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The Belt and Road in the Middle East: The Cases of Iran  
and Saudi Arabia

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# 1 Introduction

In recent years, China has taken the world by storm. As a matter of fact, the relevance of China worldwide is growing and, at least for the time being, it does not seem to be reaching a halt any time soon. Among the different projects and initiatives promoted by China which have gathered global attention, the most significant one is indeed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known with the name One Belt One Road (OBOR).

The BRI involves a large number of countries around the world, mainly in Asia and Africa, but it is also spreading in other parts of the world, having already established solid “bridgeheads” in Europe and South America. Currently, about 140 countries have joined the BRI, including some US allies (Sacks, 2021).

The Middle East has shown a huge involvement in the BRI. Although the degree and depth of relations differs among countries, there are only few countries in the ME who are not directly involved in the project. The ME has always been considered relevant by China. As a matter of fact, Mao defined the ME as a crucial area for the stability of the Chinese regime, and during his presidency China tried to maintain its influence in the region through the support of Marxist and Leftist liberation movements all throughout the ME, for example supporting the Popular Front for Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG), the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and helping to reach the foundation of the Democratic People’s republic of Yemen. However, this approach did not yield the expected results, leading China to seek a different and more ordinary approach in the following years, attempting to establish formal diplomatic relations with Middle Eastern Countries (Olimat, 2016).

After Mao’s death in 1976, China’s relationships in the Middle East witnessed relevant improvements. Albeit with some missteps, i.e., the attempted normalization of the diplomatic relationship with the Shah in 1978, just some months before the end of his reign and his toppling through the Iranian revolution (Conduit & Akbarzadeh, 2018), China achieved some huge successes. In the case of Iran, after issuing an apology and recognizing the newly formed state immediately after the revolution, China started developing deep relationship with the Islamic Republic starting from 1983. (Conduit & Akbarzadeh, 2018). Relationships with other Middle Eastern countries had already started to improve before the events in Iran. Diplomatic relationships were established with Kuwait in 1971 (differently in

comparison to other countries, this relationship was established as Mao was still alive). Oman formed diplomatic ties in 1978 followed by the UAE in 1984, Qatar and Bahrein respectively established a relationship in 1988 and 1989. The peak of this process was reached with the creation of diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia in 1990, which has always been a US ally in the area (Olimat, 2016).

As Andrew Scobell noted, there are different reasons why the ME matters to China. First, Middle East is a flashpoint for great power competition and rivalry, often witnessing proxy conflicts among the great powers. Furthermore, the relevance of the area for China increased as it started to face pressure by the West, especially after events such as the repression of the protest in Tiananmen Square of 1989. As a matter of fact, developing countries in the area were willing to support China. Since then, China has tried to gain an increasingly prominent role in the area. Second, China sees the region as fundamental for trade and collection of resources. In particular, the area has satisfied a huge portion of China's demand for oil, for example by supplying more than half of its import of oil in 2014. While oil represent a huge element that influences China's relationship with the middle east, there are other resources towards which China has shown interest. China has also established cooperation with Saudi Arabia with regard to Natural gas and Petrochemicals. Alongside providing necessary resources, the ME has proved to be a huge market for Chinese trade and investments. Third, given the presence of Chinese Muslims, China is interested in avoiding the spread of religious extremism and Muslim nationalism within its borders, its presence and influence in the area can discourage the support for Muslim separatist movements within the country. Furthermore, China is attempting to depict itself as fostering freedom of religion and religious tolerance, showing also support for religious practices such as the Hajj, the pilgrimage which composes one of the Pillars of Islam. Lastly, China considers the ME as a crucial strategic area for China. For this reason, China has tried to foster its influence through different methods, in particular through the BRI. As a matter of fact, while the BRI is not the first attempt by China to increases its presence, it is by far the most ambitious one. (Scobell, 2018).

Among the main countries in the ME to participate in the BRI there are, of course, Saudi Arabia and Iran. China has enjoyed a long-lasting relationship with both of them. The two countries represent two of the major trade partners for China, both within and outside the region. For example, they both provide a huge part of the imported oil for China. In fact,

China was the major importer of Iranian oil in 2013 and in the first quarter of 2020, China imported 82,000 of the 170,000 daily exported Iranian barrels (Chaziza M. , 2020). Saudi Arabia is China's first crude oil supplier, exporting 1.69 million barrels daily in 2020 and showing a growth in export of 1.9% in 2020 (Muyu & Chen, 2021). Furthermore, both countries have a strong degree of dependence on oil exports towards China. Saudi Arabia showed a dependence degree in energy export of 12.62% in 2015, while in the same year, Iran shows a degree of 28.43%. Furthermore, the two countries represent two of the most secure sources of energy imports for China. In 2015 Saudi Arabia was the first exporter in the ME and was surpassed only by Russia, while Iran held the fifth position, and the fourth in the ME (Zhao, Liu, Wang, & Ge, 2019).

Besides Economic relationships, these two countries are relevant also for China at the political level. While being a long-lasting Chinese ally, Iran is divided between the Conservatives, who advocate for a stronger and deeper link with China, and the Reformist, who urge for a reduction of the tension with the West in general (Ehteshami, Horesh, & Xu, 2018). After the recent election on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2021 of the conservative Ebrahim Raisi, Iran will probably look for a deeper cooperation with China, frustrating the hopes of the reformists. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has been a long-lasting ally of the United States, but in the last decade it has relevantly deepened its relationship with China, making the U.S. worry about possible developments of their relationship and its impact on the U.S hegemony in the area (Ramani, 2018).

It is also relevant to stress how, compared to each other, the two countries enjoy a widely different relationship with China. As it was said, Saudi Arabia enjoys a strong relationship with the United States. While the Chinese role in Saudi Arabia is increasing, with both countries expressing support for the BRI and the Saudi Vision 2030 respectively, and affirming their willingness to cooperate (Chen, Shu, & Wen, 2018), the U.S., while still being the most relevant ally for the Kingdom especially in the defense and security sector, saw their influence in the country diminishing as tensions and confrontations between the two countries grew in intensity. The tension rose in intensity especially after such events as the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, which, as it will be discussed in more depth later, has pushed the U.S.'s government to the adoption of the "Protection of Saudi Dissidents Act" (Khalel, 2021), which could have a dire impact in their relationship. The current Biden administration is trying to use a careful approach towards the Kingdom, for example by avoiding punishing the Saudi

Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman directly, despite not only his involvement in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, but also the call by some U.S.'s to hold him accountable (Al Jazeera, 2021). However, this approach might not be enough to avoid the current shift of the Kingdom towards China. While the two countries have, for now, mainly cooperated in the economic sphere, further political cooperation might be around the corner, especially as China is perceived as a "less complicated" ally. Nonetheless, it is crucial to stress that the Saudi Chinese alignment represents only one of the possible courses of actions that the Kingdom might take. While being arguably one of the most likely, it is not certain that the future will see China taking the place of the United States in the Kingdom, especially since the relevant role that the U.S. play in the security of Saudi Arabia. All in all, if Saudi Arabia was forced to decide on which ally to keep, for the time being it would probably remain on the U.S.'s side. On the other hand, for Iran staying on the Chinese side represent the only possible option. Considering the tensions with the united States and the west in general, as well as its status as a pariah in the middle east, the relationship with China, and especially the BRI, represent the main source of investment and development for the Islamic Republic, especially after the sanction regime which was reinstated by the former U.S. president Donald Trump, which led to the collapse of some agreement that Iran had formed with Western firms for example the French Total (Deutsche Welle, 2018). This situation pushes Iran towards an overreliance on China, which represents a de facto monopolist in some sector of the Iranian economy, also representing the only possible access for Iran to some technologies, both in the military and civilian spheres. This, however, also leaves Iran exposed to the decisions of the Chinese government, which, as it will be shown in more detail later in the dissertation, has often used the Islamic Republic as a tool in its negotiations with the United States. In any case, although some political factions inside Iran push for a friendlier approach towards the west, the country has its hands tied for now, as China represents the only actor able to be extensively involved in Iran, and will not loosen its grip in the near future, especially considering the increase in strength that the pro-China conservative camp is witnessing in Iran in the current time. Lastly, it should be pointed out how the alliance with both the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic represents an issue for China. Since the Islamic Revolution, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been strong adversaries, which have often fought more or less directly in the Area. As it will be discussed more in depth in a later chapter, China, which has tried to avoid political involvement in the Middle East, might be forced to intervene in the future to safeguard its economic interests, or to increase its prestige in the region. However, it is easy to see how



these two alliances, beside the economic advantages that might bring to China, also represent a relevant issue for China, which is forced to balance its approach to avoid alienating one of the two partners. This task, which might appear not too complicated in the case of Iran, as the country often has to “bite the bullet” regarding Chinese decision, is made more complicated in the case of Saudi Arabia, as the United States always represent a relevant economic and political ally, which also shared its adversarial position towards Iran. The possible developments of the two alliances, as well as the impact on the BRI that the tensions between the two Middle Eastern countries might have, are naturally a relevant topic of analysis.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia play a crucial role in the Chinese ambitions to develop the BRI. This dissertation is aimed at analyzing the relationship between China and these two countries, their relevance and some possible future developments. The first chapter will be dedicated to a general description of the structure of the BRI, its perception, both at home and abroad, and also a describing the challenges it has to face in the Middle East in general. In the second and third chapters, the relationship respectively between China and Saudi Arabia and China and Iran will be discussed, as well as their role in the BRI and the projects that might be realized under the BRI. The fourth chapter will be dedicated to an analysis of the issues that the implementation of the BRI faces in the two countries, as well as the problems that the relationship with the U.S. and the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia might entail for a fruitful and successful implementation of the BRI. Lastly, some final remarks on the future of the BRI in both countries will be provided.

## 2. Overview of the BRI

The starting point of the Belt and Road Initiative is unanimously identified as the speech delivered by president Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan at the Nazarbayev University in 2013. While referencing old imagery of the ancient Silk Road, and referring to it as a groundbreaking example of peaceful cooperation among different cultures, Xi Jinping proposed the establishment of new ties among the countries that once were touched by the Silk Road. However, the project was broader than a mere trade agreement. As reported by the Chinese Ministry of foreign affairs:

*Xi Jinping proposed that in order to make the economic ties closer, mutual cooperation deeper and space of development broader between the Eurasian countries, we can innovate the mode of cooperation and jointly build the "Silk Road Economic Belt" step by step to gradually form overall regional cooperation. First, to strengthen policy communication. Countries in the region can communicate with each other on economic development strategies, and make plans and measures for regional cooperation through consultations. Second, to improve road connectivity. To open up the transportation channel from the Pacific to the Baltic Sea and to gradually form a transportation network that connects East Asia, West Asia, and South Asia. Third, to promote trade facilitation. All the parties should discuss the issues concerning trade and investment facilitation and make appropriate arrangements. Fourth, to enhance monetary circulation. All the parties should promote the realization of exchange and settlement of local currency, increase the ability to fend off financial risks and make the region more economically competitive in the world. Fifth, to strengthen people-to-people exchanges. All the parties should strengthen the friendly exchanges between their peoples to promote understanding and friendship with each other. (President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries, 2013)*

During the speech president Xi also stated that the idea of a new Silk Road would have not implied an interference by China in the internal affairs of the states involved. On the contrary, the project's goal was the creation of the so-called win-win type of cooperation, as well as "build a community of interests" (President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries, 2013). A months later, Xi Jinping delivered a speech at the Indonesian Parliament, in which he called for the creation of a "Maritime Silk Road of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" as well as affirming its interest in the formation of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), (ASEAN China Centre, 2013) which will be later formed in 2016. These two speeches served to lay the foundation

of the two branches of the BRI, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road”.

The idea of the Belt and Road was further developed in the following years. In 2015 the “Vision and actions on jointly building Belt and Road”, a document establishing the main guidelines of the initiative, was published by the Chinese Government. The publication of the Vision and Action was followed by different other documents, defining different aspects of the BRI. While the idea of win-win cooperation and mutual benefits has been always a clear defining element of the initiative, always stressed by supporters of the BRI as the main positive element of the project, the way in which the BRI is structured was always less clearly defined. The BRI has always been characterized by documents broadly defining its goals and scope and a loose set of initiatives and member states. The attempt to explain the structure of the initiative is the starting point of this chapter. In the next section, the structure of the BRI will be the focal point. Secondly, the perception of the BRI, both in China and abroad, will be discussed. Lastly, the final section will address the main issues and concerns that the China faces regarding the application of the BRI in the Middle East.

## 2.1 The Structure of the BRI

“Vision and actions” was the first document establishing some of the features of the BRI. In the document some of the most well-known features of the initiative are reported, like the non-interference in internal affairs, the seeking of mutual benefits in the conduction of the project and the openness of the initiative to all countries, without considering their belonging to the ancient Silk Road as a necessary prerequisite. The document also defines the two components of the BRI, namely the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (SREB), which is the land part of the initiative, and the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road” (MSR). In the document are also reported the six land corridors around which the BRI is structured, i.e., the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the China-Mongolia-Russia, the China-Central Asia-West Asia, the China-Indochina Peninsula, the China-Pakistan and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridors. The document is also crucial through its content the main priorities of the initiative are also established. Along with trade and financial initiatives, the document also stresses, for instance, the need for cultural exchange among the BRI countries. (Vision And Actions On Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt And 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, 2015)

However, the document never clearly defines the initiatives and the projects that are planned for the development of the BRI. The document expresses only loose commitments, ideas and calls for cooperation among states in different sectors, from the economic sphere, to the environmental protection and the so-called people-to-people bonds, with no clear action plan stated. While representing the first attempt at coordinating the different aspects of the BRI, no clear definition of the actual structure, plans and/or projects that should compose the initiative are given.

The “Vision and actions” (VA from now on) was followed by other documents defining other aspects of the initiative. An example would be the “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative” (VMCBRI for short), published in 2017. This document presents very similar elements with the VA. In fact, it is composed by general remarks and broadly defined projects concerning a plethora of sectors and lacking a defined action plan. Only the last part of the document addresses the already implemented projects. However, the section presents only a list of projects with only few notes on the actual results:

*Progress has been achieved in implementing a series of programs and projects, including the Malaysia Malacca Seaside Industrial Park, the Pakistan Gwadar Port, the port+industrial park+city mode of integrated development of the Kyaukpyu port in Myanmar, the Colombo Port City and the Phase II Hambantota Port Project in Sri Lanka, the railway linking Ethiopia and Djibouti, the railway between Mombasa and Nairobi in Kenya, and the Piraeus port in Greece. China is collaborating with the Netherlands in developing offshore wind power generation and with Indonesia, Kazakhstan and Iran in implementing seawater desalination projects. The connectivity of submarine communication has been remarkably enhanced and the Asia-Pacific Gateway (APG) submarine optical fiber cable is officially up and running. The industrial parks in China’s Qinzhou and Malaysia’s Kuantan, the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone in Cambodia and the Suez Economic and Trade Cooperative Zone in Egypt, are currently under construction, and have achieved remarkable progress. (Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017)*

Furthermore, the document includes the Greek Port of Piraeus among the instances of BRI infrastructure projects. While it is true that the Port is now an example of successful Chinese investments, and is used as a positive example of the BRI, the Chinese involvement in the port had already started before the birth of the BRI. In fact, Freymann reports that two piers were already leased to the Chinese firm COSCO in 2008. Furthermore, as the BRI was firstly announced in 2013, Piraeus was already in Chinese hands. (Freymann, 2021, pp. 168-174;

188-192) On one hand, it is true that Piraeus might receive further funding and investments through BRI projects, meaning that it could be included among the BRI projects. On the other hand, even considered the characteristics previously stated, the inclusion of Piraeus which saw Chinese investments even before the launch of the initiative creates further confusion regarding the actual composition of the BRI.

Another element creating confusion is the mapping and definition of the member states. While, as the official documents have made clear, the BRI is an open initiative, there is no clear definition or map depicting its members, even among Chinese sources. While the most used map is the provided by Xinhua, one of the most relevant Chinese press agencies, other important sources, such as the Hong Kong Trade and Development Commission, provide maps showing different routes and places with respect to the one provided by Xinhua. This creates a variety of maps, often produced by different official institutions and often contradicting or confusing. (Freymann, 2021, pp. 80-86). All these elements direct toward the idea that the BRI, except for some general remarks and some basic principles, is a largely fluid initiative, able to accommodate the largest variety of projects and ideas. Therefore, it can be stated that the structure of the BRI is not confusing and obscure, but actually lacking on purpose. This however might prove to be one of its strongest features. As a matter of fact, every successful project can be included under the umbrella of the BRI, while keeping out the failing ones.

To understand why the Chinese government, and more specifically president Xi Jinping, kept this fluid structure there are mainly two explanations, which can work in a complementary way to explain this characteristic of the BRI. On one hand, Eyck Freyermann stresses how the BRI is actually a type of brand and also an instrument which is used to show party loyalty. On the other hand, according to Jones and Zeng, the BRI is structured as it is because it is mainly generated by conflicting interests inside the Chinese state, which often push towards different outcomes.

Freyermann affirms that, since the creation of the BRI, different governmental organs, as well as provincial governments and other institutions, have started to promote different programs and events under the name of the BRI, showing great enthusiasm and involvement in the initiative. Even private companies, both Chinese and foreign, have capitalized on the opportunity, using the BRI name to promote their activities. However, the projects proposed were not always strictly related to the actual goals reported on the BRI official documents.

The BRI name was put on events and initiatives ranging from conferences of the Chinese beauty industry to the programmed Sri Lankan joint venture of the Chinese brewery Tsingtao. This fosters the idea, supported also by CCP officials, that the BRI is more a brand than a clearly defined project, which firms, both Chinese and international, and state organs can use to show their loyalty to the party and to Xi's grand vision for the Chinese future. (Freyman, 2021, pp. 69-73; 75-78)

On the other hand, Jones and Zeng provide quite a different perspective on this issue. They argue that China has been marked by three different trends, namely fragmentation, with the creation of overlapping state institutions, decentralization of power, with provincial government enjoying a higher degree of autonomy, and lastly internationalization, with internal actors, including local governments, gaining a broader international role. This has led to a tendency of issuing broad guidelines for projects and initiatives, to let each tailor it to its needs. This was the case also for the BRI, with different organizations left free to interpret the initiative in their own way. In fact, there are different plans regarding the BRI for every Chinese province, with some of them even going against some governmental decisions, fostering also the idea that not only the BRI is not a monolithic, well-defined initiative, but it is not even fully in the hands of the president or of the central government. Therefore, the actual implementation of the BRI is brought about by a variety of agencies and actors, showing a more bottom-up approach than expected, leaving to the central government and to president Xi Jinping more of a role as the regulator of the initiative than the creator of a masterplan (Jones & Zeng, 2019).

These two views, working in a complementary way, are crucially helpful to define the BRI. As a matter of fact, the government can swoop in on every project, using it as a flagship of the BRI and showing how successful the initiative is, while ignoring minor or failing projects. Besides, actors have a broader freedom of action, enjoying also a sort of "governmental approval" or "quality stamp" for their ideas and projects, and also showing their adherence to party doctrine by putting their work under the BRI umbrella. Fully in the spirit of the BRI, both the government and the actors involved have something to gain from it.

The fluidity of the BRI has also proved to be effective in facing the rise of new challenges. As a matter of fact, besides the original SREB and MSR new "Silk Roads" have emerged, each playing an important part in the initiative. For example, in 2015, the Digital Silk Road (DSR) was launched. As all the other parts of the BRI, the terms of this "Silk Road" were loosely

defined, but many different countries joined the initiative, boosting the worldwide Chinese involvement in the tech sector. This initiative has also created a lot of tensions with Western countries, concerned with the diffusion of the new 5G networks and infrastructures developed by China. (Kurlantzick & West) Even more relevant is the “Health Silk Road” (HSR). While it was initially suggested in 2017 before the current Covid-19 pandemic, the HSR has gained steam in recent times, especially after a phone call in March 2020, in which President Xi proposed to the former Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte the will to further build this new silk road. This was coupled with other initiatives, for example the delivery of relief packages to other countries along the BRI (Lancaster, Rubin, & Rapp-Hooper, 2020). Furthermore, China has been very active in selling or donating its own Covid-19 vaccine, mainly in Africa and South America. China has sold 792.77 million of doses while another 25.36 million were donated. (China COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker, 2021) However, doubts regarding the effectiveness of the vaccines (Wong T. , 2021), as well as skepticism regarding Chinese help, have proved detrimental for the Chinese efforts and the development of the HSR.

Another fundamental aspect of the BRI is how the projects proposed get their financing. There are five main ways to get the funds for the projects, involving both private and public actors. The first one, regards the involvement of global institutions. China has sought to collaborate with institutions such as the IMF or the World Bank. However, these institutions have often provided technical support, without actually financing the projects of the BRI. Secondly, Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), especially the ones backed directly by China, are involved in the financing. In this category fall also banks such as the AIIB, which was arguably founded with the main goal of supporting the development of the BRI. However, these institutions, while providing financial aid for a large number of projects, are usually not specifically focused on the BRI. Another source of financial support are international banking consortiums formed by Chinese banks in alliance with other foreign banks. The fourth, and main, source of funding are Chinese state-owned commercial banks, which have contributed to about 50% of the BRI funds, surpassing by far every other contributor. However, this has created some problems, as those banks charge for profit interest rates. This has created some issues in the repayment of the debt for the countries involved in the initiative, a prime example being Sri Lanka. The country had to lease the Hambantota port, which it had constructed under the BRI, to China, in order to repay its

debt<sup>1</sup>. Lastly, another important source of funding is the support of private sources of capital in co-financing the projects. (Rana & Ji, 2020, pp. 12-15; 36-37).

Besides the AIIB, another relevant fund involved in financing the Initiative is the “Silk Road Fund” (SRF), established ad hoc in 2014, with the clear goal of providing funds for BRI projects, as it is also stated on the SRF’s website. However, the fund, as other financial institutions supporting the BRI, is completely owned by Chinese firms or state organs. Another important element to stress is the composition of the fund’s financial capital. The fund has a capital of 40 billion USD and 100 billion Renminbi (RMB). (Silk Road Fund overview) This fact is just an example showing how the BRI and the funds linked with it have been a relevant tool for the internationalization of the RMB.

In recent times China attempted to boost the international role of its currency, an example of this being the integration of the RMB into the Special Drawing Rights (SDR) currencies of the IMF. For this reason, the development of the BRI is a huge opportunity to move further in that direction. As a matter of facts, the use of RMB to invest and lend money for the various projects could be a great chance for increasing the international role the RMB plays. However, the RMB is used only for a limited amount of BRI transaction. This phenomenon has different explanations. First, the U.S. dollars are still the preferred currency used in BRI projects, meaning that to have enough dollars to sustain the projects, China must run a balance of payments surplus, meaning that it exports more than it imports from the United States. This is achieved by keeping the RMB competitive with respect to the USD. The floating exchange system makes the RMB a less attractive currency than it might be. Furthermore, to internationalize a currency, you need to provide other countries with it. This is achieved either through a trade deficit, or using financial assets. Currently, China runs a trade surplus with the BRI countries, making it difficult to use trade to obtain RMB. Furthermore, the “Panda Bond” which were issued by Chinese banks have proved to be less attractive than expected (Liang, 2020). However, this does not mean that the international role of the RMB has not improved. The Renminbi Internationalization Index (RII) increased from 0.23 in 2010 to 3.13 in 2017, meaning that about 3% of worldwide transactions use RMB (Ly, 2020). While the amount remains low, this shows a trend towards a broader use of the RMB in transactions. This trend might increase if the BRI is exploited in the right way by China.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the topic, See Chapter 5 “Strategic Promiscuity: Sri Lanka Flirts with OBOR” in E. Freymann, “One Belt One Road: Chinese Power Meets the World”.



Organizations such as the SRF and the AIIB have a relevant role to play in this process, as they might turn the RMB in the most used currency in the BRI area.

Another relevant element for the circulation of RMB is the presence of currency swap agreements. It was estimated that such agreements increase by 37% the flow of trade between BRI countries and China. (Yu, Zhang, Yu, & Yang, 2020). This shows how it is possible not only for the BRI to help to internationalize the RMB, but how the internationalization of the currency can help to strengthen the ties among the BRI countries. As a matter of fact, the two processes go hand in hand, giving each other support.

In any case, while the BRI is a huge tool for improving the international role of the RMB, its success depends on the willingness of the Chinese government to use it, considering that further internationalization will reduce the control the state has on its own currency.

To sum up, the BRI has not a fixed structure with a clearly defined order. The documents provided work only as general guidelines, without describing anything in specific terms. However, this has proven to be a great advantage for the BRI, which is able to shift its shape and scope according to the necessity of the time, and without imposing any limitation to its reach. This created a multi-faceted structure, capable of addressing different topics. Furthermore, even regarding financing, the sources are fluid and changing. While the weight is still carried mostly directly by the Chinese state, China is trying to enlarge the number of contributors. This has worked with the creation of consortium and mainly the supports of MDBs, in particularly the AIIB. Lastly, the Renminbi has a growing relevance for the BRI. The BRI is a relevant network for the promotion of the Chinese currency, and further internationalization of the Renminbi might help the growth of the BRI itself. However, the RMB still plays a second fiddle to the USD, and it still might need a lot of time to become the currency of choice in the BRI.

## 2.2 The Perception of the BRI

Defining the BRI has been a hard task both in China and abroad. However, while in China the issue was the framework of the initiative, and how it should be defined, in other countries the discussion was more focused on the attempt to define China's ultimate goal, and also on understanding if the BRI was actually a trap laid by the Chinese government or an actual attempt at cooperation.

When the BRI was firstly proposed by president Xi Jinping, the immediate reaction, both at home and abroad, was to compare it to the Marshall Plan. The idea of a “Chinese Marshall Plan” was not a new idea formed together with the BRI. As a matter of fact, talks about such a plan had already started in 2009, when various Chinese economists proposed the creation of this kind of project (Jin, 2015). However, at the time nothing came out of that proposal.

The birth of the BRI seemed at first to be the actual realization of that “Chinese Marshall Plan” which was envisaged years before. As Shen and Chan stressed, while differing in the historical circumstances in which they were proposed and applied, both projects shared a lot of similarities. From the economic point of view, both the Marshall Plan and the BRI represented a way to increase the exports of the two countries and to foster the circulation of their currency. From the political side the BRI might be seen as a way to remove support from the US, limiting its influence and dividing its allies, especially the ones already taking part in the BRI, as the Marshall plan was used to strengthen the U.S.’s position in Europe. (Shen & Chan, 2018)

However, the idea of the BRI as a “Chinese Marshall Plan”, has been strongly rejected. While stating that some similarities might be identified in the fact that both the Marshall Plan and the BRI had the goal of revitalizing the economy, the two projects are completely different regarding the political aspect. First, it is argued that the initiative is open to anyone and inclusive, detaching itself from the idea of a “sphere of influence”, stressing the relevance of common development and win-win achievements. On the other hand, the Marshall Plan was undetachable from the political background of its time, meaning that it was mainly a political move based on ideology, and it was used to gain an edge on the USSR. Second, it is argued that the BRI is based on equality of the participants, without interference in the internal affairs of the participants by China or other members of BRI. Conversely, it is sustained that the Marshall Plan imposed harsh political conditions on the participants and also made the US able to intervene in European States’ internal affairs. Lastly, the BRI is based on each country’s specific features and situation, stressing the cooperative nature of the initiative and its pragmatism, whereas the Marshall Plan was aimed at gaining and hegemonic role in Europe, both in politics and also in the economy (Jin, 2015). This idea that, while recognizing similarities in the economic sphere, the BRI is a completely different concept, as it fosters amicable relationship and trust, is currently vastly spread. Chinese scholars now tend to stress this fact, and the narrative of a win-win cooperation, already used when the BRI was

founded, has become a sort of “catchphrase” for the initiative. Furthermore, as Freymann stresses, this view that the BRI had nothing to do with the Marshall Plan has been firmly defended by a variety of scholars and official sources alike, an example being the *Qiushi* Journal which published an article titled “The ‘Belt and Road’ Is definitely not the Chinese Version of the ‘Marshall Plan’” (Freymann, 2021).

Chinese scholars have also argued whether or not the BRI represents a Chinese response to U.S. politics regarding China. Since more than a decade US politics has been standoffish with regard to China. During the Obama presidency, the U.S. raised their involvement in east Asia (the so-called “Pivot to Asia”), in what was seen as an attempt to counter the Chinese growing power. During the Trump presidency relations did not improve, as the “U.S. – China Trade War” broke out. Relations are not yet improving under current president Biden, which is adopting a similar attitude towards China as the one adopted by Obama during his mandate. Some Chinese scholars have argued that the BRI is a response to all of these positions and attitudes by the US. It is argued that the BRI should balance or counter the effects of the US actions, in an attempt to establish a “parallel world order”. However, most Chinese scholars refused this type of narrative, seeing the BRI just as a new attempt at cooperation. As a matter of fact, the main narrative is again one of strong cooperation and collective advantage and growth, while any attempted framing of the BRI as a project aimed at the creation of rivalries and tension is strongly opposed (Zhao, 2016).

While, especially in the west, the BRI was sometimes perceived as an outlet to Chinese overproduction, this view was not particularly popular in China. Scholars have argued that the countries of the BRI are not able to efficiently absorb Chinese overcapacity, meaning that an attempt to use the BRI as an outlet for this problem would be meaningless. Furthermore, joining the BRI doesn’t mean that a country would be willing to absorb the products in excess, as it might be seen as a move from China to free itself of its problem at the expenses of its “allies”, which are often faced by their own pressing issues. Lastly, the export of overcapacity might be just a momentary and symptomatic solution for the problem, without addressing the real cause, namely a growth model which should be change and modernized (Zhao, 2016).

Lastly, another view, which can be complementary to the previous one regarding the promotion of cooperation, is that the BRI is used as an instrument to achieve domestic stability. This goal is reached in two ways according to this idea.

The first way is by having the party exercising an even stronger role in daily life. This is achieved through the BRI mainly through the reinforcement of the connection of the provinces with the central government. In fact, local government use the BRI to gain recognition by the central institutions (Ma, 2017), as it was also stated by Freymann.

The second is that the BRI is a way to stimulate Chinese nationalistic sentiment. This will help the population focus on broader, long-term goals, and foster national unity, especially in difficult times (Ma, 2017). This view is particularly compelling and actual, as in recent years a strengthening of Chinese national sentiment and pride could be clearly witnessed, especially as a response to the Covid-19 crisis. This trend has led to more confrontational statements and position by Chinese politicians and diplomats (the so-called “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy”). This approach was mainly used for domestic purposes, to show an unwavering will to defend China and the Chinese government and to boost nationalistic sentiment at home, apparently with a wide success. (Wong, 2020). The Apex of this trend was reached recently during the celebrations of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. During his speech, president Xi Jinping affirmed:

*We have never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other country, and we never will. By the same token, we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves on a collision course with a great wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people.* (Full text of Xi Jinping's speech on the CCP's 100th anniversary, 2021).

This part of the speech is another proof of the intention by the State administration to foster this rising nationalistic sentiment in the country. However, Xi Jinping stressed how China leaves room for cooperation with other countries. In the same speech he directly referenced the BRI stating:

*On the journey ahead, we will remain committed to promoting peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit, to an independent foreign policy of peace, and to the path of peaceful development. We will work to build a new type of international relations and a human community with a shared future, promote high-quality development of the Belt and Road Initiative through joint efforts, and use China's new achievements in development to provide the world with new opportunities. The Party will continue to work with all peace-loving countries and peoples to promote the shared human values of peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy, and freedom. We will continue to champion cooperation over confrontation, to open up rather than closing our doors, and to focus on mutual benefits instead of zero-sum*

*games. We will oppose hegemony and power politics, and strive to keep the wheels of history rolling toward bright horizons.* (Full text of Xi Jinping's speech on the CCP's 100th anniversary, 2021)

This speech reflects not only the current domestic situation in China, but it also shows the main feature of the BRI. China again underlines its apparent intention of cooperating and establishing ties with other countries, while again stressing the alleged detachment of the BRI from politics.

Further attention is due to the inclusion of the BRI in the anniversary speech. Since the introduction of the BRI in the Chinese constitution in 2017 (Xinhua News Agency, 2017), the BRI has achieved an even more prominent role, not only as a forward-looking project, but also as the CCP's latest endeavor. Not only the speech strengthens the idea that the BRI is a fundamental project for the CCP, but it also stresses that Xi Jinping has launched China through a revolutionary path. As Freymann puts it, speaking about a documentary series created for the Chinese public: *"'One Belt One Road' [the name of the documentary; A/N] is organized around a guiding narrative: that China's Silk Road history is glorious and Xi has initiated a world historical transformation to restore it"* (Freymann, 2021, p. 49). This idea of the crucial role of the BRI and of Xi Jinping grandeur has been fostered at home through different methods. As was already stated before, different series of documentaries were produced, highlighting the relevance of the historical Silk Road and stressing the relevance of the Chinese attempt to revive this link among nations, showing also examples of cooperation between China and, for example, Mongolia. However, the documentaries are not as relevant as the changing historical narrative in scholarly textbook which took place after the birth of the BRI. The new textbooks depict the ancient Silk Road as more of a willing undertaking of the Chinese Emperor than a connection arising by the necessity and willingness to trade of the countries touched by it. Furthermore, a clearer link is established not only between the "Old" and the "New Silk Road", but also between Emperor Han Wudi and Xi Jinping as the creators of a masterplan to improve the Chinese position (Freymann, 2021). Therefore, the BRI is depicted domestically not just as a groundbreaking project, but also as a way to bring China back to its glorious past, in which China played a huge role for the world. The reimagining of the historical process behind the formation of the Silk Road, and the linking of the current president with a Chinese Emperor further stress this idea of China as a crucial actor for the world, as well as Xi as an enlightened ruler, who envisioned a bright future of prosperity for China.

The debate around the BRI in other countries presents, naturally, different elements with respect to the domestic narrative in China. The most widespread idea regarding the BRI is that it is actually a form of “debt trap”, presenting countries with a huge amount of debt they cannot possibly repay. This leads the countries involved to make concession to China in exchange for a reduction in the amount of their debt. The idea of this debt trap was mainly pushed by the Trump administration. In 2018, in a letter addressed to the former secretary of state Mike Pompeo and the former secretary of the treasury Steven Mnuchin, 16 senators expressed concern regarding the possibility of a bailout by the IMF for countries participating in the BRI, bringing also the Hambantota port project as an example of debt diplomacy (Grassley, Senators Express Concerns Over China's "Debt Trap" Diplomacy With Developing Countries, 2018). Pompeo too criticized the lending by China, accusing it a lack in transparency and affirming that it was creating an “unsustainable debt burden” for African states (Reuters, 2020), and also criticizing China for its approach towards Sri Lanka, calling the CCP a predator, violating sovereignty and international law (Kyodo News, 2020). Even former vice President Mike Pence criticized China’s perceived debt trap and behavior in Sri Lanka. During a speech he affirmed:

*In fact, China uses so-called “debt diplomacy” to expand its influence. Today, that country is offering hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure loans to governments from Asia to Africa to Europe and even Latin America. Yet the terms of those loans are opaque at best, and the benefits invariably flow overwhelmingly to Beijing.*

*Just ask Sri Lanka, which took on massive debt to let Chinese state companies build a port of questionable commercial value. Two years ago, that country could no longer afford its payments, so Beijing pressured Sri Lanka to deliver the new port directly into Chinese hands. It may soon become a forward military base for China’s growing blue-water navy. (Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy Toward China, 2018).*

Similar critiques were expressed by a variety of members of Trump’s administration. However, the view that the CCP is using the BRI to make countries depend on China has been criticized and opposed. In fact, the BRI has been described more as an economic strategy than a political one. As Jones and Hameiri argue, the fact that, as it was described before, the BRI is loosely organized makes it impossible for the BRI to become an instrument to pursue a coherent and well-structured political strategy. Furthermore, the fact that the BRI entails bilateral projects make it difficult to use it to push a one-sided Chinese agenda, as the projects need also the approval of the partner. However, this bilateral approach makes the

projects more vulnerable, as they are exposed to the shortcomings of both China and its partners. Hambantota is used as a prime example of this issue. As a matter of fact, Sri Lanka was facing already economic hardship before the project, and the port was riddled with shortsighted planning by the Chinese side, and reckless spending and borrowing from the Sri Lankan government (which had already started before the Hambantota port project), as well as corruption and inefficiency. Besides, Chinese loans were not even the heaviest that Sri Lanka had to face, and China owned only around 9% of the government's debt. Finally, repayment for the port amounted to 3.3 % of the payment of foreign debt in 2016 (Jones & Hameiri, Debunking the Myth of "Debt-trap Diplomacy", 2020). More than a debt trap diplomacy, the Hambantota project seems like a huge miscalculation by the two parties involved.

The idea of a "debt-trap" is also a divisive issue inside the countries participating in the initiative. In the survey conducted among Asian Opinion Leaders by Rana and Ji in 2019, around 30% of the interviewee claimed that China was pushing the participant countries in a debt trap. While skeptics represent a large number, the survey also showed that the majority (42%) did not think that China had such ulterior motives regarding the BRI projects. Moreover, 41% of the interviewee claimed that the BRI represents an opportunity for their country, while only about 18% of them identified it as a risk, while almost the same number of participants (40%) affirmed that it was too early to tell (Rana & Ji, 2020). In any case, while the opinions remain divided, the idea that the BRI is an instrument for conducting a "debt-trap diplomacy" is faltering.

While the view of the debt-trap might be rejected, countries are still wary of the initiative. Although, as was shown before, it is argued that the initiative is purely economical, countries have a hard time trusting the idea that the BRI entails no political aspect whatsoever. As a matter of fact, different countries have proved to be wary of the political impact of the initiative. Going back to Rana and Ji's survey, China's motivations were mainly perceived as being related with the will of China to strengthen its international role, controlling supply chains and advancing its soft power. Furthermore, among the main concern was the exposure to Chinese influence (Rana & Ji, 2020). While debt implications are not in the top concerns, political ones and Chinese influence on political life in general seems to be the main concern of the countries involved in the BRI.

One of the Prime examples of this fear of the Chinese influence and presence is India, which always had a confrontational approach towards BRI and China in general, leading to rising tensions and clashes. As a matter of fact, the BRI is indeed perceived as an encroachment of India's sovereignty, as one of its corridors, the China Pakistan one, passes through the disputed Kashmir territory occupied by Pakistan, leading to the perception of BRI as a menace to the Indian unity and territorial sovereignty (Maçães, 2018).

The reaction to the BRI in Europe has not been univocal among countries, even inside the EU. The initiative has been welcomed especially in Eastern and Balkan countries. China has been investing hugely in the area in various form, from mergers and acquisitions to infrastructures projects, all in the attempt to create a stronger connection to reach Western Europe and to improve the link with the Piraeus Port. In the Balkans, Chinese investment is seen as a huge opportunity for development and states have usually very supportive of Chinese investments and involvement, especially Serbia, which has a long-lasting relationship with China (Zweers, Shopov, Van der Putten, Petkova, & Lemstra, 2020). Among the members of the EU, central European countries, especially members of the so-called Visegrad group, showed a highly positive perception of the BRI. The Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán expressed huge support for the initiative, stressing its relevance for Hungary and how the national interest of Hungarian state coincides with the BRI (The Belt and Road Initiative coincides with Hungarian national interest, 2019). On the other hand, in the Czech Republic, while having some strong supporters of the initiative like President Milos Zeman, who showed tremendous support for BRI (Yang, 2019), Prime Minister Andrej Babis and especially some local authorities have proved to be wary and critical of China, causing some division in the country, and less involvement by China (Gosling, 2019). Western Europe seems more concerned regarding the BRI. European politicians have showed to be concerned with the possibility for the BRI to divide the EU, supported by cases in which countries like Greece and Hungary have opposed some attempts by the EU which were aimed at criticizing Chinese actions (Maçães, 2018). However, the approach towards the BRI has been less hawkish than, for example, the U.S., with Italy signing a memorandum of understanding in 2019, even if amid strong European concerns (Hillman & Tippet, 2021). While the Italian flirt with the BRI can be considered already over, especially after current Prime Minister Mario Draghi stopped the acquisition of an Italian firm by a Chinese company (Massaro, 2021), the initial adherence to the BRI by Italy shows a more open approach at least by some Western European countries.



Looking more broadly at the global trends, it seems that the trust in the BRI has plummeted in recent years. In a survey conducted in 2020, international respondents showed a decreased interest in getting involved with the BRI, with 52% showing a decreased interest (and 30% affirmed that their interest decreased significantly). International interviewees also affirmed that their perception of the BRI decreased during the year before the survey. As a matter of fact, while mildly negative and extremely positive views remained stable respectively at 15% and 1%, there was a huge increase in extremely negative view of the BRI, which went from 3% to 37%. This increase was mainly determined by the shift in the number of interviewees which expressed a neutral opinion, which went from 49% to 23%. This data is totally in contrast with the Chinese respondents, which have generally a hugely positive view of the BRI (although even in China the opinion regarding the BRI worsened, with an increase of extremely negative views going from 0% to 10%, and with a general reduction in positive views). Besides, interviewee affirmed that working through the BRI framework proved “More challenging than expected” (69%), and just 37% of them affirmed to be mildly or extremely satisfied with their involvement, in contrast with 49% of them holding a negative view (Glueck & Gu, 2020).

Another important aspect of concern expressed by international respondents was the lack of transparency of Chinese firms, which sometimes did not share important details about the projects with their partners. Other important elements perceived by international interviewees are a lack of trust or lack of interest by Chinese partners in their proposals, and problems in communicating with each other. These facts prove to be of great concern for the BRI, as 59% of the international respondents do not expect the BRI to become more transparent in the future, with only 15% expecting improvements. Besides, even regarding procurement processes 64% of them do not expect more openness and competition, and again only 15% expect a more open framework (Glueck & Gu, 2020).

Furthermore, what is interesting to notice is that, while the mistrust regarding the initiative is growing, the financial aspect does not seem to be one of the main concerns of the foreign participants. Among the risks reported by the interviewees regarding their involvement in the BRI, interest rates occupy the fifth position and only 22% of the participants cited them as a risk for their involvement. Legal and Regulatory issue (68%) and Political issues (44%) represented a more pressing concern for them with respect to financial issues. However, the

stability of the projects is a huge concern for international respondents, being placed almost on par (43%) with Political issues (Glueck & Gu, 2020).

The perception of the initiative seems to be facing a crisis even in the middle east. In the MENA region (which includes also Northern Africa) 58% of the interviewees affirmed that the willingness of their organization to be involved in a BRI project decreased, with 31% affirming that it had decreased significantly. While the interviewees reported that in the year before the interview the majority of the organizations had neutral or positive stances towards the BRI (32% positive and 44% neutral, with only 5% very negative), more recently the situation has completely changed, with 63% of the organizations holding a negative view (43% very negative) and only 20% had a positive perception (Moore & Kordvani, 2021).

Regarding the process and outcomes of their involvement, the majority of the interviewees expressed a negative view (27% very unsatisfied, 33% moderately unsatisfied), with only 33% of the respondents answering that they were satisfied with it (24% moderately satisfied, 9% very satisfied). However, while the respondents usually confirmed that working with Chinese partners has proved to be much more difficult (48%) or at least moderately more difficult (34%), only 24% of them found that working with Chinese partners was a negative experience (12% very negative and 12% negative), while 36% found it a positive experience, and 36% expressed neutrality on this topic (Moore & Kordvani, 2021).

Regarding the lack of transparency and openness of the BRI, interviewees in the MENA region showed relevant skepticism. 58% of the respondents did not expect the BRI to become more transparent, and only 11% of them expected some positive development in this aspect. Besides, while the majority of them expected the initiative to be more open to non-Chinese participants (51%), in contrast to 13% who did not expect more openness, only 11% of them affirmed that the procurement processes will be more open and competitive, while 70% of them did not think that there will be a positive development in that sector (39% moderately disagree, 31% strongly disagree) (Moore & Kordvani, 2021).

The data reported regard a broader region with respect to the Middle East, showing also the influence of the Northern African countries. Nonetheless, they help provide a general picture of the area and the general perception of the BRI. While the BRI will not likely be stopped any time soon, with a lot of projects already on their way in the ME and more to come, it is interesting to see how the perception of the BRI in that area is becoming more and more

negative. With governments apparently growing even more entangled in the BRI, it will be interesting to witness its further development in the years to come.

Apparently, the BRI, while being portrayed as a huge chance for cooperation and a chance for a non-competitive world system, has proved to be divisive and is being met with growing skepticism, at least outside of China. Having reviewed the structure of the initiative as well as having provided a broad review of its perception, the next section will be more focus on the BRI and the issues it faces in the Middle East.

## 2.3 The BRI and China in the middle east

In 2016, the Chinese government published the “China’s Arab Policy paper”, in which it stated its intentions for the future cooperation with Arab countries. Besides the usual statements regarding “win-win cooperation” and “mutual non-interference”, the paper encompassed a wide range of sectors in which China was willing to cooperate with Arab states, from the political sphere to security and counter terrorism, as well as cultural exchanges between them. In the section dedicated to economic cooperation it is stated:

*Joint efforts will be made by China and Arab countries to promote the "Belt and Road" initiative under the principle of wide consultation, joint contribution and shared benefit. China and Arab countries will adopt the "1+2+3" cooperation pattern to upgrade pragmatic cooperation by taking energy cooperation as the core, infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation as the two wings, and high and new technologies in the fields of nuclear energy, space satellite and new energy as the three breakthroughs. (China's Arab Policy Paper, 2016)*

The BRI in general occupies a relevant position in the paper, as it is also placed as the main point of cooperation in the “Investment and Trade Cooperation” section, showing how relevant is the ME for China development of the Initiative. While this statement and the paper in general regard only the Arab countries, China has an interest in cooperating with the Middle East in general. As a matter of fact, while not all the Arab states are part of the AIIB, both Israel and Iran became members in 2016 and 2017 respectively (Members and Prospective Members of the Bank, 2021). Furthermore, Iran has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2016 regarding the BRI (Iran, China sign 17 documents, MoUs, 2016), a step which not all the other Middle Eastern states have made. Being the heart of both the maritime and the land routes of the BRI, China has a huge interest in developing its projects and influence in the area. Besides the BRI, China has a huge energy dependency on the area,

as well as relevant trade relationships. BRI projects are being developed in almost every country of the ME, in coordination with the national strategies adopted by the countries. However, while there is no doubt of the will of both China and Middle Eastern countries to cooperate, there are some issues that the BRI faces in its path.

The first challenge regards the political sphere. Being faithful to its idea of mutual respect of sovereignty and non-interference, China has tried to approach its relationship with Middle Eastern State and the BRI mainly under an economic perspective, with just some attempt to spread its so-called “soft power”, profiting from the security that the presence of the US in the area provided. However, while the publication of the “Arab Policy Paper” signaled the will for a stronger cooperation besides the economic sphere, and maybe even a more marked political role in the area, it seems evident from its low political involvement that China is still “treading lightly” when it comes to be actively engaged in politics. As Zhang and Xiao pointed out, the willingness to become a major political player in the area, does not overcome the fear of losing its position as a non-problematic actor, able to enjoy amicable, or at least non-problematic, relationships with every country in the area. The result was that China, while being more critical regarding the behavior of the U.S. and taking more neutral stance towards Russia, has avoided taking position in other conflicts present in the area. For example, it has avoided taking positions in the Israel-Palestine conflict, or the conflict in Yemen, sometimes not even reporting news from the area to avoid controversies (Zhang & Xiao, 2021). However, it is difficult to believe that this kind of balancing could work in the long run. Even if the never-ending tension between Muslim states and Israel is not considered, other BRI member states have conflictual relationships with each other, with the risk of an escalation towards actual often present. Furthermore, the same BRI projects might in some cases contribute to this tensions and conflicts, or at least be hugely influenced by them. A clear case is the Red-Med railway, a project which will connect the Israeli cities of Eilat and Ashdod and possibly extended to Jordan, creating a land link between the Red and the Mediterranean Sea. As Evron pointed out, along with the difficulty of making the project operational, and the fact that it would only represent a possible alternative to the usual route through the Suez Canal, the railway faces huge difficulties in its operations. First, its operability, especially if Jordan joins the project, might be influenced by tensions among Israel and the Muslim countries in the region. More importantly, Egypt has strongly opposed the construction of the railway and it did not have any problems in clearly expressing its opinion with the Chinese government (Evron, 2019). This case shows how China, with the further developing of the

BRI, might be forced to make a choice: either it might be forced to abandon a project, or take a stance and meddle with local politics. While this does not mean necessary that China will take hardline positions on some issues, as it can still rely on diplomatic efforts to find satisfying solution with all the actors involved, it means that probably China will have to renounce to its current attempt to avoid any political involvement if it wants to see some of its projects bear fruit.

Strictly linked with the political aspect is the security issue. In the “Arab policy Paper”, the security issues are addressed in broad terms, affirming the Chinese support for a regional security mechanism, as well as affirming its willingness to deepen its military cooperation with Arab states (China's Arab Policy Paper, 2016). As a matter of fact, the Chinese involvement is growing, with arms sales increasing. For example, it has had a steady and growing presence in UN peacekeeping operations and also other military operation approved by the UN in the ME. Furthermore, arms sales by China, albeit remaining confined to a small scale if compared with other actors, especially the U.S., have been increasing. Furthermore, China has even increased its efforts against pirates in the Red and Arabian sea. Besides Military intervention, China has increased its role as a mediator for the conflicts in the Area mainly to protect its interests or to gain some relevance in the area while helping to solve issues in which it has no particularly high involvement (Lons, Fulton, Degang, & Al-Tamini, 2019, pp. 17-24). However, China has left the major role in the security issues to the United States. This approach was adopted mainly for two reasons: first, it allowed China to grow its presence in the Area, mainly through its economic influence, without creating any enemy in the area. Second, both China and the Gulf state are aware of the limitations that China faces in acting as a source of security in the Area (Lons, Fulton, Degang, & Al-Tamini, 2019). However, there are different reasons that will probably lead towards a change in the current situation. First, in the unlikely case the U.S wanted to push its allies to choose either to stand with them or with China, the Chinese government has to show that they are a viable alternative to the U.S. in the security field. Second, the Biden administration is continuing the withdrawal of troops and military equipment from the ME. While the U.S. presence in the ME is not going to end, at least in the near future, the withdrawal of the U.S. troops might push China towards a more proactive and present role in the security landscape of the ME. Anyway, no matter how the situation will develop, the possibilities for China to remain only an economic actor in the area are limited, especially, and it seems to be so, if it wants to challenge the role of the United States as the only leading world power.

Another relevant issue for China in its dealings with the Middle East is its approach towards the Muslim minority present inside its borders. Broadly speaking, the Chinese government demonstrated to be supportive of the Muslim minorities, especially of the Hui minority. As a matter of fact, in 2016 around 14 thousand of Chinese citizen went on Pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, and thousands of Chinese Muslims attend universities in Middle Eastern countries or work there (Li, 2018). Furthermore, China has been involved in the construction and the operation of the Mecca Light Rail, which has proved to be crucial for the pilgrims during the Hajj. For example, in 2019, it helped to move around 2 million pilgrims in the city (Global Times, 2019). These actions have helped China to build the image of a friendly country for Muslims. However, the treatment received by another Chinese Muslim minority, the Uyghurs, has attracted criticism by Middle Eastern States.

The Uyghurs live in the Chinese region of Xinjiang, located in the western part of the country. As O' Brien and Primiano affirmed, the area is of particular interest for China. Not only it is rich with natural resources, but it is also at the starting point of some of the BRI's economic corridors (O'Brien & Primiano, 2020). However, the region is seen by the Chinese government as highly problematic and unstable. The region for Chinese authorities is always exposed to separatism and a hotbed for terrorism. Not only the region witnessed protest and violence, as in 2009, when Uyghurs clashed with Han authorities and civilians<sup>2</sup>, resulting in 800 injured and around 150 deaths (Branigan, 2009), but it was also at the origin of terrorist attacks in other parts of China, like the stabbings in Kunming which led to 29 deaths and 130 injured (Makinen, 2014). Terrorism is an always present concern for China, which also included anti-terrorism cooperation in the "Arab Policy Paper", in which it is stated:

*We resolutely oppose and condemn all forms of terrorism, and oppose coupling terrorism with any specific ethnic group or religion as well as double standards. We support the efforts of Arab States in countering terrorism and support their counter-terrorism capacity building. The Chinese side believes that counter-terrorism needs comprehensive measures to address both the symptoms and root causes, and counter-terrorism operations should comply with the*

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<sup>2</sup>To be clearer, here is provided a brief account of the three ethnicities that were mentioned. The Han is the major ethnicity in China, representing around 90% of the Chinese population. The Hui ethnicity is similar to the Han, the major difference being their Muslim faith. On the other hand, the Uyghur ethnicity is of Turkic origin, they use a different language, use the Arabic alphabet and are of Muslim faith. In contrast to the Hui, which are widely accepted, their unwillingness to assimilate with the Han culture and protection of their traditions has led to clashes with the Han ethnicity and the perception of the Uyghurs as underdeveloped people and barbarians. More info at <https://thediplomat.com/2014/08/a-tale-of-two-chinese-muslim-minorities/>

*purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international norms, and respect sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries.*

*China is ready to strengthen anti-terrorism exchanges and cooperation with Arab countries to establish a long-term security cooperation mechanism, strengthen policy dialogue and intelligence information exchange, and carry out technical cooperation and personnel training to jointly address the threat of international and regional terrorism. (China's Arab Policy Paper, 2016)*

The concern regarding possible terrorist actions is heightened as China feels that the connection with the ME might reinforce the connection between extremist groups present in the area and separatist groups in Xinjiang, which might conduct terrorist attacks in China, a feeling which was strengthened by several Uyghurs joining ISIS in the past years (Evron, 2019).

To tackle the Uyghur problem, China has started a huge campaign of oppression against the Uyghurs. The government has adopted a variety of measures to forcefully assimilate this minority. The most well-known is the setting up of internment camps, in which apparently Uyghurs are “re-educated” to support the CCP and the state, and think that the Uyghur culture is an expression of backwardness. Other methods have been the demolition of old Uyghurs’ settlements to replace them with new buildings under the pretext of modernization, or encouraging Uyghurs not to grow a beard or wear the Hijab (O'Brien & Primiano, 2020). Another element which has attracted international attention is the falling birth rate among Uyghurs. While Chinese news attributed this demographic shift to factors such as more attention towards family planning policies, shifts in the age of marriage by the local population, better living conditions for women and an improvement in the general quality of life leading to a decrease in mortality rate and birth rate (An Analysis Report on Population Change in Xinjiang, 2021), there are reports that indicate the possibility that the huge decline in birthrates (around 50%) was due to stringent family planning measure such as forced sterilization, abortions and other measure such as detention for families with too many children. This was coupled by an increased birth rate for the Han ethnic group in the Xinjiang capital Urumqi (Kang, 2021). Muslim countries have generally refrained from standing in support of the Uyghurs. A prime example is Turkey. While the opposition parties have attempted to promote motions in favor of the minority, president Erdogan and his party, along with their allies, despite an initial support for the Uyghurs, have stopped the opposition’s initiatives and in general have avoided criticizing the Chinese government for

the measures they have adopted, giving the idea that as long as countries can benefit from the economic cooperation with China, no criticism towards the Chinese measures is allowed. This approach was shared by other countries such as Saudi Arabia or Iran (Erdemir & Kowalski, 2020). However, tensions regarding this situation are always a risk, with the decision by Turkey to refuse the extradition of a Uyghur activist causing discontent in the Chinese government (Wang, 2021). While it might seem that the majority of the Muslim states have acquiesced to the treatment of the Uyghurs, the issue remains a possible flashpoint that China needs to address and resolve, otherwise possible escalation and eruption of tension with its current allies might always be behind the corner.

Lastly, the relationship with the U.S. in the area is another crucial element of concern for China. As was discussed before, the U.S. has not shied away from attacking the initiative and defining it as a threat. On the other hand, also China has been growing critical of the role of the United States in the ME. For example, it has deeply criticized the decision to veto a statement by the security council regarding the escalation of tension between Israel and Palestine earlier in 2021, calling the U.S. government hypocritical for the different reaction it showed regarding Palestinian and Uyghurs (Wong C. , 2021). Tensions between the two countries have started rising in the last years during the Trump administration, giving birth to the trade war that characterized the last presidency. Even now the Biden administration has been adopting a rather adversarial approach to China, with accusation and sanctions towards Chinese behaviors and actions (Myers & Amy, 2021). While it is true that China is trying to increase its role in the Area, the BRI being its bridgehead in the region, its success is not a certainty. While countries that have more rocky relationships with the U.S., such as Iran, might have no problem being part of China's camp, the same cannot be said for all the other actors involved in the Middle East. Some Middle Eastern states have too much to lose in joining the Chinese side given their deep relationship with the United States. Furthermore, as it was discussed previously, even China has to (or wants to) rely partially on the U.S. as far as the ME is concerned. The U.S. has not lost any time in warning its Middle Eastern allies regarding further cooperation with China. A sale of drones and fighter aircrafts to the UAE fell through due to some military dealings the Emirates conducted with China, and Dana Stroul, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East, warned against hedging between China and the US, affirming that creating ties with China is a risky move (Burton, 2021). Indeed, China will have a relevant role in the ME in the future. However, its current approach towards the US might be detrimental, and the attempt to encroach on the



US authority in the region, even if in a small scale and without any strong political implication for the time being, might prove detrimental in the long run. It is far from sure that the Middle Eastern states would choose to side with China, particularly now that it has not depicted itself yet as a reliable security actor in the area. A more or less open confrontation with the US might prove counterproductive for all the efforts that China has done to establish its presence in the ME. While China has indeed developed a more proactive and confrontational approach after president Xi rose to power, it should probably return to the idea of “biding its time” when it comes to the Middle East, at least until it develops a stronger presence in the area. While the Biden administration has been confrontational, it has also been open to cooperation in some sector. As Mordecai Chaziza pointed out, the recent launch by the US of the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, aimed at fostering the investments in different sector of the developing world to close the infrastructure gap, could prove either a challenge or a complementary project for the BRI (Chaziza, 2021). China should approach the US in a more collaborative way if it wants to build its presence in the Area. The Chinese government might find out that “tailgating” the US might prove a better strategy to take its place than strongly opposing its actions.

Having reviewed the challenges the BRI and China in general face in the middle east, the next two chapters will focus more in depth on China and its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively.

### **3 China and Saudi Arabia**

In recent times, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and China has been remarkably positive, with the two countries willing to cooperate in different aspects of their economies, as well as in the social and religious spheres. However, while right now the states represent a crucial partner for each other, things were quite different until 30 years ago, when no official diplomatic relationship existed between them. Furthermore, the relationship could have been defined as adversarial rather than neutral, with Saudi Arabia being openly critical of China and its role in the Middle East. This chapter will focus on the relationship between the two countries, both in the past and in the present under the BRI. The first section will be dedicated to the historical development of the relationship between China and Saudi Arabia up to now. The second section will focus on the scope of the relationship and its main features in general terms, mainly outside of the BRI. The third section will concentrate on the BRI, its goals, its projects, and the possible developments in the future in Saudi Arabia.

#### **3.1 Historical development of the relationship**

As it was stated before, the two countries did not enjoy a good relationship at the beginning. Right after its foundation in the 1940s, the PRC strictly followed the line dictated by the USSR, and not only sustained communism and communist groups, but was also strictly adherent to atheism. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia was firmly in the US camp and enjoyed a good diplomatic relationship with Taiwan, without recognizing the PRC (Wu & Zhao, 2020). Considering also the fact that in Saudi Arabia the religious aspect played, and still plays nowadays, to say the least, a crucial role, it is easy to see how cooperation or even establishing any form of ties between the two countries was hugely complicated, if not downright impossible. Some signs of a possible improvement in the relationship between the two came from the religious aspect. During the Bandung conference in 1954, the Saudi foreign minister expressed its concern for the conditions that Chinese Muslims had to face, asking the premier of the PRC Zhou Enlai to grant them more religious freedom, enabling them to manifest more freely their religious beliefs and to allow the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca which constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam. After the conference, China relaxed its rules regarding Muslims, allowing even “officials” Hajj mission, in which the chairman of the China Islamic association led the delegation, and even meeting the Saudi King (Olimat, 2016, pp. 181-182). However, the relationship between the two countries did not improve in

the following years. The fact that China allied itself with countries which were in strong opposition to the Kingdom such as Egypt, or that it also supported leftist groups or states in the area, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) or the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, created huge skepticism and animosity towards China in Saudi Arabia. The onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 further divided the two countries. As a consequence of the deterioration of the relationship, Hajj missions were prohibited in 1969 (Olimat, 2016, p. 182), and Saudi Arabia was the only Arab state that opposed the UN's proposal to restore the PRC's seat (Wu & Zhao, 2020).

After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 China sought to create a more friendly relationship with Saudi Arabia. As a matter of fact, the end of the 70s witnessed an improvement in the relationship between the two states, especially after China gradually stopped its support for the leftist organizations in the Middle East. Furthermore, China and Saudi Arabia found themselves on the same side during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, during which both countries supported the Mujahedeen in an anti-Soviet function. Furthermore, the 80s witnessed a series of events which drove the two countries towards a reconciliation. Firstly, Saudi Arabia found growing difficulties in buying weapons from the United States, which had been the traditional armaments supplier for the Kingdom. Consequently, Saudi Arabia turned towards China to fulfill its military needs. Having struck a secret deal, Saudi Arabia purchased Chinese made missiles. While the US, when they found out about the missiles, vehemently protested against the deal, Saudi Arabia could not be convinced to dismantle the weapons. Second, the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, in which both of them supported Iraq (albeit China supported Iran too), and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which preannounced the soon to be end of the USSR, helped the two countries to strengthen their relationship (Olimat, 2016, pp. 183-185). The approach adopted by Deng Xiaoping, which favored economy over ideology, helped to overcome the great divide which had separated the two countries. The final event that precipitated the reestablishment of the ties was the Tiananmen Square Protests in 1989. Faced with sanctions and criticism by the West, China turned to other countries to find support, Saudi Arabia being one of the most relevant. On July 21<sup>st</sup> 1990, China and Saudi Arabia formally established their diplomatic relationship.

After the ties between the two countries were formed, cooperation started to increase quickly. In the following years, the two countries started conducting official visits from

political leaders, culminating in 1999 with the visit by President Jiang Zemin, which established the Strategic oil cooperation agreement, increasing the energy ties which linked the two countries. The exchanges between the two countries continued, with other relevant visits conducted between 2006 and 2009. Furthermore, these visits saw a development of the relationship beyond the economic aspect, as during the visit of President Hu Jintao to Saudi Arabia in 2006, only months after the newly crowned King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz went to China for its first official visit, security issues were discussed for the first time (Fulton, *Strangers to Strategic Partners*, 2020). A relevant step for the development of economic ties was the signing of a MoU in 2007 that allowed Chinese firms to directly compete for contracts for infrastructure and construction projects, whereas before the signing of the MoU they had to operate as subcontractors (Fulton, *Situating Saudi Arabia in China's Belt and Road Initiative*, 2020). In 2008 the countries further developed their ties, establishing their relationship as a Strategic Partnership, one of the highest levels that China attributes to its relationships (Chen, Shu, & Wen, 2018). Another relevant passage of the cooperation was, as it was mentioned before, the beginning of the construction in 2009 of the of the Mecca Light Metro (MLM) by a Chinese company, the China Railroad Construction Corporation, handpicked by King Abdullah himself. The MLM construction, which was completed in 2011 in a record time, six months before the expected date, helped to establish China not only as an economic partner, but also as a relevant actor in the religious and cultural spheres (Olimat, 2016, p. 202). The years before Xi Jinping took power saw a gradual growth of the relationship between the two countries, and an increase in their collaboration. For instance, a prime example of this growing trust, as well as a recognition of their importance to each other and their willingness to cooperate, was the establishment by the Saudi national oil company Aramco of the headquarters of its branch Aramco Asia in Beijing in 2012 (Gater-Smith, 2018, p. 99). It was estimated that by 2013, the year in which Xi Jinping took power, there were over 140 Chinese firms working on projects in Saudi Arabia, with an estimated value of 18 billion USD (Fulton, *Situating Saudi Arabia in China's Belt and Road Initiative*, 2020).

Even during the Xi Jinping presidency, the relationship between these two countries continued to grow. As a matter of fact, in January 2016, during a visit by President Xi to Saudi Arabia, the two countries decided to sign the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which upgraded their previous agreement to the highest level in Chinese diplomatic hierarchy, also showing how relevant each of them is for the other (Fulton, *Strangers to Strategic Partners*, 2020). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia joined the AIIB in 2016 (*Members and Prospective*

Members of the Bank, 2021), showing support for the Chinese initiative, and more broadly of the BRI. However, the most important part of the cooperation will probably take place in the following years, as Saudi Arabia tries to create some fundamentally radical changes in its economy. Announced in 2016, the Saudi Vision 2030 represents a great effort to change not only the economic sphere, but also some relevant social aspects of the state. Regarding the economic aspect, the vision comprehends investments in a variety of different sectors, including, for example, renewable energies, with the stated goal of strongly reducing the dependency of Saudi Arabia on oil. Other important goals of the economic investments are the establishment of special economic zones, the rehabilitation of the economic cities, and the strengthening of the financial role of Saudi Arabia, for example through the restructuring of the King Abdullah financial center (Saudi Vision 2030, 2017). Considering these aspects, it is not difficult to see how China, and even Saudi Arabia, might be willing to coordinate the BRI and the Vision 2030 for their common goals. As a matter of fact, some of the declared objectives of the two projects are intertwined. For example, they share the emphasis on the development of renewable energy sources. As a matter of fact, President Xi and Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman have already expressed their willingness to cooperate and it is likely that the two initiatives will develop together in the future (Yumul, 2021). The alliance between Saudi Arabia and China is a crucial element for both of them. The cooperation between the two has steadily increased in the past and, while the success of the projects they have started is difficult to predict, it is easy to say that the synergy they have developed will not reach a halt in the short run.

### 3.2 The cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia

While at first it might seem that the cooperation entails almost only economic aspects, and they surely have the lion's share, the relationship between Beijing and Riyadh is not limited to that sphere. To better understand what drives their cooperation, it is necessary to conduct a brief analysis of the different aspects that compose their ties.

The economic aspect of the relationship is clearly the most important one. Since the 1990s the two countries have signed a multitude of trade agreements between them, four of them just between 1992 and 1998. Since then, the two countries have further improved their cooperation, leading to the signing of a high number of deals encompassing every aspect of the economy, with China becoming Saudi Arabia's biggest trading partner, with the amount of trade growing year after year (Olimat, 2016, p. 189). Data on trade help to show more in

depth the relevance that both countries have for the each other. According to the China Statistical book of 2019, in 2018 Saudi Arabia represented 23% of Chinese trade in the Middle East, and while not being the country with the highest value of import from China, it amounted for around 15% of Chinese import to the region, while it also represented around 29% of Chinese export from the Middle East, being by far the country with the highest level of export towards China in that region (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019). The economic relationship proved to be even more relevant as the two countries see it as a “no strings attached” kind of relationship. For example, in 2019, while Saudi Arabia was facing international backlash after the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the two countries signed an economic deal for a refinery worth \$10 billion (Standaert, 2019). This once again proves that China, usually, is not willing to intervene in the domestic politics of its partners, concerning itself merely with the economic aspect. However, this fact proves incredibly useful in cases such as the one described before, in which China is able to collect huge benefits from its non-interference. The events also mirror the situation that China had to face at the end of the 80s and the early 90s. As China sought the support of the Gulf in the light of Western pressure for the Tiananmen square protests, Saudi Arabia was able to find in China a good ally when its turn to face similar pressures came. Besides, the economic ties between the two states were also able to weather the storm of Covid-19, as the two countries maintained a strong relationship, both inside and outside of the economic sphere. As a matter of fact, both the Chinese press and the government underlined how the cooperation between the two countries was fundamental for facing the pandemic, how the two of them enjoy a strong and robust relationship, and how more cooperation was to be expected in the future in a variety of spheres (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). The events described before show how both countries now might perceive each other not only as a crucial economic partner, given the amount of trade that links them, but also as an “all-weather” friend, unlikely to meddle in the internal affairs, thus giving freedom of action to both governments, but always reliable when the situation becomes difficult.

Another fundamental element for the relationship, being also deeply intertwined with the economic cooperation, is the energy cooperation between the two countries. Following the idea proposed by Xi Jinping in 2014, China and Saudi Arabia are following the “1+2+3” model of cooperation, with the 1 standing for the traditional sources of energy, the core element for cooperation between the two countries (Fulton, China-Saudi Arabia Relations Through the "1+2+3" Cooperation Pattern, 2020). Saudi Arabia represents a crucial source of energy

for China. Saudi Arabia was even able to surpass Russia as the top oil supplier to China, and it was still able to maintain that role, even if recently the volume of oil exports toward China fell by 19% (Reuters, 2021). However, the energy cooperation is not limited to oil exports. The two countries, as Fulton stated, have tried to move beyond a simple buyer-seller dynamic, with Aramco investing in Chinese oil refineries (Fulton, China-Saudi Arabia Relations Through the "1+2+3" Cooperation Pattern, 2020). However, this was not a new phenomenon in China-Saudi energy relations. A MoU regarding further cooperation in different sectors of the oil industry, including but not limited to refining and petroleum engineering, was signed already in 2010. Besides, Sinopec and Aramco had already started a joint-refinery in 2012 in Yanbu Industrial City, with the refinery being opened in 2016. Along the years the two countries signed more MoUs regarding energy, and even started joint ventures (Olimat, 2016, pp. 195-196). However, both countries are aware that, apparently, the world is attempting a shift towards a world less relying on oil. This has led to cooperation in other aspects related to the energy sector. Two elements of strong cooperation between the two countries are nuclear and renewable energy, which are two of the three breakthroughs of the last part in the "1+2+3" framework. The two countries already signed a MoU regarding civil use of nuclear energy in 2012, and in 2017 they signed two MoUs concerned with nuclear energy, one regarding research on Uranium and Thorium and one regarding the development of nuclear reactors for water desalinization projects (Fulton, China-Saudi Arabia Relations Through the "1+2+3" Cooperation Pattern, 2020). Renewable energy sources play a huge role for Saudi Arabia. In the Saudi Vision 2030 official document it is stated that the country, while having huge potential especially in the solar and wind power, it still lags behind, not having a well-developed renewable energy production capacity (Saudi Vision 2030, 2017). Indeed, Saudi Arabia will foster investments in the renewable sector. As stated before, the fact that both BRI and Saudi Vision share a similar goal is a huge chance for investments and development. The implications of this alignment will be further discussed in the section dedicated to the BRI.

Further relevance for the economic relationship between the two countries, and for the efforts of the internationalization of the Chinese RMB, is the financial cooperation. However, this type of cooperation is still in its infancy, with Saudi Arabia hosting only few Chinese financial institutions and the lack of RMB clearance center, despite having signed a MoU to develop one. However, the RMB might increase its relevance in the dealings between Saudi Arabia and China. As a matter of facts there were talks about the possibility for Saudi Arabia

to buy the Chinese “panda bonds”, which are RMB-denominated, as well as using RMB to pay Chinese firms working on the Saudi Vision projects and also for the oil trade with China (Fulton, *Situating Saudi Arabia in China’s Belt and Road Initiative*, 2020).

The cultural relationship between the two countries plays a relevant role in the cooperation. The cultural realm is part of China’s Arab Policy Paper. The paper reports the willingness of China for further cooperation in some aspects, for example religious exchanges, expressing the willingness to create “platforms for religious exchanges”. Furthermore, the paper expresses the willingness of the Chinese government to expand the visits by officials as well as tourists, the establishment of cultural centers, as well as cooperation in the media and in the news sector (China’s Arab Policy Paper, 2016). Even before the issuing of the paper, China and Saudi Arabia enjoyed growing cultural and social ties. For example, in 2010 they formed the Saudi-Chinese Youth Forum (SCYF). The forum has witnessed growing cooperation over the years, concerning itself with different topic, among which Health research plays a huge part (Olimat, 2016, p. 203). Furthermore, the fact that China has contributed to the construction of the MLM helps to foster the idea of China as a country supportive of Muslims and of their traditions. China has also actively tried to build this image, for example by publishing articles depicting its efforts in helping Chinese Muslims to complete the pilgrimage (Li, 2017). Students play another relevant part in the creation of cultural and social ties. The two countries have fostered the enrollment of Saudi and Chinese students through the formation of agreements and scholarships. It is estimated that every year more than 1000 students from Saudi Arabia decide to study in China, and more than 270 students from China enrolled in Saudi Universities in 2018. Furthermore, both countries expressed their willingness to further increase the number of scholarships available, aiming to strengthen the students exchanges already taking place (Chen & Han, 2019). To further strengthen its link with China, Saudi Arabia has also started teaching Chinese in secondary schools (Obaid, 2020), and it has also instituted the “Prince Mohammed bin Salman Award for Cultural Cooperation between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the People’s Republic of China”, an award which is given in different categories, for example best scientific research or best translation of a book from Chinese to Arabic and vice versa (Al Arabiya, 2020). Cultural ties are also creating while focusing on history. The discovery of an ancient port in Saudi Arabia, probably linked with the ancient Silk Road, by Chinese and Saudi archaeologists (China Daily, 2018) not only serves as an example of academic and scientific cooperation between the two



countries, but also strengthens the historical ties of the two countries, an element which has strong relevance in China's discourse on the BRI.

While cooperation has been generally positive, the two countries have experienced also some problematic moments. In 2015 the media reported that China had prevented some of its Muslim citizens from observing the Ramadan fasting. While the Saudi authorities did not condemn the Chinese actions, the public opinion was strongly supportive of the Chinese Muslims' right to observe the religious practice, showing support for the Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Olimat, 2016, pp. 203-204). Recently, China has also further strengthened the regulations on the Hajj. Chinese citizens now must show that they are patriotic and law-abiding citizens before going on pilgrimage. Furthermore, the government has decided to bar individual pilgrimages. Pilgrims must now be authorized by Chinese Muslim authorities and must be accompanied by said Chinese authorities to Saudi Arabia (International Observatory on Human Rights, 2020). While Saudi authorities have decided not to oppose the Chinese government policies, such measures might create a wedge between the Chinese and Saudi civil societies.

Since the onset of their relationship, China and Saudi Arabia have given an important role to the security issue. It is not a case that one of the first commercial exchanges between them involved missiles. China is seen by Saudi Arabia as a reliable provider of arms and modern weapons, not inclined to let political issues steer their trade deals as it often happens with the United States. Saudi Arabia remains the world's largest arms importer in an area of the world which has seen its weapon imports increased by 25% in the period from 2016 to 2020 with respect to the years between 2011-2015. While the US remain the main exporter of weapons to Saudi Arabia, covering around 79% of their imports, China is steadily growing, being the 5<sup>th</sup> worldwide weapon exporting country between 2016 and 2020. In that period of time, China also increased its arms sales to Saudi Arabia by 386% with respect to 2011-2015. (Ningthoujam, 2021). Arms sales between the two were already consistent before that period of time. In 2007 Saudi Arabia purchased Denfong Ballistic Missiles from China, a type of missile built for delivering nuclear warheads, but modified to be able to deliver only conventional warheads and, in 2008, it purchased 54 Chinese-produced howitzers (Olimat, 2016, pp. 198-199). More recently, Saudi Arabia has showed huge interest for Chinese-produced drones, purchasing respectively 15 and 5 units of the Wing-Loong 1 and CH-4 UAV models from China in 2014, and 25 units of the Wing-Loong 2 model in 2017 (Fulton,

Strangers to Strategic Partners, 2020). Furthermore, China Aerospace and Technology Corp. and King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology signed a deal for the joint production of CH-4 UAVs and the use of the Saudi facility as a hub for the construction and delivery of the UAVs in the ME (Ningthoujam, 2021). The sales of weapons to Saudi Arabia, and to the Middle Eastern countries at large, is not merely a commercial strategy, but it entails also political implications. In the same manner as with all its endeavors, China is acting as reliable partner, unwilling to be held back by political issues, consequently strengthening its presence in the area by having a growing number of actors rely on its products in an increasing way. The arms sales are just another step in the deepening of the relationship and in the increasing of the interdependence of the two countries.

Another relevant aspect concerning the security issue is the one related to terrorism. Both Saudi Arabia and China are deeply concerned with the possibility of terrorist attacks taking place in their territory. As it was already written before, China witnessed several attacks by Uyghurs outside of the Xinjiang region. Those attacks did not take place only on Chinese territory, as in the case of the car bombing attack on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan (BBC, 2016). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia too has not been safe from terrorism within its borders, as it suffered from different attacks by different groups, for example ISIS, which conducted several attacks in Saudi Arabia since 2014 (Al Jazeera, 2017), or the Houthi rebel group in Yemen, which have conducted different attacks on Saudi territory, including drone bombings on Aramco's facilities (Barrington, 2021). Consequently, the two countries have strongly cooperated in the opposition to terrorist forces. In 2016, the two countries held their first joint anti-terrorism drills, which took place in China (Al Jazeera, 2016). In the framework of anti-terrorism activities, Saudi Arabia has been hugely supportive of the Chinese actions in Xinjiang towards the Uyghur minority. The Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman expressed its support for the actions. During a visit in Beijing, in which he also talked with President Xi about further cooperation in anti-terrorism activities, he affirmed that China was acting in a legitimate way to protect its security and fostering counter-terrorism and de-radicalization (Al Jazeera, 2019). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia also signed a letter praising the measures undertaken by China in fighting terrorism in Xinjiang, and its "remarkable achievements in human's rights" (Nichols, 2019). More recently, during a meeting between the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, both countries reaffirmed their willingness to further their cooperation, including the security sector and the anti-terrorism activities, with the Crown Prince reaffirming its

support of China in the Xinjiang issue (Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz AL Saud Meets with Wang Yi, 2021).

While the security cooperation between the two countries seems to be at a high point, there are yet some issues that might become problematic. The main point is that, while China tries to be the least involved as possible in the political issues of the middle east, Saudi Arabia is strongly proactive, often acting against its “enemies” in the middle east. For this reason, such facts as China exporting arms to Qatar, a country with which Saudi Arabia had cut diplomatic ties from 2017 to 2021 (Ningthoujam, 2021), or to Iran, might be detrimental for their relationship. For the same reason, while Saudi Arabia showed a strong willingness to intervene in the Syrian conflict, China decided to tread lightly, vetoing UN’s resolutions regarding the conflict, and causing discontent in the Kingdom, which caused the suspension of dialogue between the Gulf Cooperation Council and China from 2012 to 2013 (Kéchichian, 2016). Lastly, China also enjoys also a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia long-time adversary, Iran. While China’s relationship with Iran is complex, with China unwillingly to help Iran in some circumstances due to the international pressure and opinion, it is indeed true that in some cases China has prevented the imposition of UN sanctions on Iran, and enjoys also good economic relationship with the country. While it might not jeopardize every aspect of the relationship, the Chinese support of Iran, coupled with the strong role played by Saudi Arabia in countering the Republic, might put a wedge between Saudi Arabia and China in their security relationship (Kéchichian, 2016). However, the interaction between the two alliances is a complicated topic which needs a deeper reflection, which will be provided later in the dissertation.

Having provided a general review of the cooperation between the two states, the next section will be more focused on their cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative Framework.

### 3.3 Saudi Arabia and the BRI

The first element which should be taken into consideration for the analysis of the BRI initiative in Saudi Arabia is the energy sector, as it is the most relevant element that defines the relationship between the two states. Rather than the usual involvement with Oil, a main feature of the BRI in Saudi Arabia is the focus on the development of alternative and renewable energy sources. The Chinese government has published three documents which

also contain some elements regarding the green aspect of the BRI, namely the “Vision and Actions on Energy Cooperation in Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Maritime Silk Road”, “Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road”, and “The Belt and Road Ecological and Environmental Cooperation Plan”, all published in 2017, a year after the announcement of the Saudi Vision. While being formulated in the typical fashion of the BRI documents, through vague and broad commitments, they nonetheless prove that the environmental aspect plays a relevant role in the initiative. For example, in “The Belt and Road Ecological and Environmental Cooperation Plan” it is stated:

*Share the concept of ecological civilization. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms will be fully used to deepen dialogue and exchange on concepts, laws and regulations, policies, standards and technologies for ecological progress and green development and facilitate the joint development of bilateral, multilateral, sub-regional and regional strategies and action plans for eco-environmental protection.*

*Share experience in green development. The practical experience of green development will be summarized and environment-friendly technologies and products advocated to meet green development needs. Eco-environmental protection will be cultivated as a new engine of green transformation in countries and regions along the routes. (The Belt and Road Ecological and Environmental Cooperation Plan, 2017)*

Even in the Saudi Vision the green development and the green energy sector are given a fundamental role. In the official document describing the Saudi project the following is reported:

*From inputs such as silica and petrochemicals, to the extensive expertise of our leading Saudi companies in the production of different forms of energy, we have all the raw ingredients for success. We will put this into practice with the forthcoming launch of the King Salman Renewable Energy Initiative. We will review the legal and regulatory framework that allows the private sector to buy and invest in the renewable energy sector. To localize the industry and produce the necessary skill-sets, we will also encourage public-private partnerships. Finally, we will guarantee the competitiveness of renewable energy through the gradual liberalization of the fuels market. (Saudi Vision 2030, 2017)*

By comparing the two documents, as well as the two passages which are highlighted above, it is fairly easy to understand why both these countries would have an interest to cooperate

in the establishment of green and renewable energy. Besides, President Xi Jinping and the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman have recently clearly reaffirmed their willingness to further collaborate in the promotion, among other things, of a “fair climate governance regime”, as well as promoting sustainable development and increasing the synergy between the Saudi Vision and the BRI (Xi says China to work with Saudi Arabia to build fair climate governance regime, 2021). It is indeed true that, at least on paper, China has a huge role to play in the renewable energy sector. As a matter of fact, as of 2017 it was the largest producer worldwide of both solar and wind energy, it invests hugely both at home and abroad in renewable energies, and its companies have conducted over the years huge deals in this sector (Chiu, 2017), with China contributing to around half of the increase in renewable electricity in 2021, with an estimated production of 600 Terawatt/hour through wind energy in 2021, and also expecting an increase of hydropower production (International Energy Agency, 2021). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has announced its willingness to increase its production of renewable energy up to 9.5 Gigawatt by 2023, with the goal of reaching 200 Gigawatt of renewable energy by 2030 (Fostering Joint Leadership on Energy Productivity Transitions in Saudi Arabia and China, 2018). These two elements show even further how relevant the cooperation under the BRI can be for the two countries in the renewable energy sector.

In fact, cooperation between the two countries not only is already in place, but has reached an incredibly high level. For example, in May 2019 the Silk Road Fund acquired 49% of the Saudi ACWA Power Renewable energy holding (Mogielnicki, 2020), and the Chinese firm LONGi, which produces solar panels, signed an agreement with the Saudi company El Seif, in order to foster the manufacturing of solar panel directly in Saudi Arabia (Braunstein & McPherson-Smith, How Saudi arabia and China could partner on solar energy, 2019). The Saudi government has also other ambitious projects in stock, for example the creation of around 35 industrial parks aimed at generating renewable energy and producing the necessary components for its operation, not only producing green energy but also further localizing the production of the materials. Furthermore, the Kingdom also launched different projects and initiatives to support investments in renewable energy sources, like an online data portal aimed at increasing the availability of information and the transparency of the investments. Besides, Saudi Arabia is attempting to strengthen its capacities in innovative sectors such as carbon capture and storage (Policy and Economic Frameworks to Deepen Sino-Saudi Cooperation, 2020). All these projects, sharing also some of BRI’s various goals,

might benefit hugely from Chinese technical cooperation and economic support to fully and successfully develop. Alongside the renewable energy sources, the BRI has had an impact even in the more traditional energy production. As a matter of fact, the 2016 meeting of the Sino-Saudi High Level Joint Committee (HLJC) saw the signing of 15 MoUs, some of them regarding energy cooperation. The agreement signed in 2016 led to the signing of 21 deals worth 65 billion USD, which included investments in oil and petrochemical plants as well as in renewable energy sector (Fulton, *Situating Saudi Arabia in China's Belt and Road Initiative*, 2020).

While, as Braunstein and McPherson-Smith have pointed out, not only Saudi Arabia has not a particularly developed know-how regarding the production of solar panels, as well as not having a specialized workforce, but also China might not be willing to relocate its production to Saudi Arabia (Braunstein & McPherson-Smith, *Saudi Arabia's Moment in the Sun*, 2019). However, a way to attract foreign business, including of course Chinese firms, is the institution of Special Economic Zones (SEZ). Saudi Arabia has started to create SEZ, with the first, the "Integrated Logistics Bonded Zone" (ILBZ), opening in March 2021 near the Riyadh international airport (ILBZ's Main Regulations, *Saudi Arabia's First Special Economic Zone*). While imposing some limitations on the activities that might be eligible to be hosted inside ILBZ, the SEZ offers huge advantages, which might push Chinese firms to move production to the Kingdom. Besides, there are plans for the construction of other SEZ in Saudi Arabia in the following years, like NEOM city, a cross border project, expected to cover an area about as big as Belgium, and the King Salman Energy Park (Spark), an industrial area managed by Aramco which should cover about 50 KM<sup>2</sup>, hosting around 300 commercial units (New special economic zones in Saudi Arabia offer a range of fiscal and logistics benefits). The fact that SEZ are going to play a relevant role in the future of the BRI was also clearly stated by the Chinese government. As a matter of fact, Xinhua published an article reporting statements supporting the institution of SEZ to attract Chinese investment, including the remarks by then Saudi Minister Khalid Al-Falih, affirming that: "Saudi Arabia is developing special economic zones to attract domestic and foreign investment that would be suitable candidates to merge with BRI" (Xinhua News Agency, 2019). This clearly shows how relevant the formation of SEZ is for the development of the BRI, encouraging Chinese firms to go abroad and move production.

Another relevant element linked with the construction of SEZ is the building of infrastructures. The building of SEZ requires huge investments and capital, as well as expertise and firms. China has already been involved in construction projects inside the Kingdom, with the already mentioned MLM being the prime example, as well as a relevant source of “legitimacy” for Chinese firms operating in Saudi Arabia. Collaborating in the construction of SEZs in Saudi Arabia might be another form of political legitimacy, as well as a way for China to create its own economic advantage, and maybe obtain even more advantageous conditions by the Saudi government. Another relevant example of Sino-Saudi cooperation regarding infrastructural projects is the building of 100,000 housing units in the Al-Ahsa region. The construction project was conducted together by the Saudi Ministry of Housing and by the government of the Ningxia Province (Alqahtani, 2020), showing once again the relevance of China for the Saudi Urban development. While these examples are mainly concerned with urban infrastructures, China and Saudi Arabia have also collaborated in the industrial sector. A relevant example of this kind of collaboration between the two is the Jizan Industrial Park.

While cooperation involving Jizan started as early as 2006, way before the establishment of the BRI, the development of the project reached its peak during the Xi presidency, especially after its visit to Saudi Arabia in 2016. During the visit the signing of an agreement between Aramco and the Chinese company Yinchuan Yucheng for the establishment of a Joint Venture took place. Among its goals, the Saudi Vision aimed at revitalizing the Economic Cities, including Jizan. Working towards that goal, Aramco proposed to establish a special zone inside Jizan Basic Industrial City dedicated only to Chinese firms and enterprises, thus coordinating the efforts of the BRI and of the Vision. Consequently, an agreement to establish a joint venture within the Jizan Basic Industrial City was signed the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2016. The Chinese Area is set to be around 32 Km<sup>2</sup>, divided in an industrial area which should occupy 30 Km<sup>2</sup> and a living area occupying the remaining space. Also, the range of activities that will be conducted will vary widely, from the development of energy stations and seawater purification stations and other energy related projects, to the development of raw materials and the production of agricultural technology and biotechnology. As in the case of the SEZ, the Chinese enterprises working in Jizan will be granted some generous economic advantages even beyond financial assistance for the projects that will take place (Yang, Du, & Ding, 2020). As expected, the advantageous conditions of Jizan have attracted a wide variety of Chinese firms, including also the already mentioned LONGi, which showed interest in Jizan for the

development of its photovoltaic industrial project. Furthermore, the initiative will also represent a test for the working and future creation of Saudi-Chinese joint ventures, with the first common project, the Panya-Saudi Arabia Petrochemical and fiber integration project, starting in 2019 (Yang, Du, & Ding, 2020). By the efforts that the two governments put in the development of the project, it is clear how relevant the Jizan Industrial Park is as a possible flagship initiative for the BRI. If the Park proves to be a viable and profitable endeavor, similar projects might be developed not only in Saudi Arabia, but also abroad. Furthermore, Jizan might provide an example for the other urban and industrial projects Saudi Arabia is developing, like Neom city or Spark.

As it was also stated before, the BRI represents a huge opportunity for Chinese firms to be involved in the construction of infrastructures in Saudi Arabia, even outside the development of SEZ and the Industrial Cities and Parks. A relevant example of this is the case of China Communication Construction Group (CCCC). CCCC was tasked in 2013 with the construction of a flood drainage system for the city of Jeddah, which in the previous years had experienced severe damages following floods, which were very likely to happen in the city. The project was completed by CCCC in the record time of nine months. In 2014, the system prevented the city from experiencing damages from floods, leading also the Saudi government to send a commendatory letter to the company, praising their work. Another relevant case is the involvement of Huawei in the communication sector of Saudi Arabia. Representing another branch of the BRI, namely the “Digital Silk Road”, the company has not only provided the Kingdom with the latest communication technology, but it has also realized around 90% percent of the Saudi government’s projects in this sector, especially the ones concerning remote areas of the country (Alqahtani, 2020). These cases, alongside the other mentioned projects such as the MLM, or the Housing project in the Al Ahsa region, prove how relevant the involvement of Chinese firms is for Saudi Arabia, and how the BRI creates a useful framework for cooperation between the two countries and their firms, especially since the infrastructures were not only often built in a record time, but also proved to be a huge success in their operation.

A fairly untapped part of both the BRI and the Vision is the education sector. Education is a relevant topic for both countries and for both initiatives. In the “Vision and actions” it is stated:



*We should increase exchanges and cooperation between non-governmental organizations of countries along the Belt and Road, organize public interest activities concerning education, [...] We should enhance international exchanges and cooperation on culture and media, and leverage the positive role of the Internet and new media tools to foster harmonious and friendly cultural environment and public opinion. (Vision And Actions On Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt And 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, 2015)*

Similar statements are also present in the Arab policy paper, underlining the relevance that education and cultural exchange apparently have for China. The Saudi Vision also pays attention to the educational aspect, stating:

*We will continue investing in education and training so that our young men and women are equipped for the jobs of the future. We want Saudi children, wherever they live, to enjoy higher quality, multi-faceted education. We will invest particularly in developing early childhood education, refining our national curriculum [...] Our scholarship opportunities will be steered towards prestigious international universities and be awarded in the fields that serve our national priorities. We will also focus on innovation in advanced technologies and entrepreneurship. (Saudi Vision 2030, 2017)*

While these two statements, as was said previously, highlight how relevant the sphere of education is for both countries, it is also true that cooperation in the educational sector is still lagging behind compared to other sectors such as the energy one. While previously it was reported that exchanges are already taking place, the number of students represent a minimal amount considering both the size of the respective population and of the percentage of the young population, especially in Saudi Arabia. For example, it was estimated that between 2006 and 2018, only between 1400 and 1600 Saudi students were sent to study in China. Furthermore, there are few chances to learn Chinese in Saudi Arabia. While, as of 2018, more than 40 Chinese universities offered Arabic courses, Chinese courses are almost nonexistent in Saudi Arabia, and the main foreign language used for teaching remains English (Foley, 2018, p. 80). A prime example of this limited cooperation is the fact that, until its opening in 2020 at the Jeddah University, there were no Confucius institute in Saudi Arabia (SDNU Has Been Approved the Fifth Confucius Institute, 2020). The fact is quite surprising considering the fact that the Confucius Institute has always been the bridgehead for the promotion of the Chinese culture and Language all around the world. This particular aspect, as well as the so-called “people to people bonds”, should indeed be more developed and witness more cooperation

between the two countries, especially if China wants to establish itself as a pro-Muslim country.

In the Saudi Vision, the Saudi government also expresses their willingness to further increase the role that the private sector plays, including through the privatization of some sectors of the economy. The Vision brings the example of the health and education sectors, which were dominated by the state. This liberalization campaign might represent a huge chance for China to further enter the Saudi economy. Firstly, China might be able to provide support for Saudi Arabia in the privatization process, since it underwent a liberalization process itself in the past, after Mao's death. While one might put into question how effectively the Chinese market underwent this process of liberalization, it is indeed true that, starting with Deng Xiaoping, China went through an opening of the economy, as well as witnessing the economic miracle that turned the country into the world's second economy. Providing support and helping Saudi Arabia during this difficult process might not only provide economic benefits to China, but it might also be a wonderful chance to prove the veracity of such statements as "Win-win cooperation" and "community of shared future for mankind", which are always present in the BRI official documents. Furthermore, there is also the chance to enter the Saudi market through the liberalization, being it with joint ventures or other methods. This again might be useful under other aspects beyond the mere economic gain. Taking as an example the two sectors mentioned by the Saudi Vision, namely education and health, entering the education sector might prove useful to widen the knowledge regarding the Chinese culture, promoting also the creation of stronger bonds, which is also one of the BRI's goals. Even More interesting is the role of the health sector. As a matter of fact, becoming a part of the Saudi health sector might be fundamental for the promotion of the "Health Silk Road", one of the many aspects of the Silk Road which China is trying to promote, especially during the pandemic.

Considering the relevance of the topic, especially considering the Covid-19 pandemic, the Health Silk Road plays a hugely relevant part in the Chinese approach towards Saudi Arabia. Even recently China has reiterated its willingness to help Saudi Arabia in its fight against Covid-19 (as well as other Saudi Initiatives including the Vision) (Wang Yi Meets with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, 2021). During the Outbreak

of the pandemic in China, Saudi Arabia also helped China fighting the spread of the illness. As a matter of fact, Saudi Arabia delivered to China different medical devices and materials, among which were included non-invasive respirators, which are incredibly useful in responding to Covid-19, 300,000 surgical masks, 1000 protective suits as well as other useful devices such as defibrillators, dialysis machine and ultrasound machines. China too reciprocated the help offered by Saudi Arabia, sending medical supplies such as masks, protective suits, thermometers and kits, sending medical and technical experts to the kingdom and helping the Saudis setting up test laboratories. All in all, Saudi Arabia was one of the Middle Eastern countries which provided the most relevant contribution in helping China tackling the virus (Zoubir, 2020). Both countries helping each other contributed to the strengthening of their relationship. After a deal was signed between the two states, which included the delivery to Saudi Arabia of test kits and the setting up of the laboratories mentioned before, the Chinese ambassador Chen Weiqing affirmed that “[...], the genes of solidarity, cooperation, friendship and mutual assistance are inherited in the traditional culture of both peoples, which makes the sincere friendship between the two peoples even stronger in these special and difficult times” (Radwan & Obaid, 2020). The Saudi Media reflected the improvement in the general opinion towards China, with Al-Arabiya announcing that “China is the only country that has performed well in dealing with this crisis”. Other media outlets also praised China for its response, supporting its tight control of the population as a necessary mean to control the spread of the virus, with some of them echoing the rumors affirming that the virus did not originate in China (Leber, 2020). Another relevant issue regarding the “Health Silk Road” concerns the vaccination against Covid-19. Saudi Arabia presents one of the toughest set of rules regarding vaccines, limiting the access of unvaccinated people from their workplaces, schools, and even a broad range of public places, and having to use an app tracking their location constantly, as well as working as a proof of vaccination (Nereim, 2021). China has given huge relevance to its vaccine policy, aiming to share its vaccines with other countries and make them widely accessible, also gaining political legitimacy through this move (Mardell, 2020). It would seem clear that the combination of the tough rules in Saudi Arabia and of the willingness of China to share its vaccines would lead to a wide use of the Sinopharm and Sinovac in Saudi Arabia, solidifying the role of China as a relevant ally, as well as creating a milestone for the “Health Silk Road” promoted by president Xi. However, as it was stated earlier, the doubts regarding the efficiency of the

vaccines<sup>3</sup>, with both Sinovac (World Health Organization, 2021) and Sinopharm (World Health Organization, 2021) being approved by the WHO only for emergency use, have contrasted the wide usage of the Chinese vaccines. This has led the spokesperson of the Saudi health ministry to deny the rumors of the approval of Chinese vaccines in the Kingdom, while stating that, in the case of a full vaccination using one of the two vaccines, only a booster shot from any of the approved vaccines is required (Abueish, 2021). This case can be seen as a huge false step in the implementation of the “Health Silk Road” in the country. While many other countries, especially poor ones, might be forced to adopt the Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines, as they lack access to any of the other more reliable vaccines, the approval and widespread use of the Chinese vaccines in a country like Saudi Arabia, considering also its relevance for China, could have been a hugely relevant step to further increase its relationship and establish itself as a reliable partner. While the fight against the pandemic is, probably, still long, meaning that China will have other opportunities to increase its reliability in the eyes of the Saudi, the vaccine issue is a huge missed opportunity for the Chinese government.

Lastly, another extremely relevant sector of cooperation regarding the energy sector, which is also deeply tied with the security sector, is the nuclear cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China. Collaboration in the nuclear sector has been a long-standing goal of both countries. As a matter of fact, during the China-Arab Cooperation Council which took place in 2014, nuclear energy was announced by president Xi Jinping as one of the three breakthroughs of the “1+2+3” cooperation framework aimed at coordinating the efforts and projects of that the Arab states might develop along the BRI (Xi Jinping Attends Opening Ceremony of Sixth Ministerial Conference of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and Delivers Important Speech Stressing to Promote Silk Road Spirit and Deepen China-Arab Cooperation, 2014). In the light of the strong cooperation that the two countries have reached regarding green energy, nuclear power might even receive a relevant boost, considering the shifting opinion worldwide regarding this type of power,

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<sup>3</sup>The WHO reported that the Sinovac had an efficacy of 51% against symptomatic Covid-19, and a 100% protection against hospitalization and severe cases (The Sinovac-CoronaVac COVID-19 vaccine: What you need to know, 2021), the Sinopharm has an efficacy of 79% against symptomatic cases and 79% protection against hospitalization (The Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine: What you need to know, 2021). On the other hand, the WHO reports that the Pfizer-Biontech vaccine, one of the most widely used has an efficacy of 95% against symptomatic cases (The Pfizer BioNTech (BNT162b2) COVID-19 vaccine: What you need to know, 2021).

with experts starting to consider the possibility of categorizing nuclear power as a source of “green energy” (Abnett, 2021) and organizations such as the IEA supporting its use for the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (International Energy Agency, 2019). In the last decade, China and Saudi Arabia have strongly cooperated in this sector, and have signed various types of agreements regarding the development of nuclear energy for civil use. As Fulton reports, the two states have started cooperating in this sector as soon as 2012, when a MoU regarding civilian use of nuclear energy was signed (Fulton, China-Saudi Arabia Relations Through the "1+2+3" Cooperation Pattern, 2020). In the following years, during Xi Jinping’s visit to Saudi Arabia in 2016, China Nuclear Engineering and Construction Group Corporation (CNEC) and the Saudi Nuclear and Renewable Energy City (NREC) also signed a MoU regarding High-Temperature Gas Cooled Reactors (Chen, Shu, & Wen, 2018). A year later, during the meeting of HLJC, CNEC signed another MoU, this time regarding the use of gas cooled nuclear reactor for the desalinization of seawater, in substitution of the already existing oil fueled reactors (Fulton, Situating Saudi Arabia in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, 2020). During the same meeting, another MoU was signed, which concerned the assessment of the availability of thorium and uranium. Furthermore, in the same year, during a visit to China, the president of NREC discussed a possible agreement and a pre-feasibility study for the construction of the two first nuclear reactors in the Kingdom, which are going to be commissioned in 2027 (Fulton, China-Saudi Arabia Relations Through the "1+2+3" Cooperation Pattern, 2020). The possibility of Saudi Arabia gaining access to nuclear civil technology has, obviously, created huge concerns, as there is the strong chance that Saudi Arabia, after having obtained nuclear energy for peaceful use, might decide to aim at the development of its own nuclear weapons program, especially in response to a possible threat from Iran (Ahmad, 2020). However, the Saudi nuclear program is still in its early stages, even considering the civil use of nuclear power. It is still unlikely that the Kingdom will develop nuclear weapons anytime soon. Even in the light of some concerns regarding the Saudi nuclear program, the relationship between China and Saudi Arabia and their cooperation in the development of nuclear reactors is not going to stop, except in the face of an unbearable international pressure, as both countries have too much to gain from it. For China, it represents not only a chance to further export its technology and expertise, but also a chance to make Saudi Arabia further rely on China, as well as improving their relationships and again proving to be a reliable, “non-invasive” partner. For Saudi Arabia, the main point is

creating another alternative to oil alongside more traditional “green energy” sources, as the country tries to diminish its reliance on oil in the light “green transformation the energy sector is trying to accomplish. There are however huge implications for the balance and peace in the region that might derive from Saudi Arabia obtaining nuclear power, which will be discussed later in the dissertation.

Having reviewed in this chapter the relationship between China and Saudi Arabia, as well as the development of their cooperation along the BRI, the next chapter will focus on a similar analysis of Iran and its relationship with China.

## 4 China and Iran

The history between China and Iran has some similarities with the one linking China and Saudi Arabia. In both cases, initially the two countries were opposed to each other, as the Shah was firmly a U.S. ally, consequently avoiding contact with the Chinese government. However, even if their relationship did not start on the right foot, the relationship between the two countries gradually improved after the Islamic revolution of 1979. Since then, China has evolved into one of Iran's most important partners, if not the most relevant one. Like the previous chapter, this section will start first with a review of the historical relationship between the two states from the birth of the PRC until now. The second part will be dedicated to an analysis of the relationship and the cooperation between the two countries, focusing primarily on the aspects outside of the BRI. The last section will be dedicated to the BRI and its role and impact in Iran, as well as its possible development in the Islamic Republic.

### 4.1 Historical development of the Relationship

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in 1911, at the end of the Qing dynasty and before the establishment of the Chinese Republic, Iran and China were able to establish diplomatic relations between them. However, after the birth of the PRC, the relationship was broken, with Iran not recognizing the Chinese Communist government. As in the case of Saudi Arabia, both countries view each other as enemies. While the Shah did not support the communist rule, China saw the Shah and its policies as an expression of Imperialism and also supported the communist Tudeh party in Iran. (Garlick & Havlová, China's "Belt and Road" Economic Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf: Strategic Hedging amidst Saudi-Iranian Regional Rivalry, 2020).

The relationship between the two countries started to improve at the beginning of the 70s. After the rapprochement of the U.S. and China in 1971, China and Iran started enjoying economic as well as stable diplomatic relationships, with China showing support for the Shah. Their relationship culminated in 1978 with the visit to Iran by the Chairman of the CCP Hua Guofeng, in which the Chinese government again expressed its support for the Iranian Shah. However, the fact that China, only a short time before the Islamic revolution, decided to back the rule of the Shah had a negative impact on the Sino-Iranian relationship, complicating the establishment of diplomatic relationship in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian Revolution (Garlick & Havlová, The Dragon Dithers, 2020). In any case, China quickly recognized the newly formed Republic on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 1979, just a short time after

the revolution. The relationship started to improve significantly after 1983, when China began to sell a large number of armaments to Iran, becoming the provider of around 80% of the Islamic Republic's armaments (Conduit & Akbarzadeh, 2018).

The sales of weapon by China faced a mounting pressure by the U.S., which strongly criticized and opposed the selling of armaments to the Islamic Republic. Faced with this pressure, in 1987 China decided to stop, at least for some time, the weapon sales to Iran. However, the military cooperation between the two countries continued in the following years, facing further U.S. opposition, leading again to the US opposing the sale of M-11 missiles by China. Between the 80s and the 90s, China and Iran also attempted to join forces in the nuclear sector, after secretly deciding to collaborate in 1985. At first, China even refused to apply the sanction against Iran that the U.S. supported, until it caved in 1997, leading to the termination of nuclear cooperation and of the arms sales (Garlick & Havlová, *The Dragon Dithers*, 2020). In the years after the establishment of sanctions, China has tried to balance its role as an Iranian ally with its willingness not to challenge the United States. However, despite the U.S.'s influence, the trade relations between the two countries not only did not reach a halt, but they also further developed, with China again deciding not to impose sanctions on Iran. As a matter of fact, Sinopec was able to enter the Iranian market in 2001, and signed a contract with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). Besides, the Chinese company was able to sign other agreements in the following years regarding the use and development of Iranian oil fields as well as gas fields (Garlick & Havlová, *The Dragon Dithers*, 2020). This has led to a huge increase in relevance for China, which became Iran's major trade partner. Besides, during 2010, China also attempted to stop the imposition of further sanction on Iran, arguing for more diplomatic efforts to reach an agreement, and obtaining special conditions for Chinese companies operating in the country. Furthermore, in the face of sanctions, China increased its purchases of both oil and non-sanctioned products like ores (Conduit & Akbarzadeh, 2018).

The relationship between the two countries further developed in 2016. After a visit by president Xi Jinping to Teheran, the two countries agreed to bring their relationship to the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, like it happened for Saudi Arabia on the same year (Full text of Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between I.R. Iran, P.R. China, 2016). Besides, as Saudi Arabia did the year before, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 2017 Iran joined the AIIB, again stressing its link with China, and indirectly showing support for the



BRI (Members and Prospective Members of the Bank, 2021). Recently, the relationship between China and Iran has further evolved and developed, with the signing of the 25-year agreement. First proposed in 2016, before the reestablishment of sanction by former U.S. President Trump, the agreement is a crucial step in the Sino-Iranian relationship. It entails huge investments by China (around \$400 billion) in a large variety of sectors of the Iranian economy, as well as stronger military cooperation (Fassihi & Myers, 2020). This deal, not only represents a huge development in the relationship between the two countries, but has also huge implications for the BRI in Iran, as will be discussed later in the chapter. While often being faced with pressure by the U.S., the relationship between the two countries has always been highly relevant for both of them, especially for Iran. The next section will focus on the analysis of said relationship.

## 4.2 The Cooperation between China and Iran

This section, similarly to the one in the chapter before, will be focused on the analysis of the cooperation between China and Iran in different sectors. As in the case of Saudi Arabia, cooperation is not limited to the economic sphere, embracing a wide variety of aspects.

Starting from the economic aspect, the two countries have enjoyed deep ties, even in the face of U.S. pressure. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, their relationship has further developed, leading to a multitude of deals between the two governments and both Chinese and Iranian firms. It is relevant to report that, in 2006 China became Iran's top trading partner and by 2009, it also became Iran's leading supplier, providing around 16% of Iran's total imports (Garver, 2013). As for Saudi Arabia, the Chinese 2019 statistical book helps to stress the relevance of trading with Iran for China. Iran represents almost 13% of Chinese trade with the Middle East, with the Chinese import from Iran representing slightly more than 13% of the overall import from the Middle East and the exports towards Iran being slightly more than the 12% of the Chinese import to the region (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019). The imposition of sanctions on the Iranian economy has also affected the economic relationship between the two countries, with China able to capitalize on the opportunity. Trade between the two countries saw a huge increase in the years, going from 440 million USD in 1996 to 50 billion USD in 2013, increasing especially between 2005 and 2013, a period in which the sanctions against Iran were strongly enforced. This huge increase in the amount of trade lead to an overreliance on China by Iran. It was estimated that in 2016, out of every 100 dollars of imports by Iran,  $\frac{1}{4}$  of them were from China. Furthermore, it is also estimated

that some of the exports that Iran gets from the UAE is basically Chinese export under a different label. Besides, even the products that are smuggled to Iran are often Chinese, meaning that the official estimates of Chinese exports to Iran represent only a fraction of the actual export. (Shariatinia & Azizi, 2019). The Iranian market has consequently witnessed a huge presence of Chinese products. For example, during the Ahmadinejad presidency, a huge number of Chinese goods, worth around 40 billion USD, flooded the Iranian market, with a similar trend continuing during the Rouhani presidency, which lasted until 2021 (Ehteshami, Horesh, & Xu, 2018). This huge Chinese presence has also led to some controversies and political tensions. For example, there was some concern that the Iranian car market would be completely taken over by cheap Chinese cars (Ehteshami, Horesh, & Xu, 2018). Another example would be the affirmation by Eshaq Jahangiri, who acted as vice president during the Rouhani presidency, which criticized the Ahmadinejad government, stating that their uncontrolled importation of Chinese goods had led to the employment of Chinese youth at the expenses of the Iranian one (Shariatinia & Azizi, 2019). As Garver (2013) pointed out, this strong presence of Chinese goods is dictated by the fact that they are easier to access for Iran with respect to western goods, especially in the presence of international sanctions. Furthermore, Chinese firms are more willing to adapt to Iranian requests, as well as being more prone to accept “barter agreements”.

The most important aspect of the Sino-Iranian relationship is the energy cooperation. China has been present in the Iranian energy sector for more than 20 years, with oil representing the main focus of their cooperation, with imports to China tripling between 2000 and 2009 (Garver, 2013). In 2000, China started giving huge relevance to the Iranian energy sector. During that year, China National Petroleum Corp and Sinopec became involved for the first time in Oil exploration and development in the Republic (Calabrese, 2018, p. 175). One year later, in 2001, Sinopec and the National Iranian Oil Company signed an upstream contract covering a large area near the two cities of Zavareh and Kashan, in the Esfahan region (Garlick & Havlová, *The Dragon Dithers*, 2020). Further Chinese investments came in 2004, when Sinopec signed a 25 years contract regarding the production and export of liquified natural gas (LNG) produced in the South Pars gas field. This was followed by a contract signed by China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) in 2006 for the development of North Pars gas field and the production and export of LNG to China (Calabrese, 2018, pp. 176-177). However, the Chinese involvement starkly increased after 2007. By the end of that year, most Western companies withdrew from Iran, leaving a huge vacuum which Chinese

companies swiftly filled, leading to almost a de facto Chinese monopoly of the energy sector, with companies such as the China National Petroleum Company playing a huge role in Iran (Ehteshami, Horesh, & Xu, 2018). 2007 also witnessed the signing of other two important agreements between Iranian and Chinese companies, with Sinopec and China National Petroleum Technology and Development Corporation (CNPC) being granted respectively the right to develop the Yadavaran oil field and the North and South Azadegan oil fields (Calabrese, 2018, pp. 175-176). Further Chinese investments followed in 2008-09. For example, in July 2009 the Iranian NIOC developed an almost 43 billion USD project involving Sinopec, CNPC and CNOOC. The project entailed the construction of refineries as well as a trans-Iranian pipeline spanning for 1.600 Km. In the same year, just a month after the signing of the previous contract, the National Iranian Oil Products Distribution Company (NIOPDC) signed a deal around 3 billion USD for the expansion of the Abadan and Persian Gulf Star refineries (Calabrese, 2018, p. 177). Garver (2013) affirmed that Chinese companies invested around 30 billion USD in the energy sector in 2009, leading to the establishment of China as the main partner for Iran in the development of the energy sources present in its territory. The Chinese government was even able to shield from U.S. sanctions the firms which had invested in Iran. By agreeing to slow down the implementation of the agreements, China avoided the imposition of sanctions on some of its firms, much to the malcontent of its Iranian partner, who hoped for a more decisive implementation. However, Chinese firms were also able to capitalize on the sanction, gaining huge advantages in Iran. For example, in the wake of the Western sanction in 2010, which caused a strong reduction of the supply of products to Iran, including energy resources, China started selling overpriced refined gasoline to the Republic. Furthermore, it even started buying Iranian oil at a bargain and started using alternative methods of payment, for example barter or the use of RMB to settle transactions (Calabrese, 2018, p. 178). As of 2014, China was buying 54% of all the Iranian's oil export (Conduit & Akbarzadeh, 2018).

Cultural interactions between China and Iran are still underdeveloped, but play indeed an important part in their relationship. In the Joint statement released for the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, both countries agreed to further develop their cultural ties, for example by fostering tourism, media visit and academic exchanges and/or the establishment of cultural centers and cultural years, as well as deepening cooperation in other sectors. In the statement it is affirmed that:

*In view of their historical commonalities and existence of numerous capacities in human fields, both sides agree with a leading role for their bilateral Joint Cultural Committee and upgrading the level of their cultural cooperation. In this regard, they will encourage their citizens to visit each other's countries and strengthen cooperation in the fields of tourism, health, youth, and sports. They will also enhance their press and public diplomacy exchanges and increase cooperation between their media as well as the mutual visits by their media delegations. Also, through enhancement of dialog and human exchanges and expansion of communications between their Non-Governmental Organizations in various forms, they will pave the way for mutual understanding and friendship between the two Nations. Both sides shall study the possibility of mutually designating cultural years and shall continue their consultations regarding establishing their cultural centers and provision of necessary facilitation in this regard. Also, by enhancing their consular mechanisms and cooperation, both sides emphasize the provision of necessary support and facilitation to each other's citizens in their countries.*

*Both sides shall enhance their cooperation in the fields of academic and higher education, exchange of professors and students, scientific cooperation and transfer of new technologies and execution of joint projects. (Full text of Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between I.R. Iran, P.R. China, 2016).*

Some efforts have been made along this way, especially in the latest years. For example, Chaziza (Chaziza, 2020) reports that in 2019 in Beijing students from both China and Iran celebrated the traditional Iranian festivity of Yalda, held for the winter solstice. Furthermore, he also reports that in the city of Hamedan in Iran, a winter festivity was held during the period of the Chinese New Year celebrations, which apparently was also a theme of the celebrations. Another good example is the participation of Iran in the 24<sup>th</sup> Beijing International Book Fair, in which, coincidentally, Iran held an exhibition with the Silk Road as its main theme (Iran held Silk Road exhibition on the 24th Beijing Int'l Book Fair, 2017). Iran also witnessed the opening of its first Confucius institute in 2009, way earlier than Saudi Arabia, at the University of Teheran (Xinhua News Agency, 2009). However, the cooperation on cultural aspects remains somewhat limited. An Iranian professor affirmed that around 600 people have learned Persian in China and that around 60 people from China have graduated in Iran and then went back to China. Furthermore, he also stated that there are around 70 people in China graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Persian language and literature every year (Tehran Times, 2021). While the professor also stated that such numbers represent a huge increase with respect to the period before the revolution in Iran, they remain quite limited, especially considering the Chinese population and the relevance that Iran allegedly

has for China. Another example would be the limited tourism between the two countries, with only seven flights connecting the two countries each week, and only 150 000 Chinese tourists visiting the country in 2015 out of the 120 million Chinese tourist around the world in that year (Shariatinia & Azizi, 2017). However, even if the cooperation in the cultural realm between the two countries is still making its first steps, both countries are apparently deeply committed to its fruitful development.

The cooperation between the two countries faces also some other issues. For example, the political life in Iran is mainly divided in two groups, the conservative and the reformists. These two political groups have a different approach to China and its initiatives. On one hand, reformists tend to view China as a “Realist” actor, trying to protect its interests in the region. On the other hand, the conservatives view China as a natural Iranian ally, putting a great value on the cooperation with China. This consequently influences their approach to the West, with the reformist more open to the idea of developing other relationships outside of China, especially in the case that the sanctions are lifted (Shariatinia & Azizi, 2019). Another good example would be the case of Xinjiang. The political debate regarding this topic is lively in Iran, with the conservatives taking the Chinese side, albeit expressing sometimes mild criticism in the past as it happened during the 2009 protests, and the reformist criticizing the treatment of the Uyghur minority by the Chinese government (Ehteshami, Horesh, & Xu, 2018). Although, as it will be described later in more detail, the current conservative government strongly supports China, it is easy to see how such topics not only might represent a source of division within Iran, but might also be critical issue for the development of a good relationship in the future.

Defense and security cooperation between the two republics has, obviously, always been a main concern for the development of their relationship. The two countries, as Conduit and Akbarzadeh (2018) have pointed out, currently lack an actual security commitment. However, they have a lot to gain from their relationship. The security cooperation grants both of them a stronger position, and China can also use its influence in the Republic as a “bargaining chip”. On the other hand, while Iran can benefit from this relationship, it also sees its autonomy limited, being over-reliant on China, consequently fearing Chinese abandonment and being more accommodating of Chinese decisions, even if they imply limited support of the Islamic Republic. The relevance of the security issue is also stressed by

the joint statement issued for the signing of the Comprehensive strategic partnership, in which it is stated:

*Both sides recognize terrorism, extremism and separatism as threats against all humanity and the global peace and stability. Emphasizing the necessity for firm and integrated determination of the international community in fighting the three evil forces, they express their readiness to discuss pragmatic cooperation and policies in this regard. [...]*

*Both sides view the enhancement of communications and exchanges between their Armed Forces and Ministries of Defense as contributing to stability and security and shall increase the exchange of delegations, consultations and coordination at various levels and shall upgrade the level of cooperation of the Armed Forces of the two countries through cooperation mechanisms in the fields of human resource training, fighting terrorism and exchange of information, as well as equipment and technology. (Full text of Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between I.R. Iran, P.R. China, 2016).*

As a matter of fact, cooperation in this sector is nothing new for China and Iran, and example being the arms sales previously mentioned in this chapter. However, in recent years the cooperation started gaining momentum. In 2017 the Chinese company Wuhan Sanjiang Export and Import sold military technology to Iran and helped the country with its missile program in 2020, facing US sanctions in both occasions. Furthermore, the US sustain that the Chinese national Li Fangwei has sustained further development of the Iranian ballistic missiles since as early as 2006. (Green & Roth, 2021). Furthermore, China has also sustained Iran in developing anti-ship missiles, as well as granting Iran the use of the Chinese BeiDou-2 satellite navigation system (Nadimi, 2016). Chinese involvement is not only limited to technology and weapons development. In the past Iran has expressed interest in buying the Chinese J-10B fighter jets, and it is possible that Iran might acquire some other Chinese-made armaments such as warships or tanks (Nadimi, 2016). Lastly, cooperation between the two military forces plays a relevant role. The two states have engaged in high-level military exchanges since as early as the 2010s, and the defense ministers of the two republics have visited each other at least every two years. In 2016, the two countries signed a military cooperation agreement which called for more joint training and exercises, as well as for more counterterrorism cooperation. The two countries have also conducted joint naval exercises, including a trilateral exercise with Russia in 2019. Furthermore, the two states have conducted joint meetings of naval and air force commanders since the 2010s (Green & Roth, 2021). At the time of writing this dissertation, the two states have also agreed on a new

trilateral exercise, again involving Russia in the cooperation, which will take place in the Gulf in late 2021 or early 2022 (Song, 2021). Cooperation between the two countries is strong. However, the main issue is that China is not willing to escalate tensions with the US over Iran, especially in the military sphere. As long as this situation persists, the Chinese military support will probably be more of an instrument for China to use in its dealings with the US than anything else. Furthermore, the constant pressure exercised by the US and the presence of international sanctions on Iran has a deep impact on the security and defense cooperation more than on any of the other sectors which were previously analyzed, hugely limiting the possibility and the scope of the military cooperation between China and Iran.

This section has analyzed the general terms of the Cooperation between China and Iran. In the next section of this chapter, the focus will shift towards their cooperation within the BRI framework, its projects and how it has developed in the years since its birth.

### 4.3 Iran and the BRI

*The Iranian side welcomes “the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” initiative introduced by China. Relying on their respective strengths and advantages as well as the opportunities provided through the signing of documents such as the “MOU on Jointly Promoting the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” and “MOU on Reinforcement of Industrial and Mineral Capacities and Investment”, both sides shall expand cooperation and mutual investments in various areas including transportation, railway, ports, energy, industry, commerce and services. (Full text of Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between I.R. Iran, P.R. China, 2016)*

The text quoted above is an excerpt from the Statement released after China and Iran upgraded their relationship to the level of “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. It is easy to see how the BRI is held in high regard in the framework of the cooperation between the two countries. However, the development of the BRI in Iran faced some relevant issues in Iran. While the Belt and Road was launched in 2013, it could be said that its “implementation” in Iran before 2015 was indeed made more complicated by the huge presence of sanctions. The year 2015 witnessed the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions (JCPOA), also known as the Iranian nuclear agreement. Under the agreement Iran stopped the production of materials (enriched uranium and plutonium) that could be used for the development of nuclear weapons, limiting its nuclear power for civilian use only, as well as agreeing of some other limitations and more inspections. In response, some of the sanctions imposed on Iran

were lifted, and it was agreed that the weapon embargo would be lifted after five years of Iranian compliance (Robinson, 2021). While the US reinstated their sanction in 2018, adding also new ones and tightening its grip on Iran, leading for example to the loss of  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the value of the Iranian currency and the loss of 80% of its oil export (International Crisis Group, 2020), the brief period of time in which sanctions were lifted helped China and the BRI to further penetrate the Iranian market and to strengthen its dealings with Iran, even in the face of the renewed sanctions.

As in the previous chapter, we will start this analysis by reviewing the impact of the BRI in the energy sector. As it was argued in the previous section, the energy sector, especially oil, plays a fundamental role in the Sino-Iranian relationship. Besides, Iran is in dire need of investments in its energy sector. It was estimated that, in the five years after 2019, Iran needed 186 billion USD of investment in its upstream and downstream sectors, more precisely 134 billion in the former and 52 billion in the latter (Shariatnia & Azizi, Iran and the Belt and Road Initiative: Amid Hope and fear, 2019). Of course, BRI can represent a huge opportunity to channel said investment towards this sector. Under the BRI framework China has already been active in Iran. After the visit of Xi Jinping to Iran in 2016, two deals were signed, one involving a 550 million USD investment in the Qeshm Island to develop an oil terminal, the other, signed by Sinopec, was aimed at the development of the Yadaravan oilfield. On the same year, in September, the already mentioned Sinopec reached an agreement for a 4-year project aimed at developing and improving Abadan refinery, the oldest refinery present in the Iranian territory, with the first 1.2 billion USD of investment being delivered in November of the same year (Financial Tribune, 2016). Another 1.3 billion USD, out of the total 3 billion that the deal entailed, were provided at the beginning of 2017, when the state owned Sinosure established a line of credit for the financing of the project (Financial Tribune, 2017). The project, due to be finished in 2021, suffered from the Covid-19 pandemic, with the work on the refinery being halted for some time (Reuters, 2020) and in general being drastically slowed down by the current crisis. The project, which is now set to be completed at an undefined date in 2022 (Financial Tribune, 2021), might prove interesting to evaluate the feasibility, as well as the efficiency of this type of collaboration in the Islamic Republic. However, the most relevant example of energy cooperation during the BRI era came in 2017, unsurprisingly, one year after the JCPOA came into effect after its signing. As Mordechai Chaziza reports (The impact of U.S. sanctions on Iran's engagement and integration in the Belt and Road Initiative, 2020), NIOC signed an agreement around worth



about 4.9 billion USD with three other firms: CNPC, the French Total and the Iranian Petropars. The deal was concerned with the further development of the South Pars gas Field, reaching a production of 400.000 barrels per day. The agreement assigned the majority of the share (50.1%) to the French company, leaving CNPC and Petropars with 30% and 19% of the share respectively. However, when the U.S. reinstated the sanctions on Iran, Total withdrew from the project, leading CNPC to be awarded all of Total's share, creating a huge chance for the Chinese company to exploit the world's largest gas field, and to further increase the Chinese presence. The control of the major part of the share also represented a huge chance for China to prove the efficiency of the BRI, even in the light of the sanctions, using the project to channel a part of the investment that Iran needs. However, faced with mounting pressure by the US, China too withdrew from the deal in 2019, leaving its shares to Petropars, as well as leaving the Iranian company to finished the project (Radio Free Europe, 2019),and showing how the implementation of the BRI, even if it is able to sometimes avoid U.S.'s pressure, might be forced to hit a roadblock.

Nuclear energy represents another important are for Chinese investments. As a matter of fact, in 2016, when their relationship was upgraded, the two states signed 17 MoUs, one of them between the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and the China Nuclear Energy Association regarding the "peaceful use of nuclear energy" (Iran, China sign 17 documents, MoUs, 2016) Since the signing of the JCPOA, which allowed Iran to use nuclear energy for civil use, the two republics started discussions regarding a possible collaboration on this topic, holding for example a bilateral seminar in 2018, just a couple of months before the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA (Wang & Gao, 2018). Collaboration on nuclear energy had already started before the meeting, as the JCPOA allowed the use of three reactors for civil purposes, namely the Fordow, Natanz and Arak reactors (Robinson, 2021). The paramount example was the agreement that the two republics signed in Vienna in 2017, with the goal of redesigning the Arak reactor in compliance with the JCPOA standards, which aimed at preventing the use of the facility for the production of nuclear weapons (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2017). In 2021 Iran conducted cold testing of the redesigned facility, which should be used only for R&D, as well as medical and industrial use. However, some concern is rising regarding the reactor, considering that similar types of reactors in other countries are used for the production of plutonium for nuclear weapons and that the test took place following a series of breaches of the JCPOA by Iran, following the 2018 US's withdrawal and reinstatement of sanctions (Iran International, 2021). In the sphere of nuclear energy, China

has also clearly stated its support for Iran and its civil use of nuclear power, defining the Islamic Republic's requests for the continued cooperation under the JCPOA as "reasonable", also strengthening its support for Iran in the light of the 25-years agreement and the talks for the renovation of the agreement between Iran and the IAEA (ul Khaliq, 2021). While the full restoration of the JCPOA is still difficult to achieve, Chinese support might be a strong factor in the agreement reached by Iran and the IAEA on September 12 2021, in which Iran agreed to some form of monitoring by the agency (Masterson & Davenport, 2021). However, Iran has already infringed the terms of the agreement, preventing the agency from exercising its control on Iranian activities (Murphy, 2021). While China has supported the Iranian claims and demands, it is also unwilling to antagonize other countries through an unconditional support of Iran. While China will probably continue its nuclear power cooperation with Iran and its support for the restoration of the JCPOA, it is difficult to predict the actions that China will take in the future, especially considering the continuous infringements of the nuclear agreements committed by Iran.

As far as the energy sector is concerned, the BRI focuses also on the use of renewable energy sources. The willingness of the two republics to collaborate on this aspect of the energy sector was also stressed in the statement released for the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, in which renewable energy sources are named among the different areas of cooperation (Full text of Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between I.R. Iran, P.R. China, 2016). As it was already mentioned in the previous chapter, China is a relevant country for the production of renewable energies and the necessary equipment. As Zarnegar reports (2018), Iran has a huge potential for the exploitation of renewable energy, especially solar power, in which China has shown some interest, hydropower, which according to Zarnegar presents minimal cost of production in Iran, and geothermal. However, the country's reliance on renewable energy is still limited. While some of the blame lies on the huge relevance of oil and gas in the Iranian economy, Zarnegar also states that the initial costs as well as the technological and financial barriers have prevented the development of a strong renewable energy sector. The BRI might prove to be the necessary tool to foster the development of the Iranian renewable energy. As a matter of fact, China can provide not only the technology necessary for the building of the necessary equipment and facilities, but more importantly can provide the necessary funds through its initiative. The fact that this sector is still relatively untapped might prove to be an even better chance for China to gain control of another sector of the Iranian economy. While cooperation

on renewable energy between the two republics it is still lacking, it is relatively safe to assume that it will increase greatly in the future.

One of the main focal points of the BRI is the development and construction of new infrastructures. Quickly completing such projects and granting that they operate in an adequate way helps to give credibility to the initiative. Iran has a lot of infrastructural projects which are currently taking place on its territory, and to which China is contributing through the BRI. The main focus has been the development of the railways connecting different Iranian cities. One of the most relevant projects in this aspect has been the electrification project of the Railway connecting the Capital Tehran to Mashhad, which should have halved the length of the travel, as well as increasing the number of passengers and the cargo transported each year. The project, which entailed the construction of a 926 Km railroad by the China National Machinery Import and Export Corporation (CMC), was hugely important since Mashhad is one of the most important places of Pilgrimage in Iran (China Daily, 2019). It is easy to compare this project to the MLM project in Saudi Arabia, as both aimed at improving the connection to the Holy Places of both countries. Furthermore, as in the case of the MLM, this connection might have helped China to increase its legitimacy in Iran, especially in the light of the Xinjiang issue, which saw the Iranian reformist strongly criticizing the Chinese government. However, China has recently abandoned the electrification project, after the Chinese institution which should have financed the project announced that it was facing some issues, making it unable to continue to finance the infrastructure development (Mehr News Agency, 2021). The abandonment of this project represents not only a hugely missed chance for the BRI, but also a missed opportunity for strengthening the relationship between Iran and China, and improving the role of China in the eyes of the Iranian people. Another important railway project involving the BRI is the construction of the Tehran-Qom-Isfahan high speed railway, on which the two countries signed an agreement in 2015. The project, which is conducted by the China Railway Engineering Corp, is aimed at the construction of 410 Km of railway, and is expected to connect the Capital Tehran with the former Capital Isfahan in one and a half hours. The value of the project was initially estimated around 1.8 billion USD (Chaziza, 2020). In 2019, China reopened the credit line for the project with further 1.94 billion USD of financing for the project. The railway was to be completed in August 2021 (Financial Tribune, 2019), however, at the time of writing, no further news is available on its completion. China is also engaged in two more relevant railway development project. In 2018, the Chinese China National Machinery Industrial Corp (Sinomach) signed an

845 million USD contract for the construction of a 410 Km railway line connecting Tehran with the cities of Hamedan and Sanandaj, while the China Railway Construction Corp won a contract around 550 million USD for the construction of a railway between Kermanshah and Khosravi (Reuters, 2018). Another railway construction project that should be mentioned was the construction of a rail line spanning 450 Km by the firm Sinconst, aimed at connecting the cities of Marvdasht, Shiraz, Kwar and Firozabad (Green & Roth, 2021). While these last projects are incredibly smaller in scope compared to the previous two, they are still fundamental to strengthen the Chinese presence and to foster the positive image of the BRI. More legitimacy is given also by infrastructural projects which are not linked to transportation. For this reason, is it relevant to report the financing by China development bank and China Exim bank of the construction of five hospitals, which were due to be completed in 2021 (Green & Roth, 2021). Such projects, are just as relevant in giving a positive idea regarding the BRI not only to Iranian nationals but also to other countries that are already involved in the BRI, or might be willing to join.

The BRI in Iran has worked to improve the connection between the two countries. In 2015, there was a proposal to build a high-speed railway connecting Urumqi with Tehran, greatly reducing the time of the travel (Zheng, 2015). Train connections were further intensified. For example, in 2016 the first direct train between the two countries was established, connecting Tehran with Yiwu, a city in the eastern region of Zhejiang, completing its journey in 30 days less than the usual sea route. Another freight train was established in 2017, connecting Iran with Yinchuan, in the Hui region of Ningxia, transporting 1.6 million USD worth of cargo, including for example medical equipment and automobile parts (Chaziza, 2020). In 2018 a freight train service between the Chinese Inner Mongolia region and Iran was established. The train line reduced the time needed to usually complete the travel by 20 days (Xinhua News Agency, 2018). Besides train connections, there are other aspect which the BRI could help to improve, consequently strengthening the connection between the two countries. For example, it was estimated that more than 50 Iranian airports need improvement and/or reconstruction (Shariatinia & Azizi, 2017). This could be a huge opportunity not only to use the BRI for its main purpose, namely infrastructural projects, but also for fostering the connection between the two countries, as the new airports could be the destination for direct flights linking the two republics, increasing the number of flights which, as it was previously reported, remains limited. In 2019, the Iranian government estimated that 42.8 billion USD were needed to complete the infrastructural projects in Iran (Chaziza, 2020). It is

natural that this is a huge opportunity for the BRI to invest in the development of the Iranian infrastructures. A fairly untapped market by BRI projects, both linked to infrastructure and connectivity, is the communication sector. While the Chinese presence is increasing, with Huawei having the lion's share of the Iranian market, the IT and communication sector has not seen huge investments by China as other sectors have witnessed, even if in 2017 it was estimated that it needed at least 17 billion USD of investments (Shariatinia & Azizi, 2017). It is unlikely that China will let this huge investment opportunity slide, considering that it has already played a huge part in the communication sector of other country, as for example Saudi Arabia as it was stated in the previous chapter. While the overreliance on China might increase further, more cooperation in this sphere is to be expected, especially in the light of the 25 years deal between China and Iran.

The connection between the two countries is fostered also by tourism and cultural ties. As it was reported previously in this same chapter, there have been already some cultural events and shared celebrations. In 2019, Iran witnessed the opening of its second Confucius institute at the University of Mazandaran, with Chinese classes starting on October of the same year (An Introduction to Confucius Institute at University of Mazandaran, 2019). The teaching and in general the work conducted at the Confucius institutes in Iran has been linked with the long-lasting cultural ties, especially the old silk road, that the two countries have enjoyed over the centuries, as well as being put in the framework of the BRI and the attempt to revive the old ties of the Silk Road (CNA, 2018). However, as it was stated before, the cultural cooperation is still limited. Language courses are still scarce and students exchanges as well as cultural initiatives are limited. As in the case of Saudi Arabia, cooperation in the cultural sphere is still in its early phase, and needs to be further developed to increase its impact. Tourism is another aspect of the so called "people-to-people bonds" that needs to be strengthened. According to Chinese sources, Chinese tourism in Iran has seen a large increase since the establishment of the BRI, as well as increasing the Chinese interest in Iran in general (Xinhua News Agency, 2019). However, Iran has also attempted to increase the flow of Chinese tourists visiting the country, which plummeted from around 150,000 in 2015, as it was reported previously, to around 50,000 in 2018, for example by eliminating the need for Visas for Chinese tourists. The goal of the Iranian government was to reach 2 million Chinese tourist by the end of 2020 (Motamedi, 2019). The Iranian government also opened the possibility for Chinese investment also in the tourism sector, for example the construction and operation of tourism locations, or the renovation of monuments, opening also the

possibility of establishing joint ventures, and stressing the cultural ties that the two countries have shared in their history, especially the ones linked to the silk road (Ghosh, 2019). This ambitious plan has unfortunately hit a roadblock in 2020, with the breakout of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the early phase of the pandemic, the Iranian government suspended air travel from China (Lipin, Jedinia, Lu, & Kashgarian, 2020), as many other governments did in the same period. The ban has, obviously, hugely impacted the attempt to increase the flow of Chinese tourists. While the Iranian plan might still be in place, considering also the general improvement of the situation given by the ongoing development of vaccines and possible treatments, it will take a while for tourism to reach pre-pandemic levels, let alone reach the expected 2 million threshold.

While the pandemic has had, obviously, negative impacts on the two countries, such as the one discussed above, it also provided a huge opportunity for the republics to support each other, showing the benefits of their cooperation, as well as the positive effects that the Health Silk Road might generate. In the early days of the pandemic, president Xi Jinping and former Iranian president Rouhani expressed their willingness to further cooperation, also expressing their confidence that both countries were making steady progress in their battle against the virus (Xinhua News Agency, 2020). Aside from official remarks and statements, the two countries have provided concrete help to each other in the wake of the pandemic. In the face of Iran's critical infections situation, China's support has been fundamental for the Islamic republic's attempts to tackle the virus, since it has limited access to medicine and medical equipment that the West might provide due to the sanctions limiting its trade (Xinhua News Agency, 2020). While, with respect to Saudi Arabia, Iranian help to China has been limited, with only 3 million surgical masks been delivered to the country, Beijing has provided Iran with a large number of medical supplies and equipment, including various types of medical masks, protective equipment, ventilators, 15 tons of medical supplies and thousands of diagnostic kits as well as disinfectants, body temperature monitors and other fundamental materials (Zoubir, China's "Health Silk Road" Diplomacy in the MENA, 2020). Iran has been hugely hit by the Coronavirus pandemic, with the number of deaths soaring and the health system gradually collapsing due to the lack of medical supplies and equipment. Furthermore, Iran has "banned" the import of "western" vaccines in the country (Esfandiari, 2021), further deepening the impact of the pandemic. In the light of the Iranian condition, China has played a huge role in the Iranian vaccination campaign. In January 2021, Iran decided to purchase the Sinovac vaccine before its approval for mass use (Iran

International, 2021). A month later, China donated 250,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine to Iran (Motamedi M. , 2021). As a matter of fact, Sinopharm represents a huge part of the inoculations in the country, around 67% in August 2021 (Kangarlou, 2021). Furthermore, despite some concerns regarding the efficacy of the Chinese vaccines, with around 2000 fully vaccinated people dying from the virus (Khoshhal, 2021), the country has continued to rely on the Chinese vaccines, with around 4 million doses of Sinopharm vaccines being delivered at the beginning of September 2021 (Fars News Agency, 2021), and further 3 million doses being delivered through the COVAX facility on September 11<sup>th</sup> (Iran Receives Fourth Delivery of COVID-19 Vaccines through COVAX Facility, 2021). At the time of writing (October 2021), the Iranian deputy Health Minister had declared that they expected to import 20 million doses in September and 30 million in October, importing around 5 million doses weekly (Fars News Agency, 2021). The reliance of Iran on the Chinese vaccine might be used as a relevant example of the working of the Health Silk Road. If China is able to prove that the doubts casted on the efficacy of its vaccines were illegitimate, Iran might be the proving grounds of the efficiency of the Chinese support, especially for the countries of the “global south”, which are facing critical conditions in their fight against Covid-19. The further development of the Iranian situation should be monitored in the near future, as it will provide some useful insight.

Defense Cooperation is relevant also for the BRI framework. However, except for some general statements and agreements, like the one signed in 2016 between the Chinese and Iranian defense ministers in which the two states agreed to joint military training and anti-terrorism actions (Ehteshami, Horesh, & Xu, 2018), cooperation between the two republics has been limited. As a matter of fact, the military cooperation was limited to the examples reported in the previous section of this chapter, namely some joint training as well as limited arms sales. In comparison, cooperation with Saudi Arabia was more developed, with for examples sales of Chinese UAVs. Given the great issue that the military strengthening of Iran represents not only for the US, but also for other Chinese allies in the area such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, military cooperation will still be limited even in the near future of the BRI. However, there is indeed the possibility that cooperation between the two countries might increase in the light of the 25 years agreement that was recently signed, and which entailed also military cooperation.

For a full analysis of the BRI in Iran, the financial aspect should be considered. Even in this aspect the cooperation is, again, fairly limited. Even before the BRI, China had already used

Iran in its efforts towards the internationalization of the RMB, for example by using RMB for payments in its oil transaction with Iran (Sender, 2012). The joining of the AIIB as a founding member has further increased the possibility of financial cooperation as well as providing another possibility of internationalization for the Chinese currency, which however was not fully exploited by the two countries to increase their collaboration. A further opportunity for the deepening of financial cooperation (as well as defense ties, since defense cooperation is one of the main concerns of the group) would be the admission of Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), for which Iran has petitioned multiple times through the years, currently enjoying only the observer status, and for which other members of the SCO such as Russia have shown support. However, China has shown great concern for the possible actions of Iran, preventing Iran from joining the group and currently missing a chance for further financial, as well as defense, cooperation (Conduit & Akbarzadeh, 2018). In general, financial cooperation between the two states has suffered from the same issues that have plagued all the aspects of Sino-Iranian cooperation, namely the Chinese fear of Iran's rogue behavior and the international sanctions. As Shariatinia and Azizi have pointed out (2017), the cooperation in this field remains particularly problematic not only due to the sanctions but also in the light of the U.S. dominance of the financial system, which greatly impairs the possibility for Iran of enjoying international financial interactions. While things may change in the future, even considering the focus that the BRI puts in its attempt to increase financial role of China, cooperation with Iran will remain fairly limited.

An important element that must be noted is that, while in cases such as Saudi Arabia it is easier to affirm the positive impact of the BRI in the increase of trade, cooperation and Chinese commitment, in the case of Iran the impact brought by the BRI to the cooperation is not clear. It is indeed true that, after 2016, China invested hugely in Iran. However, as Garlick and Havlová have pointed out, (The Dragon Dithers, 2020) it is difficult to witness a clear-cut increase in the Chinese investments before and after the BRI. As a matter of fact, there was indeed a large increase in investments between 2016 and 2017 (around 3.5 billion USD), which can be linked to the lifting of the sanctions, as well as the fact that in that period, Chinese firms had started to largely invest all around the world without specific guidelines or goals. In the following years, in concomitance with the reinstatement of U.S. sanctions, Chinese investment in Iran reached the pre-Xi presidency levels (around 2 billion USD), way less than, for example, 2006, in which investments reached almost the 2016-17 levels. As the authors pointed out, considering the impact of the inflation, the BRI did not particularly foster



the increase of Chinese investments, except in the case of the presence of other external factors such as a reduction of sanctions. Furthermore, the authors stated that, contrary to the expectations, after the BRI announcement Iran witnessed a reduction of Chinese investments in its energy sector, with an increase in other sectors such as transport or chemicals. In general, the data provided by Garlick and Havlová suggest a wary approach by China in its investments in Iran, as it was already stated during this dissertation. Besides, other countries have witnessed larger investments than the Islamic Republic, showing the willingness of China not to rely too much on Iran, especially considering its reputation and behavior. However, there are some elements that should be taken into consideration regarding this analysis. First, the full potential of the BRI in Iran has not been reached yet, and the impact that it could have on the Iranian economy is mainly unclear. While this might hold true for different BRI countries, as the BRI projects are still in development or in their early phases, Iran's participation has been strongly impaired by the presence of sanctions. However, even if, with Chinese help, Iran was able to reestablish the initial conditions of the JCPOA, or even better ones, it is not clear the scope that the BRI projects in Iran could reach, given the stigma that cooperation with Iran represents. Second, while it is true that the Chinese investments in 2018-19 reached the pre-Xi presidency levels, it must also be stated that, at the beginning of its presidency, investments in Iran had plummeted from around 2 billion USD in 2012 to slightly above 0.5 billion USD in 2013. As a matter of fact, the investments in Iran went from around 0.5 billion in 2015 to around 1.5 billion in 2019 (Garlick & Havlová, *The Dragon Dithers*, 2020). While, except for 2016-17, the scale of the investments was not unprecedented, the implementation of the BRI was able to restore investments in the country after reaching an incredibly low point in the previous years. Furthermore, it must be considered that the BRI, which was able to restore the Chinese investment in the Islamic Republic, has been halted by sanctions and the US pressure. While it is difficult to measure, it might be affirmed that, if the US had not withdrawn from the JCPOA, the BRI could have at least kept the investment at the all-time high reached in 2016-17.

Finally, the last section of this paper will be dedicated to the 25-year agreement recently signed by the two countries. While the negotiation for the deal had started already as soon as 2016, in the wake of the signing of the comprehensive strategic partnership, the deal was apparently finalized only recently at the beginning of 2021 (Vatanka, 2021). The agreement represents a huge deal for the two countries. It consists apparently on a plan by China to

invest around 400 billion USD in Iran, with the investments comprehending a large variety of different sectors, including for example finance, healthcare or communications. In exchange, Iran will sell its oil to China at a bargain price (Zhang, 2021). It is easy to see how this agreement represents an incredibly relevant step for China and Iran in further developing their relationship within the BRI, as well as a huge commitment for China to bring investments to the Islamic Republic. However, there are some important doubts that about the working, the motivation and the feasibility of such a plan. Firstly, the scale of the investments envisioned by the plan seems to large. The investments should reach a treshold of 16 billion USD per year to respect the reach the expected goal of 400 billion USD, which is not only a large amount per se, considering that China has reached that level of investments only with countries such as the US, Britain and Switzerland (Zhang, 2021), but it also a large amount considering the level of investment by China in Iran in the previous years, which as it was reported previously were limited to around 2 billion USD in 2018 and around 1.5 USD in 2019 (Garlick & Havlová, The Dragon Dithers, 2020). It is unlikely to actually see such a large amount of investments poured by China into Iran, especially, and this is the second doubt which can be raised, in the presence of the sanctions. Not only sanction have limited the amount of investments by China, but it has also delayed or even completely halted the development of some projects, as it was reported previously in this chapter. While Iranian officials have avoided clearly stating the impact that sanction might have on the deal (Xie, 2021), it is likely that it would be impossible for it to bear fruit with the sactions still present. Third, as Vatanka pointed out (2021), the agreement was motivated less by an improvement of the Sino-Iranian relationship than by a deepening of the Sino-US conflict. It might be expected that the deal will be used again by China as a bargaining chip with the US, rather than being a deal conducted in good faith with Tehran. China has used this sort of leverage previously in its dealing with the US, and it will probably use again such a method given the opportunity. The deal might even be used as a leverage with the U.S. in the negotiations for the nuclear agreement with Iran, which, at the time of writing, are set to resume at the end of November 2021 (BBC, 2021). Lastly, as for all the previous Chinese initiative in the region, such a plan might create concerns among the other Chinese allies, especially Saudi Arabia. In the case of a Saudi reaction to the plan, It will be difficutl to keep balancing between the two allies for China especially in the case of such a huge investments project. More likely than anything else, the announcement of this plan is merely a symbol of the willingness of China to stand by Iran's side, continuing to support the Islamic Republic to gain as much as possible

from the country. It might even be the case that such an agreement might be used as a token to negotiate a return to the previous state of the JCPOA, or even to better conditions. In any case, it is unlikely that the agreement will represent a huge disruption with how China has behaved until now. While the investments in Iran might witness a spike, it is highly unlikely that they will need the required level, strengthening the idea that the agreement is more of an attempt to put further pressure on the US. In any case, it is too early to witness and judge the effects and developments of the deal, but its impact should be monitored closely in the future.

Having reviewed the cooperation between Iran and outside the BRI framework, as well as its most recent developments, the next chapter will be focused on the different issues that the BRI faces in its application in Iran and Saudi Arabia at the national, regional and international levels.

## 5 Issues in the implementation of the BRI

As it was shown in the previous two chapters, there are a large variety of projects along the BRI which are being or are going to be developed in both Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, the possibility of success of those projects is difficult to predict, not only for the intrinsic characteristics of the BRI projects, but also due to the different external problems that they may face in the development. As a matter of fact, different projects were halted, as it was also stated previously, due to some factors not related to the BRI. There are different problematics that these projects are facing or might face in the future during their development in these two countries. Such problems present themselves at different levels: the national, the regional and the international, or more properly global, level. While some of these issues were addressed briefly in the previous chapters, this one will try to focus more on those issues, trying to better define them and their impact on the fruitful development of the BRI.

### 5.1 Issues at the national level

Before analyzing the different issues that the two states face at the national level, a brief premise is necessary. While at the national level both countries have to face some issues, it is easy to admit that Iran might face more problems than Saudi Arabia. This fact is mainly linked to the type of regime in each country. While Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, with a clearly defined rule of succession, Iran is a republic and holds elections. While the country and its elections are not free, there are different parties holding different positions, even on such topic as the collaboration with China. This creates a more nuanced situation in Iran with respect to Saudi Arabia. This is not to say that Saudi Arabia does not experience factionalism, or that every Saudi cadre has the same opinion or that Iran is a country enjoying a free political life and debate. However, the Saudi type of government creates even less room for expressing dissenting opinion in the political sphere, and, as a consequence, less political issues at the national level.

Consequently, the first issue that will be analyzed is an Iranian issue, namely the “conflict” between the Conservative and Reformist political camps. This issue was briefly mentioned in the previous chapters. The main camps in which Iranian politics is divided are the conservatives and the reformist. The latter have a more critical approach towards China than the former. While as it was previously mentioned, the Conservatives depict China as a natural

and reliable partner, Reformists argue that China is mainly driven by its core interests and behaves in a “realist” way. While it has supported Iran during the sanctions, they argue that China not only has partially backed the sanctions itself, but it has also profited in an opportunistic way from those same sanctions, becoming a de facto monopolist actor in Iran. For this reason, the reformists do not want to grant a special treatment to China and its firms, aiming to attract foreign investment, especially from the EU, once the sanctions are over, with the intention to reduce their overreliance on China. As a matter of fact, Reformists have often criticized the Chinese firms and their presence in the Iranian energy sector, such as their strong control over the oil and gas resources, as well as their competence, with Chinese firms describe as less capable than Western firms (Ehteshami, Horesh, & Xu, 2018). It is unlikely that the reformist camp will gain the upper hand in the near future. The reformist camp is currently in a deep crisis, with its electorate not participating in elections, as well as the Iranian establishment clearly opposing them, for example by preventing some of their stronger candidates from running in the elections. These factors have clearly weakened the Reformists, leading them to lose both the 2020 parliamentary elections, in which the conservatives won around 90% of the seats, and the 2021 presidential elections which saw the conservative Ebrahim Raisi winning the presidency, despite the electoral turnout stopping at 49%, the lowest ever recorded in Iran (Smagin, 2021). However, the Reformists still represent an issue for China and for the BRI in Iran. If they are able to regain their strength their might push for a reduced reliance on China, as well as distance themselves from the initiative. Besides, in the case of the lifting or reduction of sanctions, their push for an opening towards the West might prove a thorn in the side of China as the increased competition will likely lead to less favorable conditions for China, as well as a possible ousting of their firms from some relevant sector such as the oil sector, one of the spheres in which the BRI is strongly involved in Iran. While this is an unlikely scenario for the time being, the reformist camp still represents a possible relevant issue for the Chinese government, which should try to obtain every possible concession from the Iranian government and increase the presence of the BRI in Iran as long as the conservatives are in power. The 25 years agreement is a step in that direction. However, this agreement is still plagued by the issues which were stated in the last part of the previous chapter.

Another important issue that Iran is going to face in the near future, which in some circumstances might even affect the relationship between China and the Islamic Republic, is the succession of the current Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Khamenei is going to be

83 next year, and consequently there are a lot of speculations regarding who will take its place in the future. The role has also a huge relevance since the Supreme Leader has the last word on both the domestic as well as the foreign policy of the state, as well as exercising huge control over the state bodies such as the Guardian Council, which elects the members of the Assembly of Experts, which in turn elect the Supreme Leader. It is not currently clear who the candidates are, but the main names on the list are Khamenei's son Mojtaba or the current Iranian president Ibrahim Raisi (Rahimpour, 2020). Both of them are considered strong, conservative figures, which would be most certainly aligned with Beijing in the future, leading almost certainly to a continuation of the BRI as it is right now, if not pushing for even more BRI involvement in the Islamic Republic. While there is always room for surprises, one of them is almost certainly going to be the next Supreme Leader in Iran. However, the issues which might arise during the succession period should not be underestimated. While the most likely scenario will see a continuation of the status quo, with one of the two men taking Khamenei's mantle, other options are still possible. For example, Khoshnood (2021) has argued that among the likely scenarios there is also the possibility that the Assembly of Experts will decide for the institution of a "Council of Leadership" instead of a choosing single figure to take the role of Supreme Leader, especially in the case of possible tensions among the different political factions. This scenario, for instance, would lead to a completely different organization of the republic, as well as some unprecedented changes and the development of the situation would be difficult to predict. While being unlikely, one should not completely discard the possibility of some clashes for the role of successor. In any case, while the death of Ali Khamenei will probably have no impact on the Iranian relationship with China, let alone on the unfolding of the BRI in the Islamic republic, as the current situation will likely be preserved, China should still keep an eye on the situation, especially in the unlikely case that a more reformist Supreme Leader is elected. It is also important to point out how a similar issue in the succession is not to be particularly feared in the case of Saudi Arabia. As a matter of fact, the current Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, has sought greater cooperation with China, inaugurating some of the projects reported in the chapter on Saudi Arabia, and has also sought more cooperation along the BRI. It is unlikely that, when he becomes king, he will change its current approach towards China. On the other hand, the cooperation along the BRI is likely to continue or even increase its pace in Saudi Arabia as the time passes.

Lastly, another relevant topic at the national level, this time involving both Iran and Saudi Arabia, is the issue of Xinjiang and the treatment of the Uyghurs. This topic too was briefly addressed previously in the dissertation, and will be now be reviewed in more depth. As a matter of fact, the Chinese region of Xinjiang is a central place for the BRI and its development, since 3 of the corridors in which the BRI is structured pass through or start in said region, since its location at the western border of China makes it extremely relevant for connecting China with Central Asia and consequently Europe (Sciorati, 2021). Besides, Xinjiang is also a link with the two countries which we have examined so far. For example, as it was previously stated, there was a proposal for a train link between Urumqi and Tehran (Zheng, 2015). The situation in Xinjiang has been a critical issue for China with the West, and it might be so even with Muslim states. As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, the Saudi government has multiple times showed its support for the Chinese actions. The current Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, as it was stated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, has condemned the intervention of foreign countries in an issue which is deemed to be exclusive competence of China, and should not be exposed to external interference. Furthermore, he has also defined the Chinese position as a legitimate one, and has defined the foreign intervention as an attempt to create animosity between China and Muslim countries (Xu, 2021). The Saudi government has not only sustained the Chinese position through statements but also with concrete actions. As a matter of fact, in 2020 two Uyghurs dissidents were arrested and jailed in Saudi Arabia, without the government clearly stating the reason for their detention, as well as prompting fear in the West that the two dissidents might face violations of their human rights if they were extradited to China (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Considering the recent and past actions by the Saudi government, it is safe to assume that there would be no formal challenges to the Chinese actions in Xinjiang. However, the Saudi civil society, as it was reported by Olimat (Olimat, 2016, pp. 203-204), has shown support for the Uyghurs when in 2015 it was reported that the Chinese government had limited their religious freedom, for example by preventing them from fasting during Ramadan. Furthermore, in the past Saudi preachers and scholars have expressed concerns for the conditions of the Uyghurs, sustaining the necessity to support the Muslim in Xinjiang and grant them more religious freedom, as well as exercising more pressure on the Chinese government on the matter. Besides, a Statement by the World Muslim League, which at the time was headed by the grand mufti<sup>4</sup> of Saudi Arabia Abdul-Aziz bin Abdullah al-Sheikh, called for more pressure to be exerted on

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<sup>4</sup> An Islamic Jurist, which is qualified to emit a Fatwa, a relevant but non-binding legal opinion

China to grant religious freedom, stop the practices aimed at deteriorating their Muslim identity and stop the repopulation of their territory by non-Uyghurs (Abu Sekin, 2015). For these reasons, while the Saudi government has a strong control of the civil society, and it is unlikely that it will constitute a hindrance in the development of the Sino-Saudi relations, the kingdom should still be wary of its actions and the reactions of its society. On the other hand, the situation in Iran is fairly more complicated. In Iran, the issue has seen different approaches along the two camps of the Reformists and the conservatives. During the 2009 protests in Urumqi, the two camps started assuming different positions regarding this topic. The conservatives slightly criticized the Chinese approach to the issue, although they also highlighted how the problematic was not simply a religious issue, but one which has to do with other elements such as ethnicity or history. At the same time, they argued that the Uyghurs call for independence had been exaggerated by the West, and that separatism was not the true goal of Uyghurs. Furthermore, they attacked strongly the reformist camp, saying that they were blindly following Western media reports and Western interests. On the other hand, the Reformists are more concerned with the situation in Xinjiang, criticizing the approach by China, defining the Conservatives as hypocrites, as they championed the Palestinian cause and downplayed the mistreatment of the Uyghurs, accusing the Chinese government of influencing the demographic composition of Xinjiang to favor the Han ethnicity and criticizing the hardline approach adopted by Beijing, which was justified by the government through the "War on terror" framework (Ehteshami, Horesh, & Xu, 2018). This topic was also relevant in the wake of the 2009 Iranian presidential elections, a period of time which saw great tensions between the two Iranian factions. While at the time the official approach of the government, nominated in a contested election, was to reestablish the principle of non-interference and its support for China, Reformist clerics criticized both China, which was deemed hypocritical in its attempt to improve its relationship with Muslim countries while suppressing its Muslim population, as well as the government, which turned a blind eye to the Uyghur oppression while claiming that Iran was the defender of Islam worldwide. This criticism gained strength through the Iranian parliament, where Reformist MPs echoed the claim, further escalating the tensions (Ramani, 2018). The positions of the two groups, especially the conservative one, have gained strength with the passing of time and with the growing Iranian reliance on China. In recent years, when a former Iranian MP criticized the government for keeping quiet regarding the mistreatment of Uyghurs due to its need for Chinese economic support, his statement was met with a huge backlash by the



Conservative. The Conservative not only attacked the former MP personally, but also strongly supported the Chinese actions in Xinjiang, claiming that the Chinese government has only suppressed Muslim hardliners, which were often linked or backed by Saudi Arabia. Others claimed that China was only trying to suppress Saudi supported Wahabism and that China was serving Islam by preventing extremism or such group as ISIS from spreading (Haqiqatnezhad, 2020). Recently, the Iranian government and the Conservatives have showed further support for China, for example by letting the Chinese embassy in Iran organized seminars which “debunked lies fabricated by the United States and some anti-China forces in the West” regarding the situation in Xinjiang and the Uyghurs’ conditions (Xing & Mao, 2021). Although, as it was stated in the previous chapter, the pro-China conservatives are most certainly going to be in power for the time being, the issue of Xinjiang has proved to be a divisive issue in Iran, creating tensions among its political groups, as well as possible issues in the Islamic Republic’s relations with China. For now, the government will simply continue to show its support and avoid addressing the issue, in order to gain full advantage by the Chinese involvement in the Iranian economy, and avoid the withdrawal of China from some of its crucial sectors. However, even if it is unlikely, if the Reformist were to gain power, such an issue could hinder the development of the relationship with China, as well as further development of the BRI, which put a central role on Xinjiang. In any case, it must be said that such a scenario remains unlikely in the future.

It must be said that the topics discussed will hardly constitute an issue for China and for the BRI. Saudi Arabia and Iran enjoy a particularly pragmatic relationship with China, were governments try to avoid such issues from influencing their relations. For now, is almost impossible that Saudi Arabia will let some internal issue influence its relationship and its economic collaboration with China. Similarly, in Iran only a dramatic and unpredictable turn of events could lead the Reformist to take power, and even the Reformists will likely continue a positive, albeit more critical relationship with China, without opting out of the BRI. For these reasons, there is no way that the current Iranian government, and probably even a Reformist one, would let such internal issues damage their relationship with China, considering that right now Iran is too dependent on Beijing, especially in the face of sanctions. However, it is still relevant to discuss these topics and the influence that they might exercise on the development of the Sino-Saudi and Sino-Iranian relations in the future, as some of them could in fact originate tensions in the area.

Having reviewed the elements at the national level which may constitute an Issue in the Chinese relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran, the next section will deal with issues at the regional level.

## 5.2 Issues at the regional level

In its plans for the BRI in the middle east, China faces different issues. Such issues are mainly derived by the fact that China supports both Iran, which is perceived as a threat in the area, and Saudi Arabia, which sees Iran as an adversary and as a rogue state. As a matter of fact, Iran is often seen as one of the main causes of instability in the region, especially by Saudi Arabia. For example, Iran at first strongly supported the uprisings during the Arab springs, which were depicted by Iran as the harbingers of new Islamists governments (Goodarzi, 2020), and it was accused by some government of directly supporting the uprising in their states (Associated Press, 2011). The tensions between the two countries are and might further become a flashpoint for the area, as well as becoming an issue for the full implementation of the BRI. In its approach towards both Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is clearly visible that China is “hedging its bets” in the area, supporting both of the two heavyweights of the Middle East. As Garlick and Havlová put it, China is mitigating its risks through the diversification of its investments and “assets” in the area, maintaining the status quo and avoiding involvement in the local issues (Garlick & Havlová, 2020). Besides, the “hedging” approach allows China to enjoy the economic benefits and increase its presence and influence in the ME, while at the same time avoiding the political issues that might arise, and leaving the burden of security and maintaining order to the U.S. while at the same time challenging its role in the ME (Fulton, 2020). However, this “betting” on both Saudi Arabia and Iran entails some risks. It is true that, by avoiding deep involvement in the political issues, China has been able to avoid the escalation of tension, and has been able to cooperate with both countries. However, the possibility that the rising tension between the two of them might damage the Chinese projects and the BRI is not an absurd hypothesis, and it could put China in a hard spot, forcing its government to unwillingly take a side in some of the issues. Besides, if China is actually aiming, in the long run, to substitute the U.S. as the main hegemonic power in the area, it will be hard, if not downright impossible for it to keep an impartial position in every confrontation.

As it was stated above, the main issue for China in its involvement at the regional level is it's the enduring rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which might prove to be a highly

problematic issue for the Chinese involvement in the ME. There are different examples of the tension and conflicts arising between the two states. One fairly recent and clear example is their involvement in the Syrian civil war. As a matter of fact, both countries became involved in the conflict with two clearly distinct and opposite goals. Since the Islamic revolution in Iran, Syria has always been on good terms with Iran, not only due to some similarities in their political positions, but also due to the fact that Iran was a Shia regime and that the Syrian leader Hafiz al-Assad, as well as his son and current leader Bashar al-Assad, belong to the Alawi Shia sect. Despite their difference in faith, Saudi Arabia has tried during the years, with mixed results, to develop friendly relationship with the Syrian regime, in order to snag them from the Iranian camp. For this reason, at the beginning of the conflict, Saudi Arabia did not condemn or attack al-Assad, instead choosing to support its rule, also due to the fact that Saudi Arabia has historically always preferred keeping the status quo in the region. However, as the conflict went on, and with the increasing role of Iran in the conflict, the Saudi position changed. As a matter of fact, the Saudi government started directly and strongly criticizing al-Assad, and started taking actions against his regime. For instance, the Saudi Arabia started paying members of the Syrian army to defect to rebel groups, as well as cooperating with other states which also opposed the al-Assad regime, to improve the delivery of equipment to the rebels. Furthermore, they directly supported rebel groups through weapon deliveries and the financing of some groups such as the “Army of Islam” (Blanga, 2017). On the other hand, Iran quickly intervened in support of its ally. With Iran’s help, Syria was able to reorganize its strengths, as well as providing the regime with resources and both financial and military aid, dispatching for example between 7 to 15 thousand fighters to Syria (Goodarzi, 2020). Besides, the Iranian government profited from its presence to further expand its power in Syria, for example by exercising more influence on the education system or influencing the spread of Shiism in the country through the work of organization such as “*Pishahangan-e Imam Mahdi*” (Heralders of Imam Mahdi), which are engaged both in military training and religious activities, or through the opening of Shia schools (Akbar, 2021). As the conflict went on, and as Bashar al-Assad gradually got back control of Syria, the Saudi attempted a rapprochement with Syria, especially in the light of the Turkish involvement in the conflict (Moubayed, 2019). However, the Saudi government has again advised al-Assad against an overreliance on Iran, with Mohammad bin Salman saying that it was not in al-Assad’s interest to let the Iranian act freely (Hennigan, 2018). As it was stated before, Syria is one of the most relevant examples of how the rivalry between

Iran and Saudi Arabia can create instability in the region, with another example being the ongoing civil war in Yemen that broke out in 2014, in which the Iran-backed Houthis are facing Saudi backed forces (Council on Foreign Relations). These conflicts are generated by the fact that both Iran and Saudi Arabia perceive each other as a huge threat for their national security. Consequently, both of them are eager to intervene to prevent the expansion of their respective influence in the area. However, their intervention often leads to the exacerbation of the conflicts and their consequences. While China has been able to avoid its involvement in this type of issues, it is relevant to ask if it will be able to do so in the future. Although the economic cooperation is the main goal for China, the expansion of its role in the ME entails also an expansion of its political weight. Considering the other economic interests that China has in the ME, it is easy to see how the heightened tensions created by the Saudi-Iranian conflicts might disrupt the economic flows and the BRI development in the ME. If China wants to become a relevant player in the area, it cannot afford to abstain from intervening in future disputes. However, this might lead to a negative impact in the relationship with the two countries, especially with Saudi Arabia which, unlike Iran, has more options in its economic and political dealings. While China has always attempted to “tread lightly” in the ME, it might be forced to change its careful approach, and the impact that this change of attitude might have on its projects is less than clear.

Another relevant issue is the fact that China cooperates military both with Iran and Saudi Arabia. As it was written in the previous chapters, the two states, albeit at a different level, have enjoyed arms sales by China, and both of them held joint military exercises with the Chinese military forces. However, the same argument which was stated previously holds true in the case of arms sales. Chinese officials have declared that Chinese weapon arms sales are based on the principles of strengthening the importer, not harming world peace and non-interference in internal affairs, and China has also avoided using arms sales as a political tool (Al Saud, 2018). Arms sales have been mainly an economic concern for China, which has shown little interest in the final beneficiary's intentions. However, this fact might prove counterproductive for China in the long run. While, as Al Saud points out, this type of behavior makes China an attractive partner and also increases Chinese influence, while also giving China some economic leverage, this kind of behavior also fosters the rise of conflicts in the area. While both Iran and Saudi Arabia, especially the former, have come to rely hugely on the Chinese sales, those same sales foster the instability in the region which is produced by the clash of these two rivals. This kind of situation puts China again in a hard spot from

which it is difficult to come out. This reasoning is relevant also for the case of nuclear cooperation. As in the case of arms sales, China cooperates with both states in the field of nuclear energy. China has not only agreed with Saudi Arabia on the development of nuclear reactors, as well as other projects which could eventually lead to the development of nuclear weapons (Chaziza, 2020), but it has also sustained Iran's efforts to restore the JCPOA (ul Khaliq, 2021). While the cooperation is merely on civil use of nuclear technology, it is difficult to be sure how things will develop in the future, especially with a country like Iran, apparently so hellbent on obtaining nuclear weapons. As a matter of fact, while China probably has nothing to gain from Iran obtaining nuclear weapons, their help with the Iranian nuclear program might lead exactly in that direction. In turn such an event could precipitate the development of Saudi nuclear weapons. As a matter of fact, the Saudi have recently clearly expressed their preoccupation with the increase in nuclear activities by Iran and the current state of the JCPOA (Landay, 2021). In fact, according to Chinese sources, China and Saudi Arabia have agreed on the need to reestablish a working JCPOA, considering also the influential role that China plays in Iran (CGTN, 2021). On the other hand, although Mohammad bin Salman has declared that Saudi Arabia will get nuclear weapons only if Iran gets them first, Saudi Arabia has not declared officially that they will avoid developing such weapons (Sagba, 2020). Again, Saudi Arabia might profit from the Chinese help to develop its own weapons. Besides, if it was to go back on bin Salman's words, the Kingdom might even acquire the weapons first, using them as a looming threat to avoid Iranian actions and pushes in the region. In any case, while China perceives its nuclear agreements as a mere economic deal, it is indeed true that the looming specter of nuclear weapons creates instability in the region, which in turn creates worse conditions for the Chinese economic deals in the area, as well as for the development of its BRI plans. In the light of this issue, it is hard to say if China can maintain its policy of non-intervention, especially if such developments were to influence the various economic projects it enjoys in the Area. The threat of nuclear tensions might be what will force China to "attach some strings" to its dealings with its allies, as well as what finally pushes China towards a clearly defined political stance.

The balancing approach adopted by China in its dealings with the two countries might prove to be itself an issue. As a matter of fact, both countries would likely want to see an increase in commitment by the Chinese government, possibly at the expenses of their rival. These expectations are not only limited to the economic sphere, but also concern the political one.

In Iran, limited Chinese support has already been an issue. As a matter of fact, the Iranian government has not particularly appreciated the Chinese behavior in the face of U.S. sanctions and, while knowing that they must rely on China and follow its pace, they did not appreciate how their proposals for more intense cooperation were turned down (Garver, 2013). During the Ahmadinejad presidency, Iranian officials have also called for more commitment not only in the economic sphere and in the promotion of its own values, but also in the fields of security, for example by putting pressure on Saudi Arabia to stop its backing of terrorist groups (Ehteshami, Horesh, & Xu, 2018). Saudi Arabia has often attempted to put further pressure on Iran, for example by calling for more sanctions and restriction on Iran in response to its intervention in conflicts (Irish & Shalal, 2017), and might decide to ask for Chinese support in further pressuring Iran in the future. However, China is not willing to take a side. As Garlick and Havlová put it, China wants to avoid tension with Saudi Arabia by showing too much support for Iran, considering the huge role that the Kingdom plays as China's main oil source. On the other hand, China has an interest in continuing its dealings with Iran, as it is still a relevant economic partner, but it does so through a cautious approach which often creates discontent in Iran (Garlick & Havlová, *The Dragon Dithers*, 2020). China has consequently tried to maintain, as far as possible, a peaceful relationship between the two countries, for example by calling for a calm approach in the aftermath of a drone strike to Saudi facilities, for which either Iran or the Iran-backed Houthis were considered responsible (Elmer, 2019). All in all, Saudi Arabia seems to have accepted the behavior of China towards Iran, considering the huge reliance they have on Chinese exports of oil (Gurol & Scita, 2020). Similarly, Iran is basically left with no choice but to accept Chinese decisions, while calling for more involvement in these issues. Relations between the two countries are, apparently, improving in recent times, with the two countries holding talks with the goal of reducing the tensions between them (Al Monitor, 2021). However, despite President's Raisi's intention to improve the Iran's relationship in the ME, tensions with Saudi Arabia remain high. While China will continue its careful approach towards the conflict in the area, it might be forced to take actions sooner rather than later, considering its increasing role in the region, and the increasing stakes it holds in the ME. If, in the case of rising tensions and conflicts, China was forced to intervene, it would be faced by two choices, each one less than ideal. If China chooses to support Iran, it might push Saudi Arabia back towards the US camp. While the Kingdom will not renounce to its Chinese ties, it might turn to a less friendly approach, and it might decide to cooperate more with Western states, hindering the

development of future projects along the BRI. On the other hand, if China decided to show stronger support for Saudi Arabia, Iran would have to “bite the bullet”. However, China would likely lose support, giving strength to the Reformists. In the long run, this might mean that Chinese BRI projects might be harder to develop even in Iran, with Western firms slowly gaining more access to Iran (in particular in sanctions are even partially lifted) and breaking the Chinese control of the Iranian economy. If China does actually want to become more relevant in the ME, it is probably impossible for its government to continue this balancing act forever. It will be interesting to see how its government will behave once it is forced to take concrete actions and to choose its path.

Lastly, some brief remarks should be made regarding the religious tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have often tried to hide political tensions between and within their states through the framework of sectarian conflict. For instance, in Saudi Arabia anti-government protest in 2011, which saw the participation of both Sunni and Shia alike, were put in the framework of Iran-backed Shia protests aimed at creating chaos in the Kingdom, even hinting at an Iranian conspiracy to destabilize and divide Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed, 2017, pp. 150-152). Similarly, Iran has used sectarian identities to frame the issues it faced. For example, it affirmed that the Green Movement, which protested against the government, was backed by the Saudi (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, pp. 12-13). Besides, it has often defined, more or less directly, the opponents to its allies in Iraq and Syria as “Wahhabis” and the conflict as an indirect conflict with the Saudis (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2017, p. 162-163). From this facts, two considerations should be taken. First, while religious tensions between the two states are indeed present, one should not consider religion as the root of all evil. Often the two states use religion to mask more mundane and political issues, as well as a method to quickly rallying support for their government and increase concern among the population. Second, China will surely not intervene in issues framed along such lines, as it has no interest in and nothing to gain from intervening in the religious issues of the area. On the contrary, it would be disadvantageous for China to meddle in such confrontations. China has refrained from intervening in normal political issues, to avoid involvement in the regional and local politics. An intervention in a confrontation framed along confessional line would not only represent an unwanted weight on the shoulder of the Chinese state, but it might also drive unwanted attention to the actual Chinese behavior towards Muslims and the Chinese Muslim minorities. While, as it was argued before, the government of Saudi Arabia and Iran have avoided criticizing the Chinese government, there are some parts of the civil society,

especially in the Islamic Republic, which have no problem doing so. As long as political issues are framed along sectarian lines, China will have an advantage in keeping out from those issues, and will keep avoiding deeper involvement in the ME, using the theme of religion to justify its lack of intervention. On the other hand, if the political issues that are hidden behind a façade of religious division were treated, rightly so, as political ones, China will be forced in the long run to intervene at some point, especially if it wants to play a bigger role.

Having reviewed the main regional issues that the BRI and in general China and its projects face when interacting with Saudi Arabia and Iran, the next section will be dedicated to the different problems that might be faced at the global level.

### 5.3 Issue at the Global level

The issues that concern the BRI at the global level are mainly concerned with the role the U.S. plays in the ME, and its impact on Beijing's plans and ambitions in that area. While the relationship that Iran and Saudi Arabia have with US could not be more different, with the Kingdom historically being on the US's side and Islamic Republic being the US's nemesis in the region since the Islamic Revolution, it has nonetheless huge influence on their behavior, as well as the possibility for future cooperation with China within and outside of the BRI. Seeing and describing how the two states interact with China and the US can give some relevant insight on the future of the BRI in the two countries, as well as the cooperation with China in general.

The case of Iran is the clearest example of this situation. Since its revolution, the Islamic Republic has always been riddled with sanctions imposed by the US. In recent years during the Trump presidency, after the JCPOA was signed in 2015 leading also to an easing of sanctions, the sanctions were not only reinstated, but were made even harsher by the former US president. New sanctions were imposed year after year, peaking in 2018, and continued to be imposed until the end of the presidency (International Crisis Group, 2020). As it was stated in the previous chapter, the Chinese investments and consequently the BRI projects surged during the time in which the JCPOA was in effect and the sanctions were lifted, and consequently declined after former president Donald Trump reinstated them. This leads to the obvious conclusion that the further implementation of the BRI in Iran is strictly linked with the imposition of sanction by the US. While Chinese firms continued to operate in the



country, their commitment was incredibly reduced due to the unstable situation in Iran, as well as the stigma and unwanted attention that cooperation with Iran under the “maximum pressure” regime imposed by the US. The sanctions are caused mainly by the Iranian nuclear program and the fear of the possible development of nuclear weapons by the Islamic Republic. However, the imposition of sanction has not led to a more careful approach by Iran, which, despite the sanctions, has scaled up its nuclear program, with experts estimating that it should acquire bomb grade uranium around the time of writing of this dissertation, in November 2021, and need another 18 months or so to develop fully operable weapons (Sanger, Crowley, & Gladstone, 2021). China has different reasons that will push it to mediate in this situation. First, as the sanctions are still in place, not only China cannot bring Iran completely into the BRI orbit, fully implementing its projects, but it also fears the US retaliation on Chinese firms for their operations in Iran, as well as for the decision by Beijing not to implement the sanctions, as it affirms the freedom of Iran to develop a civilian nuclear program. Second, as in the case of the JCPOA, China can play a critical role in reinstating the former plan of 2015, or even a new one. As in 2015, the Chinese mediation can give more legitimacy to China as a great power intervening in the Area (Garlick & Havlová, *The Dragon Dithers*, 2020). For these reasons, China has backed the requests of the Islamic Republic for the reinstatement of the JCPOA, which would make China again able to develop the BRI at full force, or at least with more intensity than now, especially in the light of the 25 years agreement. Some steps in this direction have been made by the current US president Biden, who withdrew some of the sanctions imposed by his predecessor, as well as signaling its willingness to reinstate the JCPOA (Associated Press, 2021). Besides the current president is not only considering further withdrawals of sanctions, always in the hope of going back to the previous agreement (Associated Press, 2021), but has also withdrawn some sanctions which were previously imposed on the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (De Luce, 2021). Unfortunately, these openings by the U.S. government have been met with skepticism by the new conservative government in Iran, that has accused the current government of following Trump’s footsteps, as well as announcing that it will not accept the imposition of stricter regulation, but it will demand more sanction relief for a return to the previous agreement (Sanger, Crowley, & Gladstone, 2021). It is clear that China is interested in a return to the JCPOA, even more so if Iran will be granted more sanctions relief than before. However, the current situation remains uncertain. China will necessary be involved in a difficult balancing act in the future, in order not to anger its ally and at the same time show its actual

commitment to the restoration of the JCPOA. On the success of the negotiations depends also the success of the BRI in the Islamic Republic. A failure would mean that the BRI will never see its full potential accomplished in Iran, being limited not only by material conditions but also by Chinese “fear”. On the other hand, if a deal was struck, the situation will see even increasing commitment by China, and Iran might become even a flagship country for the BRI, showing how the successful collaboration with China can benefit a country. However, a last remark should be made. Garlick and Havlová (The Dragon Dithers, 2020) have pointed out that the Chinese investments in Iran drastically sank not only due to the withdrawal of the U.S. from the JCPOA, but also because, after an initial spending frenzy, Chinese firms started to invest in BRI projects more carefully. While the return to the agreement will indeed see an increase of Chinese investment, considering also the agreement signed recently, it is also highly probable that the investment will not be as massive as expected, considering also the doubts regarding the feasibility of the 25 years agreement. The possibility of future investment in Iran by Chinese firms remains highly unpredictable and should be monitored as the current situation develops.

The military cooperation between China and Iran is also another issue that could impact the Chinese projects in the country as well as its role. The military collaboration and arms exports towards Iran have been a source of tensions in the relations between the U.S. and China. For example, in 2020 the US department of state has sanctioned a Chinese company for its support to the Iranian missile program (Green & Roth, 2021). While China has limited the exports of military technology in the fear of U.S. sanctions and opposition from its other allies in the ME, it has increased its cooperation, given for example the joint military exercises reported in the previous chapter, which also saw the participation of Russia. This strong collaboration among these three countries might attract some reaction by the US, which might be rightfully worried by the increasing cooperation among some of its strongest rivals. Therefore, China should be careful in its support of Iran, as it already is considering that it has not signed a formal alliance with the Islamic Republic (Green & Roth, 2021), since increasing its military cooperation at the moment could attract sanctions and U.S. intervention that might undermine its economic gain. Besides, the issue of the development of nuclear weapons is still a relevant topic. China has no interest whatsoever in the development by Iran of nuclear weapons, at least for the time being. As it was stated previously, while Iran will need still at least around one year and a half to reach the possibility of developing nuclear weapons, if such a scenario was reached it would be devastating for the Chinese involvement in the

country. In this case, the US will surely impose almost unbearable sanctions on the country and on Chinese firms operating in Iran, with China losing a large part of the economic gains obtained by its huge presence in the Iranian economy. For this reason, China and the U.S. might collaborate on this particular issue. Both countries, albeit in their own way, have tried to push in that direction, with the U.S. lifting some sanctions and China affirming that the Iranian demands were legitimate as long as the civilian use of nuclear energy was concerned, and with both of them calling for a return to the JCPOA framework. For this reason, it is likely that some sort of agreement, whether under new or the old conditions would be established. China has more to gain by an Islamic Republic finally freed of sanctions, in which it could fully develop its BRI projects, than a nuclear armed one. The same goes for Iran, which would likely benefit more from an improved international position than another element which would cement its legacy as a rogue state, precipitating tensions in the area. Therefore, while military cooperation might continue at this level, or even increase, it is difficult to see why China should help Iran with the developing of nuclear missiles, instead of pushing for the return to the JCPOA as it is doing already.

An important issue to analyze is the China-Saudi Arabia-US triangle. As a matter of fact, while cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia has grown in intensity in the past years, the kingdom has almost always been on the U.S. side. The relationship that Saudi Arabia enjoys with the two countries is different, with the Chinese one being linked more to the economic sphere and the U.S. one being more tied to security issues. However, Saudi Arabia is a crucial partner for the U.S. in the ME not only in the security sphere. While the Kingdom is the destination of the largest military sales by the U.S., the United States are also Saudi Arabia's second largest trade partner, with the latter being also the third oil source for the States. (U.S. Department of State, 2020). However, the relationship has worsened in recent times, especially after the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi which saw the American government imposing sanction on 76 individuals involved in the murder, as well as imposing a ban on visas for all the people involved, a move not well received by the Saudi government (Dunne, 2021). Besides, these tensions are mounting during a period of time in which the government of the United States is reducing its security commitment in the ME and with Saudi Arabia. As a matter of fact, the U.S. are withdrawing its defense assets such as missiles, aircrafts and other weapons from Middle Eastern countries, especially from Saudi Arabia (Firedman, 2021), leading to a reduced commitment in the sphere which has always been the main element in the U.S.-Saudi ties. Furthermore, the U.S. has taken also other steps in

this direction, such as halting its support for Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni Civil War (Dunne, 2021), as well as discussing a bill, named the “Protection of Saudi Dissidents Act”, which passed the U.S. House with a 350-71 vote, and if passed also in the Senate would stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia for 120 days, as well as possibly leading to the closing of Saudi diplomatic offices in the US (Khalel, 2021). However, these actions by the U.S. have also been accompanied by some opening towards Saudi Arabia, with the visit to the States by MBS younger brother Khalid bin Salman, which met important members of the U.S. government such as the secretary of State Anthony Blinken, being a clear example of the attempt by the U.S. government to ease the tensions (Gardner, 2021). On the other hand, China, as it was affirmed previously in the dissertation, has mainly an economic relationship with Saudi Arabia, with the Kingdom representing the main source of oil for Beijing. This relationship has grown significantly over the years, especially through the BRI and through the coordination of the Chinese and Saudi projects like the Saudi Vision. In recent times, Chinese and Saudi diplomats have further stressed their willingness to increase their political ties, as well as showing support for each other in some political issues, with Chinese officials declaring that China saw its relationship with Saudi Arabia as a priority in the ME and Saudi Officials calling China a “truly credible strategic partner (it what might even be seen as a not so veiled criticism of the U.S.’s actions) (ul Khaliq, China says ties with Saudi Arabia a priority in its Middle East diplomacy, 2021). As the main aspect of their relationship was strengthened during the years, the security ties between the two countries grew along with it. As a matter of fact, the arms sales to the Kingdom by China saw a 386% increase in 2016-2020 in comparison to 2011-2015, especially due to the Chinese decision to avoid imposing conditions on its arms sales (Ningthoujam, 2021), with the two countries also conducting joint military exercises (Fulton, Thirty Years of Sino Saudi Relations, 2020), as it was already stated previously. It is easy to see that, while China role in relation to Saudi Arabia is growing, the role played by the U.S. is suffering and diminishing in relevance. This, however, does not mean that China is ready to take the U.S.’s place, nor that the American government is willing to let China take it. Despite the rocky development of their relationship, the U.S. represent still a relevant economic partner for Saudi Arabia, as well as still being its main security partner, even after the withdrawals. On the other hand, China has a limited involvement in the security issues of Saudi Arabia, and tends to profit from the security generated by the U.S. to conduct its economic dealings in the region. For this reason, China is not only unwilling to take a major role in the security issues of the region and in Saudi Arabia, as it currently

does not have the necessary strength to do so, but it has also no interest in quickly upscaling its military involvement in Saudi Arabia and the ME in general because it could spark a confrontation between the U.S. and China, heightening their tensions. As Gater-Smith pointed out (2018, pp. 106-109), the perception that the Chinese economic initiatives such as the creation of the AIIB as well as some of the BRI projects, coupled with its increasing military role, might lead to the US feeling threatened in its role in the region, leading to the more clashes between Beijing and Washington which, even if limited to the economic and financial spheres, will be highly damaging for both economies, considering their huge interdependence. This scenario is likely one that China would be willing to avoid. China has already a huge economic presence in Saudi Arabia, which will likely continue to grow in the future. In order to be able to upscale its military presence, China should be careful and avoid a quick intensification of its presence in the short run. If China “plays the long game”, gradually increasing its presence, maybe as the United States intensify their withdrawal of military presence in the Saudi Arabia, it might profit hugely while also avoiding some major risks. However, the Chinese government should tread carefully. In the case of rising tensions, Saudi Arabia might be put in the position to make a choice between its two allies, which for the time being, and at least in the near future, will probably see them siding with the United States. While under some harsher conditions, the U.S. could provide the kind of economic support that China is giving to Saudi Arabia, at the moment China has not the necessary capabilities and presence to play the same role that the U.S. is playing in the ME. China therefore in its approach to Saudi Arabia should reject the aggressive approach adopted during the Xi Jinping presidency and revert to the more cautious one of the Deng era, biding its time and wait for a better opportunity to further increase its presence in the Kingdom in other fields except the economic one.

Another element that was already mentioned in the first chapter is the B3W initiative launched by the Biden administration. Launched in June 2021 during the G7 meeting, the B3W shares some similarities with the BRI. It is aimed at helping Low- and Middle-income countries, with a particular focus on closing the infrastructural gap with the High-income countries. Besides, the initiative should have also a clearer, more transparent and sustainable source of funding for its projects, as well as aiming to be environmentally sustainable (FACT SHEET: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership, 2021). On the other hand, although the previously mentioned features are similar to the BRI, the B3W also focuses on other aspects, such as democratic values, workers protection or

anti-corruption standards (Statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne, 2021), while the BRI has shown not to be concerned with such issues, especially political ones. There is the possibility that, as the B3W grows, it might take away some opportunities in some countries to further develop the BRI. However, the B3W is just at the beginning, with no clear details about its scope or budget having been clearly established yet. Besides, one of the most attractive elements of the BRI is its lack of conditionalities, which a value-based initiative such as the B3W will necessarily have. While some countries might be attracted and move towards the U.S.'s side, a lot of them will still prefer the Chinese "no strings attached" approach. This might hold true even for countries such as Saudi Arabia which, while they might have the possibility to take part in the B3W, have had issues in their relationship with the U.S. regarding crucial topics such as the respect of human rights, despite their long-lived alliance. Furthermore, in cases such as the Iranian one, there is no possibility except from relying on China, so the B3W is automatically not an option, except in the case of a totally unpredictable and unexpected scenario. However, while it's still just in its initial phase, the B3W should not be underestimated by China. This new initiative has the potential to rival the BRI in scope and relevance if the U.S. act in the right way, and has the potential to stop some countries from leaning towards Beijing, and to snatch some of them from the Chinese orbit. However, it is still too early to judge how the B3W will develop and to assess if it will constitute a threat for the BRI in the future, or a viable project at all. A brief note should also be made on the initiatives by the EU to counter the rising influence of the BRI. Like the United States with the B3W initiative, the EU has also unveiled its project of infrastructural investments. The plan was announced at the time of writing of this dissertation. The initiative, named Europe's Global Gateway is aimed at moving €300 billion by 2027 for infrastructural investment in the developing world and, as the U.S.'s initiative, is a value-driven project which has its main selling point on higher transparency and higher environmental and qualitative standards (Lau, Tamma, & Posaner, 2021). At the time of writing, the initiative has been announced just few days ago, and the scope of the initiative is not yet clearly stated. It is not clear on which regions of the world it will focus, and it is unlikely that it will be deployed in Saudi Arabia, let alone Iran. However, while it will likely represent at least somewhat of a challenge for the BRI in general, the possibility that the initiative will play a role in the Middle East should not be discarded. Especially in Iran, while as it was said it remains an unlikely scenario, such an initiative would represent a huge opportunity for the reformists and their aim of strengthening the cooperation with the West. Besides, European countries and firms might

be eager to use this opportunity to invest in Iran (and also Saudi Arabia if the chance arises), considering how a company like Total was willing to invest in the Islamic Republic in the light of reduced sanctions. The influence of the Initiative in a country such as Iran could represent a “quality stamp” which would bring more investments in the country, improving its economic condition and reducing its dependence on China. However, these scenarios are only hypothetical for the time being. Even more than for the B3W initiative, it is really too early to tell what the impact of the EU initiative will be, or even if it will have an impact at all.

Lastly, the final part of this chapter is focused on the future of the BRI and its link to its creator, the current Chinese president Xi Jinping. As was stated at the very beginning of this dissertation, the BRI was born in 2013 not much time after Xi Jinping rose to power. The BRI has always been strictly tied with him, becoming the flagship initiative of its presidency, as well as a symbol of its more proactive approach in the Chinese relationship with the world. The Xi Jinping era was due to come to a halt in 2023, when the second mandate was meeting its end. However, in 2018 the two mandates limit was abolished, granting him the possibility of governing for life (McGregor, 2021). However, Xi Jinping is almost 70 years old, something which clearly casts some doubts regarding its abilities to maintain the control of the government for long. Besides, there is no clear successor nominated by Xi Jinping, increasing the possibility of instability after the end of his presidency (McGregor, 2021). Furthermore, even considering the huge support which he apparently enjoys, there are even critics and opponents to his rule, like the academic and activist Xu Zhiyong, which was arrested after calling for Xi Jinping resignation for its misconduct of such crises as the Covid pandemic (VOA, 2020). It is safe to say that, as long as Xi remains in power, the BRI, its promotion and its further expansion and development will be a critical feature in the Chinese’s government plan for the future. However, it is difficult to clearly predict what will happen in the case of a change of leadership. The most likely scenario will be one in which the successor will set the country on a path of continuity with its predecessor. In this case, the BRI will remain a stable feature in the Chinese dealings with the rest of the world, keeping the same characteristics that it currently has, with the new leader following Xi Jinping’s footsteps. However, as it was stated in the first chapter, the BRI is also loosely organized, with different organizations and different local governments each giving its own interpretation of the project. Under a new leadership it might even be subject to a change, making it a largely different project under the same name. However, another possible scenario, is that the BRI, given its status as Xi Jinping’s “brainchild”, will meet its end as the Xi Jinping presidency meets its own end. In the

case of the presence of Xi aligned successor, the projects still active under the BRI umbrella might be brought to their natural conclusions, with the initiative being rebranded or abandoned completely later. However, if a hostile successor was to take power, or simply the successor wanted to impose its own projects at the expenses of the older ones, the BRI might be abandoned completely, with China leaving its projects and initiatives, or renegotiating them under different terms and names, eliminating the link with the former presidency. This would not be impossible. As the BRI has assimilated projects that started before its birth, the same thing could be done in the future by a different leader. Lastly, if the BRI is kept in place by Xi Jinping or by its successor, its tendency to overreach might be its downturn. In the years different branches of the silk road have emerged. The BRI spans from infrastructure, to the Health Silk Road, the Internet Silk Road and so on. In its attempt to embrace every possible sphere, the BRI might risks to lose a real meaning and importance. As a matter of fact, if everything is part of the BRI and everything has a Silk Road, then nothing really is part of it. In fact, the future of the BRI seems less clear than expected. The reasons stated above help showing how the BRI, which has bewildered and enchanted the imagination of the world during these years, fostering huge debates over its goals, its reach and its scope, might last far less than expecting, its future being unclear, not only in the two countries which have been the focus of this dissertation, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also in its projects around the world.



## 6. Conclusion

The BRI is indeed a relevant phenomenon in our times. Since its announcement to the world, it has attracted huge attention, both from supporters and opponents. Often, it has been marked as a project of a dubious nature, aimed at expanding the Chinese sphere of influence at the expenses of other states, plunging them deep in debt. However, it has also proved to be a necessary source of investments for some countries which are cut out from traditional sources of funding. In the future, the BRI tries also to depict itself as a positive source of change, with its increasing discourse regarding the possibility of green development along the BRI projects, with official documents such as the “Guidance on promoting Green Belt and Road” being published, and affirming the willingness of China to follow necessary steps in improving the environmental impact of the initiative. However, a lot of doubts still persist regarding its feasibility.

In a region as relevant as the Middle East, the BRI has a crucial role to play. As a matter of fact, almost every state in the region is more or less involved with China and with the BRI. This dissertation has focused on Saudi Arabia and Iran, as the two states play a major role not only as fundamental regional powers, but also on the global stage. As a matter of fact, the increasing role of China in the region, the shifting relationship between the two states and China, the tense relationship between the Islamic Republic and the Kingdom, as well as the changing role of the United States in the Middle East, are all elements which make the analysis of Chinese involvement in these two states relevant and interesting. So far, Chinese involvement in the two countries has been mainly economical and, since Xi Jinping rose to power, driven through the framework of the BRI. Therefore, reviewing the BRI as it unfolds in the two countries consists basically in reviewing their relationship with China in general, and helps understand the role that China wants to play in the region, also considering how relevant the role of Saudi Arabia and Iran is for the Middle East in general, and how the impact of the BRI in those countries might influence, at least, the political development of the region.

As a matter of fact, the different kind relationship that the two countries have with China, considering their different characteristics, is deeply interesting to analyze. On one hand, Saudi Arabia is an actor which, despite its eagerness to cooperate with China, has more options on the table. This leads to the fact that, however unlikely a rupture between the two might be, the Chinese government needs always to act in a more careful way, as there is

always the risk, even if minimal, of alienating the Kingdom with its actions. In any case, it can be clearly affirmed that this relationship is actually between equal partners, which consider each other on the same level. Both countries deeply need each other. For example, in the oil sector, China needs the Saudi oil as much as the Kingdom need to continue exporting it to China. On the other hand, Iran has a more dependent relationship with China, which also profits from the current conditions of Iran to obtain some economic and political advantages from the Islamic Republic. Iran has almost no possibility of reacting to the Chinese decisions and put pressure on the Chinese government, which also enjoys way more space of maneuver with respect to its relationship with the Kingdom. It is easy to see that, although China has a strong need of Iranian oil, especially at the low price at which Iran is forced to sell it, Iran is dependent on Chinese help and investments, especially to avoid crumbling under the weight of international sanctions. This difference between the two countries not only shapes the Chinese policies in each country, but, as it was shown before, also shapes the BRI and its deployment both in Iran and Saudi Arabia. The further development of the BRI in the areas, considering the evolution of the two relationships, especially in the light of the future developments of such projects as the Saudi Vision and the 25 years agreement should be taken into account and could be an interesting starting point for future analysis of the BRI and of Chinese policies in the Middle East in general.

In any case, while the BRI is always present in the relationship with China, its future is still unclear. As it was stated previously, while in the near future it will be a stable presence of the aggressive Chinese diplomacy, its future is not set in stone. The BRI could still become a fundamental initiative that will be remembered in the future for its crucial role worldwide, as well as being remembered only as a brief parenthesis of the Chinese diplomatic approach, deeply intertwined with the Xi Jinping presidency as the openings of China to the world was linked to the Deng Xiaoping period, or the Cultural Revolution and the Hundred Flowers Campaign were linked with Chairman Mao. Every possibility is still open for the BRI, and, while the initiative approaches its ten-year anniversary in 2023, it is still too early to assess its impact and its legacy.

In any case, this dissertation has, hopefully, provided some insight not only on the BRI in general, through its first chapter, but also on its development in Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as their relevance for China and the BRI, and the possible issues and developments that the initiative faces in the two countries as well as at the global level.



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