

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.121126234

CHINA'S POSITION ON THE NEW MIDDLE EAST PROJECT

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Received: 25/11/2025

Accepted: 07/01/2026

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ABSTRACT

Within the framework of the present research, the attitude of the People's Republic of China regarding the project of the 'New Middle East' would be examined, which may be defined as the most important and most representative project of geopolitical nature, aimed at influencing the political, economic, and security structures of the Middle East. It is necessary to note that the present research is based on the assumption that the People's Republic of China adheres to a pragmatic and cautious attitude, seeking to maintain its strategic interests in the Middle East, avoiding the conflict situations of the Middle East. The study has a series of important components. First of all, the theoretical and historical background of the project of the New Middle East will be discussed, the main goals of the project, as well as the international players involved in the project. Moreover, the study will discuss the rising Chinese interests in the region, focusing on the economic interests of the country based on the project of the "Belt and Road," as well as the political-security aspects of the country's involvement. Moreover, the analysis also touches upon the evolution of the position of China, which has always been suspicious and cautious but now seems more committed to the process by trying to settle some of the existing disputes in the region, like the rapprochement between the Saudis and the Iranians. Clearly, the Chinese see some challenges in the project but also some opportunities. The findings highlight China's position on the "New Middle East" project, which was not one of direct rejection or endorsement, but rather one of positioning it in a way that meets China's overall interests in a multipolar world order.

KEYWORDS: *China Foreign Policy, New Middle East Project, Geopolitics of the Middle East, Belt and Road Initiative, Multipolar International Order*

1. INTRODUCTION

Political and security shifts in the Middle East, which were felt in the early 21st century, led different world powers to reassess their strategy in the Middle East, as discussed in (Fawcett 2023). In this case, the international system is described as a new emerging world power whose main objective is to realize its economic interests, as discussed in (Han and Paul 2020), in the framework of the "principles of common security" and "global development," as discussed in (Barton 2021).

In this sense, it should be noted that the strategic importance of the project of the 'New Middle East,' which seeks to remake the maps of influence in the region, and which, in turn, forms part of a set of political and economic restructuring projects in some of the countries in the region (Abouzeid and HersHKovitz, 2025), should be highlighted. It is in this sense that the cautious and pragmatic attitude of China in relation to the project can be noted (Bruckermann 2023).

In this regard, one must highlight the strategic importance that the "New Middle East" project holds, since this project seeks the rearrangement of the "maps of influence" within the region, which, in its own right, is the

result of the series of political and economic restructuring processes that have taken place within the countries that comprise this region (Abouzeid and HersHKovitz 2025). Therefore, the prudent position that the People's Republic of China holds on this issue can be highlighted (Bruckermann 2023).

The primary objective of the present analysis is to examine the position of China in relation to the project of the New Middle East, the evolution of its strategy and interests in the region, and its relations with the most important regional and international players.

The reason why this study is significant is the timing and the content, as the world is in the process of witnessing the revolution in the international power balance, and in this regard, China is trying to consolidate its power in regions where the Western world used to reign. In this regard, the Middle East is considered to be a very significant region where the interest of the Chinese is similar to the interest of the major powers in the world, namely: the U.S., Russia, etc. "New Middle East" is considered to be a very significant project in the context of the foreign policy of China, as this project is considered to be the way to economically and politically redesign this region in the world. The objective of this study is to emphasize the geopolitical backgrounds of the 'New Middle East' project by identifying the driving forces of this 'New Middle East' project, mainly the US and the West, and relating it to the context of the hegemony of the West and the restructuring of the regional maps of this region. This study also aims to monitor the vital interests of the US and the West in the Middle East region, to identify the attitudes of the US and the West towards the 'New Middle East' project, to analyze the capabilities of the US and the West to influence the 'New Middle East' project, to evaluate the capabilities of the US and the West to benefit from the 'New Middle East' project, to evaluate the capabilities of the US and the West to impede the 'New Middle East' project, to identify the difficulties facing the US and the West in the Middle East region, and to provide a vision of the future of the US and the West in the Middle East region.

The research problem of this study lies in the apparent contradictory nature of the Chinese stance on the "New Middle East" project. On the one hand, it seeks to maintain the stability of the region in the interest of the security of its energy supply and the uninterrupted nature of its exchange relations. On the other hand, it avoids any kind of engagement in those activities that serve the purposes of the hegemony of the West, as well as any kind of interference in the internal affairs of the regional countries. This leads to the posing of the question of the nature of the foreign policy of China:

1. Is China adopting a policy of "positive neutrality"? Or does it adopt a "strategic hedging" approach?
2. Is China implicitly opposed to the "New Middle East" project, or is it taking advantage of some of its results to advance its geopolitical interests?

This study is based on the main hypothesis that "China's position on the "New Middle East" project is not characterized by direct opposition but rather relies on strategic hedging and pragmatism. China seeks to avoid direct confrontation with Western powers, while exploiting the vacuums created by this project to boost its economic and diplomatic influence in the region.

This research is based on an analytical-inductive approach, benefiting from the tools of comparative political analysis, while adopting the international relations approach to understand the regional and international interactions related to the "New Middle East" project and China's position on it. The developments of Chinese behavior in the region will also be tracked and linked to the stages of the project's development.

1. The first axis

1.1. The New Middle East Project: Origins, Objectives, and Actors

The undertaking has also been linked to the reorganization of the maps of political, economic, and cultural influence in the region, according to ideas such as "liberal democracy," "good governance," and "economic restructuring" (O'Donnell 2024). Significant geopolitical and economic changes are taking place in the Middle East, and the "New Middle East Project" has come to be known by this name for a number of projects to alter political and economic structures in the region, as stated in (Katz 2025). The project encompasses varied ambitions, such as modernization and re-engineering regional alliances, within the complex context of an environment of continuous conflict and external interventions (Vertinsky et al. 2023). This paper presents an elaborate analysis of the emergence of the project, its ambitions, and actors, with an evaluation of the complex nature of the challenges with regard to its implementation, through:

1.1.1. Origin

Bernard Lewis (1916-2018) announced his partition project in 1983, calling for the division of Arab countries into ethnic and religious states (Kent 2025), and ten years later, Shimon Peres' (1923-2016) divisive project emerged through his book "The New Middle East Project" (Sagar et al. 2022), and then the concept of the "new Middle East" crystallized for the first time during the administration of US President George W. Bush, as part of the "Greater Middle East" strategy, which was officially announced at the G-8 summit in 2004 (Ji and Lim 2022). Although the term was later reused by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2006 after the Zionist aggression against Lebanon, its intellectual roots go back to earlier U.S. theses related to the demographic and political re-engineering of the region (Bakan and Abu-Laban 2025). The Carnegie Endowment described as having "shattered the remaining hopes for regional peace and exposed the impotence of the international community," the urgent need to reshape regional structures has emerged (Wendt 2024). This need has been exacerbated by cumulative historical factors:

- **Post-Arab Spring Failures:** The unrest that followed (2011) led to the disintegration of traditional governance structures and the escalation of proxy conflicts, creating a vacuum in regional leadership (Lee 2020).
- **Global geopolitical transformation:** The decline of the relative American influence in the region, in contrast to the rise of the role of Asian powers, such as China (Shifrinson 2020), which was manifested in its successful mediation to restore Saudi Iranian relations.
- **Existential concerns:** The rise of cross-border threats such as terrorism (ISIS) and chronic humanitarian crises (such as droughts in Iraq and Syria) has pushed regional countries to adopt new approaches to security and development (Kanfash 2025).

1.1.2. Objectives

The "declared" and "undeclared" objectives of this project are represented in several axes, most notably:

Stated Objectives: This project seeks to achieve a set of intertwined objectives that reflect the diverse visions of the countries of the region, including:

Economic diversification and digital transformation: The Gulf countries have adopted transformative ambitions such as the "Saudi Vision 2030" and the "UAE Energy Strategy 2050" (Ubaid and Gulrez 2025), which aim to reduce dependence on oil. Dubai has made remarkable progress in the field of the digital economy, as Dubai attracted more than (1200) startups in the digital field during (2024) alone, an increase of (120%) About the previous year (Davalas and Angelaki 2024). These strategies also seek to raise the contribution of AI to GDP to 13.6% in the UAE and 12% in Saudi Arabia by 2030 (Potestà 2021).

Transition towards green energy: Renewable energy has become a key focus of international cooperation, as China is leading this field through projects such as the "Shuaiba" solar plant in Saudi Arabia (2.6 GW) (Torres et al. 2025), which will reduce carbon emissions by (2.45) billion tons within (35) years. As well as the Red Sea project in Saudi Arabia: the world's largest offline energy storage project (Hunt et al. 2025). In addition to the "Al Dhafra" plant in the UAE (2 GW), which raises the share of clean energy to (13%) of the energy mix (Apostoleris and Chiesa 2023). As shown in Table (1).

Table 1. shows China's major green energy projects in the Middle East

Country	Project	ability	Expected impact
Saudi Arabia	Shuaiba Station	2.6 GW	Providing clean energy for 200,000 homes
U.A.E	Al Dhafra Station	2 GW	Reduction of 2.4 million tonnes of emissions per year
Egypt	Suez Wind Project	1.1 GW	The largest of its kind in Africa
Oman	Ibra Project	575 MW	Meeting the needs of 50,000 homes

Restructuring regional security: Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates are seeking to build a regional security system that is less dependent on external powers (Kabandula and Donelli 2024), through mechanisms such as trilateral coordination to confront maritime threats in the Red Sea, and regional mediation initiatives in Yemen and Syria (Tilahun 2025). In addition, he called for the establishment of the Middle East Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) as a model for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Tzivaras 2022).

Undeclared Objectives: The United States of America has not explicitly announced the demographic, political, and security repercussions of this project on the region (Cheng 2022), however, it is clear that the undeclared objectives of this project are the following points: promoting stability through democratic transformation (according to the Western vision), ensuring the security of the Zionist entity, by dismantling any structural threats or regional alliances, as well as restructuring the economies of the region to be more open to Western companies, as well as limiting Russian, Chinese, and Iranian influences in the Arab space. In addition, the dismantling of major Arab states into "sectarian and ethnic entities" as a means of recalibrating the balance of power in the Middle East in line with Western interests.

1.1.3. Key Actors

The New Middle East project includes a complex network of international and regional actors, the most important of which are:

- **Emerging regional countries**

- A. Saudi Arabia is leading economic transformations through Vision 2030 and artificial intelligence programs such as the \$100 billion "Bypass Plan ". It has also adopted a mediating role in regional conflicts through the "Quartet Contact Group" on Yemen.
- B. UAE: A pioneer in digital transformation "Annie" platform for instant payment and renewable energy, and acts as an incubator for tech startups (Paul et al. 2024).
- C. Egypt: It plays a pivotal role in the stability of Libya, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa, with an increasing focus on green energy projects such as the Benban Solar Complex (Al-Rikabi et al. 2025).

- **International powers**

- A. **China:** It has become a key partner in digital infrastructure and energy, through projects such as the data center that Tencent is building in Saudi Arabia. As well as Huawei's cooperation with the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority. In addition to renewable energy projects implemented by companies such as Power China and CEEC.
- B. **The United States:** As the military, intellectual, and media driving force, it is trying to redefine its role through limited security agreements and technological partnerships, especially in the field of artificial intelligence and space.
- C. **Israel:** as the main beneficiary of the dismantling of entities hostile to the Zionist entity.

1.1.4. Non-State actors

- A. Multinational companies: such as BYD Electric Vehicles which collaborate with Qatar to establish the country's first electric vehicle assembly plant.
- B. Regional organizations: such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the League of Arab States, which signed a memorandum of understanding with the Digital Cooperation Organization to drive inclusive digital growth.
- C. Some international NGOs and development programs, such as the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI).

2. The second axis

2.1. China's Middle East Interests: Economic, Political, and Security

China's involvement in the Middle Eastern region has been on the rise since the advent of a new millennium, driven by a convergence of economic and strategic interests in a "non-interference" and "win-all" strategy. Today, it has emerged as one of the most important pillars of China's Belt and Road Initiative in terms of meeting its requirements of "energy security," opening up new markets, and expanding political influence in a new world order. (Dunford 2021).

2.1.1. Economic Interests

- **Energy:** The Middle Eastern region is a significant source of crude oil import to China, as China receives close to 40 percent of its crude oil import requirements from Arab Gulf nations such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq (Hao 2023).
- **Infrastructure and Trade:** China has significantly invested in infrastructure, ports, as well as rail projects in the Middle Eastern region through tools like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), as well as state-owned enterprises like CSCEC, Sinohydro, etc.

- **Markets and finance:** China is seeking to expand its exports and open new markets in Arab countries and has signed several yuan barter and settlement agreements as part of its attempts to internationalize its currency.

2.2. Political interests

- **Balance of power:** China views the Middle East as an arena for balancing American influence, without engaging in direct confrontation. Therefore, it builds balanced relations with contradictory parties such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Zionist entity and Palestine.
- **Supporting sovereignty and non-interference:** China promotes the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, making it an acceptable partner for regimes that fear Western pressure on democracy or human rights.
- **International legitimacy:** China leverages its ties in the region to garner support in international forums, especially on sensitive issues, such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong.

2.3. Security Interests

- **Fighting terrorism and separatism:** China fears the expansion of extremist currents into the Xinjiang region, so it closely monitors security interactions in the region and supports some security partnerships with Arab countries.
- **Protecting communities and investments:** In the face of rising threats, China is trying to strengthen its capabilities to secure its nationals and investments, and it has already started to develop an indirect security architecture in the form of trade and diplomatic alliances.
- **Preparing for a Greater Security Role:** Despite its former focus on economic issues, moves such as China's mediation of the Iranian-Saudi dispute in 2023 suggest a gradual move towards presence as a political and security actor.

3. The third axis

3.1. China's Position on the New Middle East Project

From the outset, China has not taken a direct position on the "New Middle East Project," given its ambiguity and the volatility of regional and international interests. Still, Beijing has treated the project as a potential threat to traditional balances of power, especially if it leads to the dismantling of nation-states or the proliferation of Western models of governance by the force of external intervention. China is adopting a "selective intervention" that focuses on economic security by protecting its energy and trade interests. It also focuses on soft domination by consolidating influence in infrastructure and diplomacy, as well as avoiding military involvement by refusing to embrace the role of a "regional policeman" like the United States. The Chinese position is clearly demonstrated by the following points:

3.1.1. From strategic caution to limited intervention

China has pursued a policy of "strategic prudence" in its handling of political change projects in the Middle East, especially after the U.S. invasion of Iraq (2003) and the Arab Spring (2011). While it has maintained public neutrality, it has been strengthening its relations with stable governments and avoiding supporting any project that would strengthen Western influence in the region. In the UN Security Council, China opposed any external intervention in Syria or Libya, adhering to the principle of national sovereignty. However, China's attitude began to change gradually starting from 2016, as Beijing entered the line of political mediation, as in Yemen and Sudan, and increased the pace of security cooperation to secure its interests and trade corridors within the "Belt and Road" initiative.

Table 2. shows China's position on the New Middle East Project

Strategic Factor	Chinese Position	Directory
Energy	Securing oil and gas supplies (52%) of energy imports from the region.	Investment of (23) billion dollars in Saudi power plants.
neutrality	Refusing to take sides with any party (the balance between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Zionist entity).	Refusal to vote on UN resolutions against Iran.
Limited intervention	Mediate conflicts only if they threaten their immediate interests (energy corridors).	Saudi Iranian mediation 2023 after the threats of the Strait of Hormuz.

3.2. Exploiting the American vacuum and regional conflicts

With the gradual withdrawal of the United States from some of the region's files, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, China has sought to fill the vacuum by developing its relations with key regional powers, such

as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, and has become a "non-nuisance" player for all parties. When China mediated between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023, this step was not isolated, but rather reflected a broader strategy by Beijing that seeks to strengthen its image as a responsible and open force to settle disputes by peaceful means, without imposing ideological or political agendas. During this period, China has been active in filling the regional vacuum by expanding in the region, through several mechanisms, the most important of which are:

- **The economic vacuum is filled:** China has started investing in infrastructure, by financing green energy projects, as in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to replace Western funding.
- **Exploiting regional divisions:** China has invested in regional divisions, as in the case of the (Saudi Iranian) conflict, as well as the (Palestinian-Zionist) conflict. As shown in Table (3).

Table 3. shows China's exploitation of regional divisions

Conflict	Chinese Strategy
Saudi Arabia - Iran	Increasing trade exchange with both (Iranian oil through Malaysia, Saudi investments).
Palestine-Zionist Entity	Supporting the two-state solution in form and enhancing technological cooperation with Israel.

In this context, China has not explicitly opposed the "New Middle East" project but has worked to mitigate its effects by consolidating stability, strengthening its bilateral relations, and moving on the gaps left by the decline of Western actors.

3.3. China's position on reshaping the map of the Middle East.

China adopts a seemingly contradictory stance on the issue of territorial division, combining an official rejection of forced geopolitical changes with practical adaptation to new realities to advance its interests. In opposing the violation of state sovereignty, China appears to oppose any change of borders by force, in response to the planned partition plans in Iraq and Syria and supports the territorial integrity of regional countries by supporting the territorial integrity of countries such as Yemen, Libya, and Egypt, in order to protect their investments in these countries. It also stands against the dismantling equation that Western countries are trying to impose in the region, as China portrays the partition acts as a Western conspiracy and a tool to dismantle the region in favor of the Zionist entity, and this was confirmed by the Chinese Foreign Ministry in 2023.

At the same time, China is adapting to the realistic division of countries, as is the case in Iraqi Kurdistan, where China deals with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a major oil investor, when it contracted with Xinhua, an oil extraction company in Kirkuk, which accounts for 20 percent of China's oil imports. In Yemen, it is negotiating with the Houthis to ensure the security of the Bab al-Mandab Strait and has signed a memorandum with the Houthis to build a power plant in Hodeidah, while China supports the "legitimate" government in Aden.

3.4. The Hidden Drivers of the Chinese Position

- **Protecting investments:** As in the case of Belt and Road projects, such as the port of Djibouti, these countries lose their value if they collapse or fall apart, especially since 78% of Chinese investments are located in the Middle East, which strengthens their close connection with the unified central countries in the Middle East.
- **Containing local separatist conflicts:** China rejects partition projects as a precedent to support China's position in Taiwan and Xinjiang, as Beijing, through its diplomatic discourse, links Chinese unity to the fate of Syria's unity.
- **Neutralizing regional rivalry:** Attempts to secede and divide exacerbate conflicts, as in the case of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, which hinders the operation of power lines, as disintegration and attempts to secede in Iraq impede the flow of oil from Basra to China's Jiechuan.

It seems from the above that China categorically rejects partition when it is a Western project, as is the case in the Kurdistan Region, while tacitly accepting realistic divisions, such as the Houthis' control of Sana'a, when it ensures the protection of its interests, which is considered an "opportunistic rejection."

4. The Fourth Axis

4.1. Opportunities and Challenges for China under the "New Middle East" Project

4.1.1. The opportunities offered by geopolitical transformations

The rapid changes in the Middle East, whether due to the relative U.S. withdrawal or the stalled "democratic change" projects, have provided important opportunities for China to strengthen its political and economic position. Among these opportunities are:

- Expanding the Belt and Road Initiative: China could expand this initiative by land and sea connectivity with the Gulf and Horn of Africa countries, including strategic ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Djibouti, and part of the Suez Canal.
- Diversification of energy sources: China relies on importing more than 50% of its oil needs from the region, making its geopolitical stability a strategic priority.
- Presenting itself as an acceptable mediator: China can exploit regional tensions to present itself as an acceptable mediator by all sides, without colonial legacy or partisan positions.

4.1.2. Challenges and constraints facing China

Despite the opportunities, China faces complex challenges in dealing with the "new Middle East," most notably:

- **Regional Heterogeneity and Conflicts:** Sectarian and political conflicts, such as in Iraq or Yemen, threaten China's investments in the region.
- Western pressure: China is facing pressure from the United States, which sees its growing role as a threat to its interests in the Gulf.
- Lack of political and historical experience: Beijing lacks political and historical experience in managing long-term conflict files compared to Washington and Moscow.
- Media and ideological attacks: China is under attack from some parties that accuse it of hiding expansionist agendas behind the guise of the economy.

Conclusion

The study concluded that China's attitude towards the "New Middle East" project is characterized by realism and flexibility, as it has moved from a hedging policy to a policy of limited intervention to benefit from the gaps left by the decline of Western influence in this region, as China has proven its ability to balance its great economic interests in the Middle East, and specifically in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, and its respect for the national sovereignty of countries, which made it a legitimate party among the conflicting parties. Another challenge facing China in this context is of great importance, and this is regional political instabilities, Western pressure, and its lack of experience in regional conflicts. Finally, the Chinese role in the "New Middle East" project is a great opportunity for China to build on its legitimate position as a powerful country, and this can be done by continuing to balance its policy to avoid any conflicts.

Results

1. China's attitude toward the "New Middle East" project is characterized by strategic prudence that balances protecting interests with avoiding direct confrontation.
2. Chinese policy has shifted from traditional caution to limited selective engagement in regional mediation files.
3. China has taken advantage of the relative decline of the U.S. role to strengthen its economic and diplomatic presence in the region.
4. Energy security is the most influential factor in shaping China's behavior toward regional shifts.
5. China rejects projects of forced dismantling of states while pragmatically adapting to real-world changes on the ground.
6. The project provided a fertile environment for the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative through investment in infrastructure and energy.
7. China's security role remains limited by a lack of historical experience in managing regional conflicts.

Recommendations

1. The need to develop in-depth studies on the implications of China's long-term presence on regional security and economy.

2. The importance of building balanced Arab-Chinese partnerships that preserve the strategic diversity of countries and do not depend on their decision to one party.
3. Encouraging the investment of China's role in diplomatic mediation in order to promote the settlement of disputes away from international pressures.
4. Expand Arab-Chinese cooperation in the fields of technology and renewable energy to support future economic transformation.
5. Assess the impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative on the economic sovereignty of countries to ensure the sustainability of partnerships.
6. Strengthen regional efforts to establish independent security systems that reduce dependence on international powers.
7. Developing a unified Arab vision towards the Chinese role in order to achieve collective interests and reduce regional contradictions.

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