projects within the latter's borders.

The Belt and Road Initiative is not a single project but rather a series of interconnected projects. As it pertains to Egypt, the BRI is linked heavily with the Sisi regime's own economic ambitions, the Egypt Vision 2030 agenda. China has worked closely with Egypt on the

construction of a new administrative capital near Cairo, including the Central Business District (CBD) project. The CBD is by far the largest infrastructure project currently underway in Egypt. The China State Construction Engineering Company (CSCEC) has played a major role in the CBD's development since 2018. The CSCEC constructed a series of towers within the CBD, and it plans to build a 345-meter tower that may become the tallest in Africa upon its completion. Future plans include a so-called "digital BRI" and cooperation on space technologies. Egypt and China have intensified cooperation in areas including satellite development and data sharing (Interesse, 2023).

Economic cooperation between China and Egypt has not been without setback. The CSCEC temporarily withdrew from the CBD project in 2017 after the pound collapsed, though it rejoined the project only a year later in 2018. Other Chinese actors such as the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, the Export-Import Bank of China, and the China Fortune Land Development Company have signed numerous agreements with Egypt that were ultimately suspended following financial disagreements (El Dahshan, 2021). Egypt's economic performance has not met China's expectations, and the ongoing financial crisis could make deadlines for Egypt Vision 2030 and the BRI unattainable (Interesse, 2022). Yet despite the many hurdles Egypt's economy faces, China has no plans to abandon its current course. Indeed, every indication points to China drastically increasing its cooperation with Egypt over the next several years. This suggests that there is more to the Egypt-China partnership than strictly economic gain.

China has traditionally been perceived as a primarily economic actor, though over the past few years the PRC has exerted increasing amounts of geopolitical influence. Egypt serves as a clear example of China's geopolitical ambitions in action. Chinese Communist Party

propaganda is rife within Egyptian media, particularly state-sponsored media. The Chinese ambassador to Egypt has routinely written articles in Egyptian newspapers, disseminating pro-China and anti-America views to the public. The Chinese embassy in Cairo has additionally worked with Egyptian political parties to strengthen cooperation with the CCP, an effort that has courted parties from across the political spectrum and is not only limited to fellow communists. Egyptian politicians are encouraged through China's International Liaison Department to meet their Chinese counterparts, strengthening cooperation between their respective governments. Egypt has also utilized controversial Chinese technology companies Dahua and Hikvision, both of which have been accused of mass surveillance and pose privacy risks to civilians (Farid & Maher, 2023). Given America's military presence in Egypt, such technologies could present a major security risk for the United States. The Egyptian government, however, has yet to express such concerns, and there has been hardly any internal resistance to China's expanding influence.

To understand the Sisi regime's embrace of China at a geopolitical level, one need only look at Egypt's relationship with the west over the past few years. Since the presidency of Sadat, Egypt has generally aligned itself with western interests, and it has received a great deal of foreign aid from the west in return. The United States has provided Egypt with billions in military aid over the 21st century, and though this aid was frozen immediately after the 2013 military coup, it resumed shortly after Sisi came to power. Even still, there remained a lingering coolness between Egypt and the US for the remainder of the Obama administration. President Trump pursued warmer relations with Sisi, inviting the Egyptian president to the White House shortly after taking office. However, the American Congress continued to place pressure on Egypt and extracted certain concessions, including the release of an imprisoned Egyptian American activist in 2018. President Biden has been a lot firmer with Egypt on its human rights

record than the Trump administration, going as far as withholding millions in military aid over certain abuses (Ghafar, 2022). Though relations between the US and Egypt are hardly hostile, and the two countries continue to cooperate on a great deal of issues, the turbulence of the past decade has not been lost on the Sisi regime. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it has resulted in Egypt attempting to hedge against the west with partners who are not only more consistent but also willing to overlook any internal human rights abuses.

President Sisi views China as an asset not only for the country at large but also for his own regime's survival. While the west tends to leverage aid packages for political reform, China has no such strings attached to its own loans and investment. The PRC is itself autocratic with a long history of abuse against its own citizens, most notably the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 and more recently its persecution of the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. Both China and Egypt rank among the highest in the world for imprisoned reporters according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, and both countries have exhibited willingness to crush dissent with violence. While each country typically remains silent on the other's abuses, in some cases there has been active collaboration. For instance, Egypt detained roughly thirty Uighurs in 2017, of which twelve were deported to China (Al-Anani, 2023). Egyptian media has effectively granted China immunity from criticism. While Egyptian media has attacked the United States for its alleged support of the proposed Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Egypt claims would threaten its water supply, the reports conveniently omit China's support of the same dam project (Farid & Maher, 2023). Chinese President Xi and President Sisi benefit mutually from this arrangement, as they can maintain their repressive political environments without having to worry about any meaningful pushback.

Polling of the Egyptian public shows mixed opinions on Egypt-China relations. The Arab Barometer released a poll in 2020 showing only 30% of Egyptians favored increased economic ties with China, the lowest of all Arab countries surveyed. When asked if they favor an increase in Chinese foreign aid, however, the percentage rises to 53%. The poll additionally shows Egyptians prefer strengthening economic ties with the United States over China (Robbins, 2020). More recent polling from the Washington Institute tells a different story. A poll commissioned over the summer of 2022 shows 64% of Egyptians view relations with China as “somewhat” or “very” important, as opposed to only 58% when asked about the United States. Nearly half of Egyptians, 47%, agree with the statement, “We cannot count on the U.S. these days, so we should look more to Russia or China as partners” (Abdelaziz, 2022). Public opinion may not be a major factor in Egypt, a country devoid of free elections and with heavy restrictions in place on speech and assembly. However, Egypt’s revolution remains a fresh memory, and the Sisi regime must understand the consequences of pushing a disgruntled populace too far. Additionally, as China aims to win the hearts and minds of the Global South, it is evident that everyday Egyptians are not entirely sold just yet.

Egypt’s cooperation with China is only expected to increase moving forward. Whether that means Egypt Vision 2030, and by extension the BRI, will be realized by their intended deadlines remains another matter. From a geopolitical perspective, China certainly views the Sisi regime’s unrelenting support as an encouraging sign. Egypt’s official membership in BRICS indicates that relations between the two countries are stronger than ever before. However, Egypt’s ongoing economic woes highlight the limitations of the partnership. Should its financial crisis persist or even worsen over the next few years, China may apply pressure on the Egyptian government to enact reform just as fellow BRICS invitee Saudi Arabia has done already.

CHAPTER III: CHINA AND SAUDI ARABIA

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is considered by many experts to be China's closest and most powerful partner in the Middle East today. Saudi Arabia plays a major role in the Belt and Road Initiative, tying the Initiative into its own Vision 2030 plan for development. The kingdom's vast oil wealth is seen by China as a valuable asset, and Saudi Arabia in turn sees in the PRC an opportunity to diversify and modernize its economy. Sino-Saudi relations have seen major milestones over the past few years. China successfully brokered a Saudi-Iran normalization agreement in March 2023, and, like Egypt, Saudi Arabia was invited to join BRICS in August of the same year.

Professor Jonathan Fulton writes extensively about the complicated history of China's relationship with Saudi Arabia in his book, *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies*. Though Saudi Arabia and China are today closer than ever before, the two countries once viewed each other as bitter adversaries. Saudi Arabia aligned firmly with the west during the Cold War and recognized the Republic of China over the mainland PRC. Initially Saudi Arabia and China had little to do with each other, their relationship being one of indifference rather than hostility. During the 1960s, however, China began to take a more active role in the Arabian peninsula. The PRC's support of the Dhofar Rebellion in Oman posed a direct threat to the Saudi kingdom, for the rebels aimed to topple all the monarchies in the Persian Gulf. The support of Arabian revolutionary movements, coupled with reports of the persecution of Chinese Muslims, led Saudi Arabia to believe the communist Chinese were enemies of Islam seeking to destabilize the Middle East (Fulton, 80-86).

The 1970s saw a shift in Chinese policy on the Arabian peninsula. Deeming its intervention in Dhofar fruitless, China reassessed and concluded that working with established

regional governments was in its best interest. The PRC cut off its support to the Dhofar rebels and began to foster relations with the Gulf monarchies by emphasizing mutual economic development. Saudi Arabia remained hostile, however, being the only Arab state to vote against China's admission to the UN in 1971. China's influence in the Gulf nonetheless expanded over the 70s and 80s as it made a concerted effort to win Saudi Arabia's favor, viewing the kingdom as the dominant power in the region and thus a necessary partner. China supported Saudi foreign policy objectives over these years, including efforts to broker ceasefires during the Iran-Iraq War and the Lebanese Civil War. Saudi Arabia finally recognized the PRC in 1990, the last of the Gulf monarchies to do so (Fulton, 86-92). Upon establishing diplomatic relations, Saudi Arabia and China's cooperation intensified rapidly as both countries came to realize each other's importance to their respective international ambitions.

From an economic perspective, Saudi Arabia sees its partnership with China as an opportunity to move away from an oil-centric extraction economy. Economic diversification has been a priority of the Saudis for years as the cornerstone of the Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 agenda. When China launched the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, Saudi Arabia was among its earliest supporters. China in turn seeks to link Vision 2030 to the BRI, investing heavily in Saudi Arabia among other Gulf states. While poorer countries like Sri Lanka have fallen into heavy debt to the PRC after embracing Chinese investment, debt traps are of little concern to oil-rich Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the kingdom's autocratic nature is compatible with the Chinese model of state capitalism, and oligarchs from each country are able to manage projects as they see fit (Haedelt, 2021).

China has poured tens of billions of dollars into Saudi infrastructure projects over the past several decades. Chinese companies presided over the construction of power plants, refineries,

and a major railway connecting the Saudi cities of Jeddah, Medina, and Mecca. Such projects are seen as essential for Saudi development and are aligned with Vision 2030. More recently, however, China has also invested in projects designed to foster regional connectivity. The Maritime Silk Road Initiative, or MSRI, is a major facet of the BRI focusing on controlling waterways from the South China Sea to the Mediterranean (Fulton, 2019). Most projects associated with the BRI in the Gulf fall under the MSRI umbrella in what has been dubbed a park-port approach. China maintains many industrial parks throughout the Middle East, including four major parks in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Oman. The PRC aims to link the supply chains of the four ports and ultimately integrate them with the Port of Djibouti, which contains a support base for the Chinese military. The MSRI has been a subject of controversy as the line between economic and military interests becomes increasingly blurred. Chinese military presence will ultimately become necessary in the Gulf if only to protect its commercial interests from piracy and terrorism. The Gulf states, Saudi Arabia included, have nonetheless welcomed such presence (Haedelt, 2021).

Though economic diversification has been the foremost long-term goal of Saudi Arabia, much of its dealings with China are still in the sector of oil and gas. 32% of total Chinese investment in Saudi Arabia has been in the energy sector, a substantial plurality even as sectors like real estate and transportation are on the rise (Zhu, 2022). While diversification will be necessary long-term for Saudi Arabia, it is not as pressing of a concern as it is for smaller Gulf states. Bahrain and Oman, for instance, are expected to run out of oil within the next decade or so (Haedelt, 2021). Saudi Arabia has much more time in comparison, and consequently the kingdom still views oil as vital to its short-term development. In 2019, the Saudi government

negotiated with China to build oil refineries on Chinese soil, particularly a \$10 billion project in the Liaoning province (Zhu, 2022).

Saudi Arabia has welcomed a significant amount of physical infrastructure from China, though equally important to the Saudi economy is the establishment of digital infrastructure. Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 has its own digital initiatives, but many sectors of the Saudi economy remain unintegrated as the kingdom has struggled to foster homegrown digital talent. Consequently, Saudi Arabia has looked to China as a source of technological investment (Calabrese, 2022). The BRI's digital component, the Digital Silk Road (DSR), has served as a catalyst for Saudi Arabia's process of technological development. Major Chinese technology companies such as Huawei are working actively with Saudi officials to develop digital infrastructure including smart city technology, 5G internet, satellite systems, and artificial intelligence. While the development of these systems is underway in several GCC states, certain aspects of the DSR are tailored specifically for the Saudi experience such as the development of infrastructure to streamline the pilgrimages in Mecca and Medina. Critics of the DSR point towards the invasion of privacy that Chinese technology poses. Data mining allows Chinese companies, and by extension the Chinese government, to obtain information about the people using their services. The United States has cautioned Middle Eastern governments against using Huawei 5G, though many governments have ignored these warnings, Saudi Arabia included (Aluf, 2021). The internet privacy of its citizens is of little concern to the Saudi government. If anything, the monarchy sees such tools of mass surveillance as critical assets in maintaining its position.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, commonly referred to as MBS, has been the leading proponent of the kingdom's modernization agenda. A critic of the Gulf's reliance on

oil extraction, MBS has promoted Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda abroad and courted foreign investment. MBS takes a considerably moderate stance on Islam relative to previous Saudi monarchs. He has strongly condemned religious extremism and expressed support for a more inclusive role for women in society. Women were recently granted the freedom to drive, while movie theatres and music festivals, once considered taboo in Saudi Arabia's strict Islamic society, have emerged throughout the kingdom over the past decade (Vick, 2018). MBS has faced domestic criticism for these reforms, including from his own family, but he has nonetheless been vocal in the defense of his policies.

China, in turn, sees MBS as a natural ally. Islam was once a point of fierce contention between the Chinese and the Saudis, but China now looks to Saudi Arabia as a critical partner in combating extremism. With a Muslim population of 23 million, the PRC has concerns over religious terrorism and nationalist sentiment. China uses these concerns as justification for persecuting its Muslim minority, most notably the Uighurs in Xinjiang, though not all Chinese Muslims are subjected to such treatment. The Hui Muslims of Ningxia, for instance, are seen by the PRC as better assimilated to Chinese society, and therefore they are free to practice Islam. Many of the Hui make pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia, strengthening the Sino-Saudi bond. With an understanding that the PRC does not treat its Muslims as a monolith, Saudi Arabia has in recent years dismissed China's more oppressive actions as an internal matter, thus reciprocating China's own noninterference policy (Fulton, 98-100). As the host of Islam's two holiest cities, Saudi Arabia's cooperation has boosted China's credibility across the Muslim world.

China's policy of noninterference is very appealing to Saudi Arabia, and especially to MBS, as the kingdom has come under intense criticism from its western allies. While MBS has been lauded for his social and economic reforms, political reform remains entirely out of the

question. Saudi Arabia remains an absolute monarchy, and it has drawn condemnation from the United Nations and the west for its treatment of political activists and journalists. MBS is currently winding down Saudi involvement in the Yemeni Civil War, but he was initially a major proponent of the war, and the atrocities associated with Saudi intervention have been a blight on the prince's international reputation (Vick, 2018). MBS drew major international condemnation over the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, in which the prince is believed to have played a key role despite his official denial. Amid these tensions, the Saudi kingdom has gravitated closer to the PRC, seeing its policy of noninterference as an assurance that investment will not be leveraged for political reform.

Sino-Saudi relations reached new heights in 2023. Two major events, China's brokering of a Saudi Arabia-Iran normalization agreement and the invitation of Saudi Arabia to BRICS, placed the spotlight on China as a serious actor in the Middle East. Though many were surprised by these developments, the PRC had previously made clear its intent to increase its presence the Gulf. In December 2022, President Xi traveled to Riyadh to meet with the Saudi royal family. During his trip, Chinese and Saudi officials signed over forty agreements on matters including energy and technology, and President Xi encouraged the GCC to accept the Yuan in oil transactions (Mogielnicki, 2023). The Chinese president's visit was much anticipated, having been only his second international trip since the Covid-19 pandemic began. His decision to visit Saudi Arabia stressed the importance of the Gulf to China's ambitions. The timing of the trip was also significant, as relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States were tense at the moment. OPEC had decreased its oil output in a direct rebuke to President Biden, who earlier pleaded with the Gulf monarchies to boost exports. During this period of strained relations, China seized on the opportunity to fill the vacuum (Calabrese, 2022). Though the significance of

this meeting was not lost on the United States, few anticipated China's next major move with the Saudi kingdom was only mere months away.

On March 10, 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran announced a normalization agreement brokered in Beijing, China. The two countries resumed diplomatic relations for the first time since the Iranian Revolution, an unexpected turn of events amid their decades-long proxy war. The conflict has been split along ideological and sectarian lines, with Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and Shia-majority Iran each claiming to speak for their respective sects of Islam. Relations between the countries remain far from harmonious, and Saudi and Iranian proxies still clash in Yemen, making reproachment all the more surprising. The most unexpected part of all, however, was the unlikely broker of the agreement.

China was undoubtedly the biggest winner of the Saudi Arabia-Iran deal. The PRC has intervened diplomatically in the Middle East several times before, though the March 2023 agreement ranks among their greatest diplomatic achievements in the region. The immediate thought of many western observers was that the deal exposed a waning of American influence the Middle East. The United States, with its longstanding animosity towards Iran and strained relations with the Saudis, was hardly in a position to broker such a deal. For China this presented an opportunity to express itself as a credible alternative to western diplomacy and the US-led global order (Gallagher, 2023). The fact that Saudi Arabia and Iran, bitter adversaries with little in common, both see China as a trustworthy broker speaks to how wide the PRC's appeal has grown in the region.

In August 2023, Saudi Arabia was invited to join BRICS alongside fellow Middle Eastern states Egypt, Iran, and the UAE. The BRICS bloc had yet to expand since its inception in 2010, and its invitees are expected to officially become members on January 1, 2024. China has been

the leading voice among the BRICS nations in favor of expanding the bloc, and it has eyed the Gulf specifically, knowing the significance of Saudi Arabia's oil wealth to the coalition. The invitation of both Saudi Arabia and Iran illustrates the recent success of their normalization agreement. BRICS membership provides the Saudis and Iranians additional opportunities to enhance their cooperation, particularly in commercial and financial sectors (Battaloglu, 2023). Geopolitically speaking, the BRICS bloc does not wield much power, and its members are often in conflict on key issues. However, it has nonetheless gained traction across the Global South with over forty countries to expressing interest in joining (Ismail, 2023). Regarding Saudi Arabia specifically, BRICS membership marks the culmination of years of cooperation with the PRC.

Saudi Arabia, like Egypt, has seen increased coordination with China on a geopolitical level. In both cases, intense pressure and criticism from the west have driven their authoritarian governments closer to the PRC, lured by promises of noninterference and mutual economic gain. Many poorer countries have bought into the BRI only to find themselves in serious debt to the PRC. Saudi Arabia, however, is in a much stronger position. It does not have an ongoing financial crisis akin to anything in Egypt, and it retains its vast oil wealth which provides the kingdom leverage in potential disputes. Economic diversification has meanwhile proceeded slowly, and while Saudi Arabia is in no immediate danger of running out of oil, moving away from fossil fuels is imperative if Saudi Arabia is to remain a powerful actor in the Middle East long-term.

CHAPTER IV: CHINA AND KUWAIT

My third and final case, the State of Kuwait, is rather small compared to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. However, Kuwait has nonetheless attracted much attention and investment from China. Situated between Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran at the northern tip of the Persian Gulf, Kuwait wields great influence over regional affairs in spite of its country's size. A member of the GCC, Kuwait functions similarly to Saudi Arabia in that it is a monarchy with considerable oil resources at its disposal. Likewise, Kuwait has made strides to diversify its economy, acknowledging that its oil reserves are not infinite. The Kuwaiti government has put forth its Kuwait Vision 2035 developmental agenda aiming to move away from its extract-based economy (Khedr, 2021). China has been more than willing to assist Kuwait in these efforts in the hopes that the kingdom embraces the Belt and Road Initiative, viewing the kingdom as vital to its own interests in the Gulf.

China's relations with the Gulf monarchies, Kuwait included, were far from amicable at first. As covered in the previous section, the PRC's initial foray into the Gulf saw it supporting and arming the Dhofar rebels against the Omani government, a move that earned China the ire of Gulf monarchies large and small. China soon abandoned this approach and instead sought cooperation with the Gulf states. While Saudi Arabia took decades to fully reconcile with the PRC, the Kuwaiti government was more forgiving. Alongside Iran, Kuwait became the first Gulf monarchy to establish diplomatic ties with China, recognizing the PRC in 1971 and voting for its admission to the UN in the same year (Fulton, 87-88). Amid the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, China provided diplomatic support to the Kuwaiti government. Though the PRC did not take part in the global coalition against Iraq during the Gulf War, China nonetheless praised the

liberation of Kuwait after the war's conclusion and issued condemnation of Iraq's brutal actions during the war.

In the decades following the Gulf War, Kuwait and China expressed a mutual desire to enhance cooperation. Emir Shayakh Al Sabah, at the time Kuwait's foreign minister, traveled to China in 2004 where he renewed signed multiple agreements on economic and technological cooperation, including in the areas of energy and environmental protections. After becoming Emir, Al Sabah made another visit to Beijing in 2009, further emphasizing his desire to strengthen political and economic ties. Unsurprisingly, oil was the most prominent issue during this meeting. Kuwait was the 8th largest exporter of oil to China at the time, and the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation had opened an official office in Beijing in 2005 with plans for Kuwaiti refineries to be built on the Chinese mainland (Niazi, 2009). Kuwait was notably the first Arab country to directly invest in China. The industrial and banking sectors ranked among the leading non-energy sectors of Kuwaiti FDI in China. In 1985, Kuwait established the Sino-Arab Chemical Fertilizer Company in China. Kuwait additionally provided millions of US dollars in soft loans to the PRC, particularly the impoverished Xinjiang region in the west (Niazi, 2009). Meanwhile, energy remains the largest sector of Chinese investment in Kuwait, making up nearly 50% of total investment and totaling over \$3.8 billion as of 2022 (Zhu, 2022). Economic diversification remains slow, though Kuwait has aligned with many of China's regional projects in the hopes of expediting the process, including the Belt and Road Initiative.

Kuwait was a very early supporter of the BRI, joining Saudi Arabia in supporting the Initiative upon its launch in 2013. Much like its counterparts in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the Kuwaiti government has linked the BRI to its own long-term economic development plan, Kuwait Vision 2035. Aiming to move away from dependence on oil, Vision 2035 calls for the

development of both physical and digital infrastructure, including transportation routes and ports but also information technologies and utilities such as 5G internet. As these goals go hand in hand with the Belt and Road Initiative, Kuwait and China have cooperated heavily in seeing them to fruition. The most ambitious and notable of Kuwait's objectives, however, is the North Economic Zone, commonly referred to as the Silk City. Linked directly to the BRI, the Silk City is intended to serve as a major logistics hub for the region. The project is projected to cost \$100 billion and employ as many as 700,000 people. Plans for the Silk City include entertainment facilities, retail centers, an Olympic stadium, an international airport, and the world's tallest building, the Burj Mubarak Al-Kabeer Tower. Construction on the city is already underway, though it is projected to take nearly 25 years to complete (Khedr, 2021).

Because of the lengthy timeline of the Silk City project, the Kuwaiti government has divided the process into multiple phases. A key part of the first phase is the construction of the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Port. In September 2023, Kuwaiti Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad met with Chinese officials to finalize an agreement on joint Sino-Kuwaiti ownership of the port. The implications of the Mubarak Port are major both economically and geopolitically, as China stands to gain a major foothold in the Gulf upon its completion (Tessaron, 2023). The construction of the port has not been without controversy, however, particularly as it relates to Iraq. Constructed within close proximity to Iraq's own Al Faw Port, the project has led to criticism from the Iraqi government that it could hinder Iraq's ability to conduct commerce in the Persian Gulf. Though the construction of the Mubarak Port has been a point of contention between Iraq and Kuwait for some time, proponents of the port argue that it can increase cooperation between the two countries, as Iraqi businessmen would be able to invest in the port (Al Asoomi, 2023).

The controversy surrounding the Mubarak Port is hardly the only setback the Silk City has faced. Indeed, many of its fiercest critics are found within domestic Kuwaiti politics. The presence of internal criticism sets Kuwait apart from my previous two cases, neither of which have seen any significant pushback to Chinese influence within their borders. Critics of the Silk City project have been primarily conservative and Islamist MPs in the Kuwaiti parliament, an institution of Kuwait's government that makes it unique among GCC states. Unlike the absolute monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which at most have advisory councils with little to no influence over policy, Kuwait holds regular elections for its National Assembly, a unicameral legislature with a degree of power in domestic affairs (Zhu, 2022). Consequently, socially conservative MPs have raised concerns over the governance of the Silk City. Upon completion, the economic zone is expected to be administered outside the jurisdiction of Kuwait. To attract investors, this most certainly means the Silk City will be governed in a more liberal, secular manner than the country as a whole. Critics have dubbed the Silk City a “state within a state” and warn of an influx of foreign values that would be impossible for the National Assembly to regulate. The sale of alcohol and toleration of homosexuality, policies seen by Islamists as at odds with Kuwaiti society, are among the feared developments that may arise within the Silk City (Hagagy, 2019).

Criticism of the Silk City project is not only limited to the economic zone, however. Several MPs have directed their frustration at China itself. Central to their anger is China's persecution of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang. Representatives of the PRC have adamantly denied allegations of genocide, but not everyone in Kuwaiti parliament is convinced. For instance, Islamist MP Mohammed Hayef Al Mutiri publicly threatened to hold up Silk City negotiations if China did not stop “slaughtering Chinese Muslims” (Castelier, 2019). Such strong

condemnation of China's Xinjiang policy is virtually unseen from governments across the Muslim world. Indeed, many Muslim-majority countries wrote letters to the UN in support of China's actions against the Uighurs. Despite the vocal opposition from Islamists within parliament, Kuwait nonetheless joined 36 other countries in writing such letters (Miles, 2019).

Despite mixed reception within the Kuwaiti parliament, the Silk City project is nonetheless proceeding as planned as of 2023. However, the National Assembly remains a controversial aspect of internal Kuwaiti politics, one that often gives the Emirs quite a headache. Kuwait's longstanding democratic institution is enshrined within its 1962 constitution. MPs have the power to propose and block legislation, question ministers, and issue votes of no-confidence (Freer, 2020). Unlike Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait has not banned the Muslim Brotherhood and allows the group to run candidates for parliament, which it often does under the political group Hadas. Though Hadas affiliates often serve in the opposition, the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the ruling Al Sabah family is rarely malevolent. Indeed, Kuwaiti Emirs have used Hadas as a way of placating the more radical factions of the Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Jaber, 2020). However, the Emir still wields lopsided power, and Kuwait is far from a full-fledged democracy. Official political parties are banned, so individuals, including the Islamists in Hadas, must run as independents. However, these measures have not prevented the National Assembly from succumbing to bitter polarization.

Frequent deadlock has resulted in the dissolution of parliament and scheduling of new elections, something that the Emir can order without checks and balances. Elections were held in September 2022 during which Islamist candidates made major gains. However, the ensuing gridlock resulted in new elections being held in June 2023 (Barrington, 2023). Fiscal reform has been at the center of Kuwait's internal political divide for many years. The IMF warned of a

financial deficit over the medium term, prompting the Emir and his cabinet to push for austerity measures including an increased sales tax coupled with decreased welfare spending.

Unsurprisingly, these policies are deeply unpopular with the Kuwaiti public and have experienced pushback from the National Assembly (Hagagy, 2019). The passage of fiscal reform would provide Kuwait increased access to international markets, an integral component to the success of projects like the Silk City. However, the future of such reform remains unclear, as the June election changed little in terms of parliament's composition (Barrington, 2023). Tensions within parliament illustrate the limitations of Sino-Kuwaiti cooperation. Not only must Kuwait navigate direct, vocal opposition to Chinese presence, but the Emir must also deal with opposition to domestic reform that would allow such presence to bear fruit.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to Chinese activity in Kuwait, however, is the presence of the US military. American military presence is not unique to Kuwait, as the US also has troops in Saudi Arabia and maintains close security ties to Egypt. However, Kuwait hosts 13500 of the 35000 total US soldiers in the Gulf, more than any other Middle Eastern country including Iraq. In the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm, the US military controlled 60% of Kuwaiti territory, establishing bases including Camp Arifjan, Camp Buehring, Ali Al-Salem Air Base, and others (Fulton, 55). Presently, Kuwait not only hosts large amounts of American troops but also other foreign soldiers including Japanese and South Koreans (Knutson, 2023). As discussed when examining Saudi Arabia, China is expected to increase its own military presence in the Middle East to protect its assets against terrorism, piracy, and potentially adversarial foreign governments. In Kuwait, however, China must contend not only with the Americans but two other foreign militaries, both of which belong to powerful East Asian countries mere miles from Chinese soil.

Kuwait's relationship with China is in many ways similar to that of Saudi Arabia. Both Gulf states have a strong desire to modernize and diversify their economies in an effort to move away from dependence on oil, and they have therefore intertwined their economies with China's BRI in an effort to accomplish this objective. However, Kuwait's government structure is more pluralistic than its Saudi counterpart. Though Kuwait remains a monarchy, its Emir does not wield unlimited power and must contend with a parliament that has not always been willing to cooperate. Parliamentary deadlock and vocal internal criticism of the BRI have been a hindrance to projects like the Silk City. China must additionally contend with a strong US military presence within Kuwait's borders, a legacy of the Gulf War that will likely remain for years to come. For these reasons, as well as the kingdom's mere size, it is perhaps unsurprising that the PRC's dealings in Kuwait have been given less attention than those in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Despite these setbacks, however, China continues to invest billions into Kuwaiti infrastructure. Projects like the Silk City continue to make progress, and Kuwait embraces Chinese presence in an official capacity despite its outspoken critics. As long as support from the Emir remains strong, China will continue to play a major role in Kuwaiti development.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

After examining my three cases, it is clear that China has very strong, vested interests in the Middle East that coincide with its long-term global objectives. However, China's international ambitions are already being put to the test around the world. The Belt and Road Initiative has been under intense criticism for its seemingly predatory and one-sided nature. According to the World Bank, roughly 60% of BRI-linked loans have been made to countries in financial distress. Many BRI projects are directly managed by Chinese citizens and companies despite being hosted on foreign soil. When host countries fail to repay their debts to the PRC, the Chinese government assumes full ownership of these projects, nullifying any benefits the host countries expected to gain. This phenomenon has already been seen in countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan, as well as much of Africa (Ezrati, 2023).

Such developments are nothing new. Indeed, allegations of neocolonialism have been a blight on the BRI since its inception. China's fortunes looked to change, however, when Italy agreed to join the BRI in 2019, becoming the first, and so far only, G-7 country to do so.² This decision came at a time Italy experienced a period of Euroscepticism, pulling the Italian government closer to the PRC. But China's hopes have since been dashed. In 2023, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni expressed her desire to withdraw from the BRI, and Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto referred to Italy's BRI involvement as an "improvised and atrocious act" (Sacks, 2023). Should Italy withdraw from the BRI, it would become the first country to do so, losing China one of its largest economic partners and potentially creating a snowball effect in which other countries begin withdrawing as well.

² The G-7 makes up the world's seven largest economies. In addition to Italy, this includes the United States, Canada, Germany, France, Britain, and Japan. The EU is also represented as a single entity.

But it is not only the BRI that faces major hurdles. In Latin America, China-dominated BRICS faces an uncertain future. During the bloc's 2023 summit, Argentina received an invitation to the organization alongside Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and several other countries, making it the second Latin American country after Brazil to be invited. While Argentina's government at the time was poised to accept this invitation, efforts to join BRICS were severely undermined by the results of the Argentine presidential election just months later. Outsider candidate Javier Milei, a conservative libertarian with pro-US leanings, swept the 2023 election in a double-digit landslide. During the campaign, Milei had expressed strong criticism of China, Brazil, and BRICS cooperation as a whole ("BRICS invite," 2023). His victory has been seen as a major setback for China in South America and perhaps a harbinger of future pushback against Chinese influence in the region.

Despite the PRC's long-term plans, these developments suggest time is not on China's side. Yet the Middle East has not experienced an anti-China shift in ways felt elsewhere, and it is for this reason that China has invested so much of its resources in the region. Perhaps ironically given the region's reputation as a hotbed of terrorism and civil war, the Middle East appears to be one of China's more stable prospects. Many Middle Eastern governments are deeply entrenched and unchanging, including but certainly not limited to those of my three case studies. The Saudi monarchy has been in power since Saudi Arabia's inception. The same can be said of the Kuwaiti monarchy, its reign interrupted just briefly during the Iraqi occupation of 1990. President Sisi of Egypt, having been in office for only a decade, has nonetheless consolidated power and will likely retain his position for the foreseeable future. The views of everyday citizens in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait are wholly irrelevant to their countries' foreign policies, even in the latter which bears some semblance of parliamentary democracy.

The unchanging nature of politics of these countries offers a degree of certainty and stability. While their governments have looked to China as a way of holding onto power, the PRC has arguably looked at them the same way. Changing attitudes in volatile democratic politics can see pro-China politicians voted into office one year and removed from power the next, making any long-term projects like the BRI virtually impossible to accomplish. Meanwhile, China-friendly autocrats with a firm hold over their countries can make reliable partners for decades. China has acted as a stabilizing voice in the Middle East, refusing to pick sides in conflict, precisely because its investments depend on upholding the status quo.

The autocratic nature of these regimes plays just as much of a role economically as it does geopolitically. It is no coincidence that all three of my case studies have similar developmental agendas, of which all three are closely linked to the BRI. The top-down nature of these developmental plans, in which the government partners with the private sector to establish key infrastructure, is very much a reflection of what China has been doing domestically for decades. Other countries, particularly western democracies, may be more inclined to leave such infrastructure projects to the free market and refrain from direct involvement. But the presence of developmental agendas in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait allows BRI-linked projects to be prioritized front and center.

Even with its reliable partners in the Middle East, China understands that there are no guarantees. The region as a whole remains tumultuous, while elsewhere public opinion is shifting sharply against the PRC. However, as long as the Middle East has faith in Chinese involvement, China will continue to strengthen its position in the region for years to come.

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