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United States and China Power Transition in the Middle East:

The cases of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Islamic Republic
of Iran

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADB: Asian Development Bank

AIIB: Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

E.U: European Union

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

IMF: International Monetary Fund

INSSG: Interim Security Strategic Guidance

JCPOA: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

KSA: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

M.E: Middle East

MDB: Multilateral Development Bank

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

OBOR: One Belt One Road

OPEC: Organization Petroleum Exporting Countries

PDPA: People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan

PRC: People's Republic of China

PTT: Power Transition Theory

RCEP: Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organization

TPP: Trans-Pacific Partnership

U.K: United Kingdom

U.N: United Nations

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

U.S: United States

WB: World Bank

WMD: Weapons of Mass Destruction

WTO: World Trade Organization

ABSTRACT ENG

After the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) and the subsequent affirmation of United States and its capitalist driven economy, the world transitioned to a phase of unipolarity, in which the United States was the only hegemonic superpower. Francis Fukuyama (1992) and Chris Krauthammer (1990) perfectly grasped the *zeitgeist* of that time, praising the arrival of a “unipolar moment” and the “end of history”. Almost three decades later, this argumentation seems old and outdated. In fact, China has quickly emerged in the world economy as a superpower, with a population of over 1.4 billion people, the second world’s largest economy in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), and a growing presence, both economically and militarily, in the international arena. The core arguments of this thesis are, thus, two: first, I will analyze the geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions between China and the United States, with a particular focus on the Middle East as a possible competition ground; and secondly, I will test the applicability of the Power Transition Theory (PTT) on the current state of the U.S-China relations. The first chapter of the thesis is going to be focused on the current state of U.S-China relations, in particular during the Trump administration, with an in-depth analysis of Xi Jinping’s role as the leader of the “new” China, and the escalation of the Trade War. The second chapter of the thesis is going to focus on China’s presence in the Middle East, and specifically in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the PRC has signed Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships, the highest form of Chinese diplomatic ties. The last chapter of the thesis will focus on the future of Sino-American relations, trying to understand if China really a dissatisfied power is, and if Washington and Beijing are really in a superpower competition for the Middle East.

ABSTRACT ITA

Dopo la caduta dell'Unione Sovietica (URSS) e la successiva affermazione degli Stati Uniti e del loro modello economico basato sul capitalismo di stampo neo-liberale, il mondo è passato a una fase di unipolarismo, nella quale gli Stati Uniti erano l'unica superpotenza egemonica. Francis Fukuyama (1992) e Chris Krauthammer (1990) hanno colto perfettamente lo *zeitgeist* di quel tempo, decantando l'arrivo di un "momento unipolare" e della "fine della storia" per come l'avevamo conosciuta fino ad allora. Quasi tre decenni dopo, queste argomentazioni sembrano vecchie e superate. Infatti, la Cina è emersa rapidamente nell'economia mondiale come una superpotenza, con una popolazione di oltre 1,4 miliardi di persone, la seconda economia mondiale in termini di prodotto interno lordo (PIL), e una crescente presenza, sia economicamente che militarmente, nella scena internazionale. Per questo motivo, questa tesi si concentrerà sulle relazioni, al momento complicate, tra Stati Uniti e Cina. Gli argomenti centrali di questa tesi sono, quindi, due: in primo luogo, analizzerò le tensioni geopolitiche e geo-economiche tra Cina e Stati Uniti, con particolare attenzione al Medio Oriente come possibile terreno di competizione tra le due potenze; e in secondo luogo, testerò l'applicabilità della Teoria della Transizione del Potere (TTP) allo stato attuale delle relazioni USA-Cina. In questo senso, il primo capitolo della tesi sarà incentrato sulle relazioni tra Washington e Pechino, in particolare durante l'amministrazione Trump, con un'analisi approfondita del ruolo di Xi Jinping come leader della "nuova" Cina, e l'escalation della guerra commerciale iniziata sotto l'amministrazione Trump. Il secondo capitolo della tesi si concentrerà sulla presenza della Cina in Medio Oriente, e nello specifico nel Regno dell'Arabia Saudita e nella Repubblica Islamica dell'Iran che saranno i due casi studio presenti nella tesi, due stati dove la RPC ha firmato Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships, la più alta forma di legame diplomatico a disposizione della Cina. L'ultimo capitolo della tesi si concentrerà invece sul futuro delle relazioni sino-americane, cercando di capire se la Cina è davvero una potenza insoddisfatta con lo status quo, e se Washington e Pechino sono davvero in una competizione tra superpotenze per il controllo e per l'influenza in Medio Oriente.

INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) and the subsequent affirmation of United States and its capitalist driven economy, the world transitioned to a phase of unipolarity, in which the United States was the only hegemonic superpower. The *zeitgeist* of that time is perfectly described in Francis Fukuyama's paper *The End of History and The Last Man* (1992), in which the political scientist claimed that the victory of Western capitalism, and the diffusion of liberal democracies signaled the arrival of a post-ideological world: a new world system in which the great ideological battles between West and East were finally over. Charles Krauthammer, in a famous article published by *Foreign Affairs*, proclaimed the advent of the "unipolar moment" (Krauthammer, 1990: 24), with the U.S being considered the first-rate power and the only country with the necessary political, economic, diplomatic, and military means to play a key role in any conflict in whatever part of the world it chose to involve itself and with no immediate rivals able to overtake it (Krauthammer, 1990).

Almost three decades later, this argumentation seems old and outdated. Regional powers have emerged, and among them there is the People's Republic of China (PRC). In fact, China has quickly emerged in the world economy as a superpower, with a population of over 1.4 billion people, the second world's largest economy in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), and a growing presence, both economically and militarily, in the international arena. A one-party State guided by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which is engaged with (and has embraced) the world market in ways and to degrees the USSR never was able to. With Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia", the U.S started to acknowledge the presence of other regional powers, especially in the Asia-Pacific, shaking for a moment, the beliefs of political scientists at that time, and put to rest the claims made only 18 years prior by Krauthammer and Fukuyama.

The core arguments of this thesis are mainly two: first, I will analyze the geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions between China and the United States, with a particular focus on the Middle East as the possible next competition ground; and secondly, as I will explain below, I will test the applicability of the Power Transition Theory on the current state of the U.S-China relations. Contrarily to what was expected, the research has brought me to the conclusion that the region is not going to be the ground of a geopolitical arm wrestling between the two superpowers, because the elements considered in the analysis of the dissertation, namely engagement of the two powers in the region, military presence, and

energy and oil dependence point to the direction of natural power transition towards Beijing, at the expenses of Washington.

Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by Xi Jinping in 2013, China is in fact expanding its economic interests in the region, challenging the U.S on many levels, considering that the M.E has always been a bastion of the U.S foreign policy agenda. As William F. Wechsler (2020) observed, just two years after the announcement of the BRI, China became the biggest global importer of crude oil, with the Middle East supplying almost half of its imports. Moreover, China has financed \$123 billion worth of investments and construction contracts from 2013 onward, becoming the largest investor in the region. (Wechsler, 2020).

Obama's choice to focus on Asia and to distance his administration from the Middle East – reinforced by Trump's "America First" slogan – has seen the U.S pull away from the Middle East and remaining active in the region only for security matters. The U.S-backed security focus in the region has been proving to be ideal for China, as it has enabled Beijing to focus solely on economic integration, while the U.S provides the security umbrella necessary for the Chinese investments to grow (Lyll, 2019). Moreover, the increased Chinese leadership in the region is serving the interests of several states to embrace the so-called "China Model" of development instead of the "Washington Consensus" that has defined foreign (mainly American) economic presence in the region (Lyll, 2019).

In order to understand this power struggle and the importance of its developments for the future U.S-China relations, this thesis will consider the *Power Transition Theory* as the theoretical framework of the dissertation. First theorized by AFK Organski in 1958 in his book *World Politics*, he predicted the potential rise of China and its impact on the international security order. Very few scholars at that time paid attention to this theory, but at the turn of the 21st century and the rapid growth of China, this theory saw a revival. The basic proposition of PTT is that war is most likely when the "relative power of two competing nations approaches parity" (Efird, Kugler, Genna, 2003: 294). However, despite the words "parity" and "overtaking" being key concepts of PTT, it is the extent of (dis)satisfaction of the emerging power that defines the inclination towards war of a given transition (Lim, 2015). The purpose of this choice is to understand if the theory is able (or not) to explain the Sino-American power struggle in the Middle East and, if not, whether other theories of International Relations (IR), namely *New Bipolar Order*, *Geoeconomic Spheres of Influence* or *Multipolarism*, could explain this struggle better.

The first chapter of the thesis is going to be focused on the current state of U.S-China relations, in particular during the Trump administration, with an in-depth analysis of Xi Jinping's role as the leader of the "new" China, and the escalation of the Trade War.

On the American side, under the Trump administration, the U.S returned to trade protectionism, after being the leader of multilateral globalization for decades. However, in order to "Make America Great Again" (former) President Trump assessed that protectionism was needed until the U.S re-negotiated more favorable deals with other countries on trade policies (Sheng, H. Zhao, J. Zhao, 2019). Having China the largest trade surplus with the U.S, Beijing was therefore, the first target of Trump's policy.

On the Chinese side, under Xi's leadership, China seems to have acquired new force. Lee Kuan Yew, one of the greatest experts of Asia, has described Xi as "[...] a person with enormous emotional stability who does not allow his personal misfortunes or sufferings to affect his judgment. In a word, [...] impressive" (Allison, 2015, no pagination). After being nominated leader of the Communist Party, Xi declared his "China Dream", that is "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Callahan, 2014, p. 143). We can, therefore, consider part of his masterplan the developments of two important geoeconomic tools: the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the One Belt One Road (OBOR) or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite these tools being announced as purely favoring multilateralism and mutual development, from an IR perspective, these initiatives have revealed a more complex diplomatic strategy, namely soft power, to assert Chinese influence globally.

The second chapter of the thesis is going to focus on China's presence in the Middle East. In this second chapter, I will try to analyze and explore China's interests in the region and how Beijing is threatening the "American Century" in the Middle East. Although over time U.S priorities in the Middle East have changed, three areas have systematically been a top priority in the U.S agenda, also under the Trump administration: Israel's security, close alliance with Saudi Arabia and control over the Persian Gulf (Andersen, 2019). While the U.S continues to be Saudi Arabia's most important security partner, Riyadh is also becoming China's biggest source of imported oil and an increasingly important economic partner, signing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Beijing in 2019 (Scobell & Nader, 2016). In addition, a growing number of countries in the Middle East are looking towards Beijing for trade, investments, diplomatic consultations, and even security cooperation. Moreover, China has managed to maintain good relations with several actors in the region, namely Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, despite their lingering

hostilities (Scobell & Nader, 2016). Although China doesn't seem willing or able to engage more in the delicate affairs of the region and play a key role in the security of the Middle East, thanks to the OBOR it is becoming a key partner of many Gulf States. For practical reasons, the thesis will analyze in depth China's presence and investments in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Not only these two countries are the main competitors in the Gulf region, but also their relationships with Washington are very different: Saudi Arabia, as aforementioned, is a close ally of the US while Iran has seen its relationship with the Americans deteriorate to a breaking point under Trump administration. As a consequence, also their relationships with China and their willingness to accept its increasing presence in their territory is going to be different as well. After analyzing how China and Saudi Arabia went from marginal partners to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and Chinese heavy investments in Iran, even after the multiple U.S rounds of sanctions, I will try to understand if the Middle East could be considered the new arena of U.S-China competition. Will China be willing to engage more in the regional affairs of the Middle East and shift the balance of power away from the U.S? How is Washington's perception in the region going to change over time, if Beijing continues (or increases) its presence in the region? Will the longstanding U.S-Saudi partnership withstand? These are just few of the research questions that I will try to answer and analyze.

The last chapter of the thesis will focus on the future of Sino-American relations. Is a "hot" war avoidable between the two superpowers? Going back to the Power Transition Theory, I will try to understand the degree of (dis)satisfaction of China with the existent *status quo* and if war between the two superpowers is inevitable. Graham Allison, in his famous book *Destined for War. Can America and China escape the Thucydides' Trap* (2017), through a detailed analysis of similar historical events, comes to the conclusion that a direct armed confrontation between the two countries might be avoided, for many reasons. From what we can gather, it seems that Beijing does not have a grand strategy to go against the U.S in the Middle East yet. The main reason for this is because, for the time being, Beijing does not desire a direct confrontation with the U.S (Scobell & Nader, 2016). However, it is noteworthy, in this regard, to take into account also the Chinese culture. In fact, as Lee Kuan Yew has observed, China is in no rush to become the first superpower, playing, instead, the long game to enable its "peaceful rise" (Allison, Blackwill and Wyne, 2012). The Chinese civilization sees itself as a thousand-year-old civilization that has been for the majority of that time the world's most powerful nation. In fact, considering this large timeframe, it should be noted that only in the past two

centuries has the West surpassed China (Allison, Blackwill and Wyne, 2012). However, many especially in the West, see a worryingly resemblance in the narratives between the U.S and China today and those of the U.S against the USSR during the Cold War (Rachman, 2020). Trump's escalation of the Trade War, the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing competition in the Middle East, and last but not least, the growing threat to Taiwan's security are some of the elements that suggest that a new cold war might be ahead of us. Having seen the different opinions of scholars concerning this topic, I will argue that a new cold war is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER ONE

U.S-CHINA RELATIONS: A CLASH OF GLOBALIZATIONS

In the last few years, the escalating confrontation between the United States and China has been worrying many scholars and journalists (Rachman, 2020; Luce, 2019; Lyne, 2020). Especially since the election of (former) President Donald J. Trump, the Sino-American relations have been at their lowest point. After noting that ties between the United States and China used to rest on the confidence that they were in a win-win relationship, but the trade war has highlighted that the U.S-China rivalry could, in the decades ahead, culminate in a *Second Cold War*, something that is unacceptable in American view. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the Cold War's end signified the "end of history" in Fukuyama's words: *Pax Americana* culminated in the unipolar era and the U.S self-proclamation as the *indispensable nation* (Albright, 1998). Is a Second Cold War between the United States and China merely a narration made by International Relations scholars that see power struggles and Cold Wars happening in every corner of the globe or is it a concrete and legitimate risk that we will face in the foreseeable future?

In this first chapter, the thesis will firstly provide a theoretical framework to help us navigate through the U.S.-China power struggle and to understand if China is planning on waging a hegemonic war against the U.S or vice versa. I will be analyzing the Power Transition Theory (PTT) and assessing its arguments and limits regarding the topic of this thesis, highlighting how – for the time being – China is not to be perceived as an existential threat to the U.S and the U.S-led international order. Then, I will analyze the current state of U.S.-China relations under Trump administration and Xi Jinping's leadership, with an assessment of the Trade War and the Cold War-like rhetoric adopted by the Trump administration.

Lastly, through an analysis of Xi's "China Dream", the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as key soft power tools, I will try to make a point of Beijing's diplomatic and economic goals, and if these are perceived by the U.S as worryingly challenging Washington's interests.

1.1 Power Transition Theory: arguments and limits of the theory in addressing Sino-American power struggle

Power Transition Theory (PTT), emerged as a theory within the framework of Realism, was first theorized, and put forward by A.F.K Organski in 1958 in his book *World Politics* in which he predicted the potential rise of China and its impact on the international security order. At that time, very few scholars paid attention to this theory, but at the turn of the 21st century and the incredible growth of China, this theory saw a revival. Although Organski was the first theorizer of PTT, other scholars such as Douglas Lemke, Woosang Kim, Jack Levy, Richard N. Lebow, Benjamin Valentino have made important contributions to this theory, making it one of the most used theoretical frameworks of the current U.S.-China power struggle. The core claim of this theory is that the international system is viewed as inherently hierarchical, while the main realist assumption claims that the international system is inextricably anarchical. This does not mean that the presence of a hierarchy eliminates the possibility of an anarchical international order. In the realist tradition, being the system a self-help one, the strong will always prevail over the weak, while PTT vouches for hierarchy as the shape of the world system. At the top of this pyramid-shaped world order there is the dominant power, which creates and sets the rules of the game – the *status quo* (Lim, 2015; Rauch, 2018). It is in the interests of the dominant power to spread satisfaction regarding the status quo because the less turmoil and issues in the international system, the easier it is for the dominant power to reap the majority of the benefits (Lim, 2015). Beneath the dominant power, there are the great powers, middle powers, small powers, and last dependencies.

New powers rise from time to time, and a *power transition* happens when an emerging challenger approaches, or surpasses, the existing dominant power in terms of specific power capabilities needed to maintain the global order (Rapkin & Thompson, 2003). Although power transitions do not always culminate in wars, they can represent dangerous times, especially when a dominant power is challenged by a *dissatisfied* ascending power (Lebow & Valentino, 2009; Rapkin & Thompson, 2003; Lim, 2015). The degree of dissatisfaction of a State derives from the awareness that the top tier power and its allies benefit, above all, from the international order, norms, and institutions (Lemke & Tammen, 2003).

As several PTT scholars argue, the probability of war between the challenger and the dominant power is the greatest when the relative capabilities of the two are characterized by parity – namely when the challenger is able to acquire the equivalent of 80% of the

dominant nation's power (Rapkin & Thompson 2003; Lim, 2014). However, despite *parity* and *overtaking* being important elements in this analysis, Organski and Kugler (1981) argue that they are not sufficient conditions for a large-scale war to occur. In fact, the high disparity between the dominant power and the potential challenger constitutes a favorable condition for peace (Organski, 1981). According to Organski (1981) the dominant power, being much stronger, does not need to wage war to achieve its goal and, in the same way, the emerging power, being much weaker, would act irrationally if it tried to fight for its own goals.

All in all, PTT is a helpful predictor of interstate wars among great powers and minor powers, providing also important arguments about international cooperation and integration (Tammen, et al., 2011). On this regard, Lemke et al., (2017) argue that the consequences that lead to conflict and those that lead to cooperation have a common root. Contrary to realism that accounts only for major conflicts and neoliberalism that separates conflict from integration, PTT accounts for cooperation and war across global and regional hierarchies. The interaction between conflict and integration can be merged together because PTT assumes that, while anarchy might still endure, it can evolve into cooperation as rules and norms of the status quo shift from conflict-prone to integration-prone type of relation. For this reason, satisfaction is a key element in the analysis of a power transition. Satisfaction, in fact, leads to cooperation, which in turn promotes integration. This condition makes the role of the satisfied dominant state pivotal in the peace-building process (Lemke et. Al., 2017).

PTT's analysis of power conceived as the interaction between population, economic output, and political performance, has helped to foresee that China would overtake the U.S. in Asia (and maybe globally) and replace the West as the center of global politics in the 21st century (Tammen, at al., 2011).

1.2. Assessment of China's (dis)satisfaction with the status quo

After having laid down the basic principles of the Power Transition Theory, I will try to understand if China is a dissatisfied power, willing therefore, to overthrow the United States-led world order or, on the contrary, if Beijing is a so-called *status quo power* with no interests in overtaking or revising the international world order. About this topic, there are numerous scholarly and academic contributions, such as those of Serafettin Yilmazand and Wang Xiangyu (2020), Yves-Heng Lim (2014), Douglas Lemke and Ronald L. Tammen, (2010) etc.

Already in 1958, A.F.K Organski, despite the world being in the middle of the U.S.-USSR Cold War, wrote that China's rise as the most powerful nation was inevitable. What concerned Organski was rather how long would have taken China to achieve this position. Tammen et al., (2011) argue that the power transition which is underway between China and the U.S. is to be considered a critical one, because it is the first time that a less productive society will reach and maybe overtake a leading developed one.

Lim (2015), for example, argues that the exceptional growth of China's military expenditures, the consolidation of the "China Model"¹, and Beijing's attitude towards international institutions, suggest that China is a dissatisfied State. Moreover, Lim observes an "obvious Cold War, zero-sum logic at work in China's approach to its relations with the United States in East Asia [...]" (Lim, 2015:297). Rachman (2020) too sees the U.S.-China power transition escalating towards a new "cold war". The U.S. is turning to its allies to cut tech ties with China, as the Huawei and TikTok cases have demonstrated. Moreover, the construction of military bases in the much-contested South China Sea by Beijing has been perceived by Washington as a direct challenge to the U.S. power in the region. Of course, China dismisses this Cold War-rhetoric, asserting that it stems from America's refusal to accept a multipolar world order, in which the U.S is not at the center (Rachman, 2020).

However, after a careful analysis of the available literature on this topic, it has emerged that the majority of scholars do not see this power transition escalating to a "New Cold War" between the two superpowers – for the time being. Among the different types of strategic risings that a challenger state might adopt – supportive strategy, predatory strategy, and mixed strategy – according to Joshua Shiffrin (2018) China's rise is a mixed one. Although Beijing seems to have embarked an assertive behavior regarding territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific, it is worth to note that these have mostly involved territories that the Chinese government has long claimed (Shiffrin, 2018).

¹ Also known as "Beijing Consensus" – as provocatively coined in 2004 by economist Joshua Cooper Ramo – the "China Model" is a blend of national control and ownership of resources and economic activities dominated by private entrepreneurs. A state-led economic and political system that leaves room for capitalistic elements.

More on this topic in:

Turin, D.R (2010) The Beijing Consensus: China's Alternative Development Model, *Inquiries Journal*, 2 (1), 1-2, DOI: <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/134/the-beijing-consensus-chinas-alternative-development-model>

Johnston, A., Trautwein, C. (2019) What is the China Model? Understanding the Country's State-Led Economic Model, *Frontline*, available from <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/china-trade-war-trump-tariff/>

Lebow and Valentino (2009) argue that Chinese military expenditures, despite increasing sensibly every year, have remained below those of the U.S. Similarly, Kastner and Saunders (2012), through their original analysis of Chinese leadership travels as indicators of foreign policy priorities, have observed that China is indeed a *status quo power* because of Beijing's efforts to maintain good relations both with its neighboring countries, Western democracies, and U.S. allies. In fact, the Sino-American strategic competition, although not to be underestimated for its capacity and dangers, lacks the three elements that were instead typical of the U.S.-Soviet Union bipolar confrontation: first, the two superpowers are not involved in an ideological struggle (capitalism vs communism); second, it would be impossible in today's highly globalized society to divide the world in two non-communicating economic blocs; third, Washington and Beijing are not leading different and opposing alliance systems, as it was the case with the North Atlantic Treaty vs. the Warsaw Pact (Christensen, 2021). Despite the Trump administration – from 2017 onward – and the Biden administration now having framed Beijing as a threat to the U.S. security (National Security Strategy, 2017; Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, 2021), most of Washington's allies do not perceive China as such. For example, taking into consideration the European Union (EU) which is U.S.' most important trading partner (European Commission, 2020), recent data provided by the European Commission (2021) illustrate how China is the EU's second-biggest trading partner behind the United States, and the EU is China's biggest trading partner. Moreover, as a State that trades with capitalist powers, China is highly dependent on the well-functioning and stability of the international system and, in order for trade to work properly, it needs rules to be respected by the whole international community (Lieven, 2020).

It is important to take into consideration that power transitions can represent also peaceful times in international relations. An important case in point, for example, is the peaceful transition between the United States and United Kingdom during the late XIX and early XX century. The two States did not engage in a hegemonic war but resolved their differences through negotiations to forge a strategic partnership that is still in action today (Qiu, 2013; Allison, 2018). Nevertheless, thanks to the important contribution of Graham Allison on this topic, we have today a further interpretation of what the relationship between these two superpowers is going to be shaped. In his book *Destined for War*

(2018), Allison introduces the Thucydides' Trap security dilemma ²concept when talking about the U.S.-China confrontation. In fact, although the U.S and the U.K power transition did not end in a hegemonic war, Allison (2018) argues that out of sixteen cases in history, in which a challenger threatened a dominant power, twelve of them led to hegemonic wars. These data do not bode well for the future. Plus, both Xi Jinping and Donald Trump's rhetoric is/was focused on making their countries great again. However, if China is not able to moderate its ambitions or if Washington is not able to accept China's leadership in the Asia-Pacific, a Trade War, a cyber-attack, or a maritime accident can be enough of a spark to start a major conflict. Thus, given the importance of this contribution to the literature on the Sino-American confrontation and the immediate success that this interpretation has had, this thesis will take into account the security dilemma factor during a power transition like the one studied in this paper.

In substance, it is important for the U.S. to not look at its power confrontation with China with the same lens as it did against the USSR. China, although being a Communist Party-led country, is engaged in the capitalist system in ways and to degrees the USSR never was able to. For the U.S. to successfully compete with China, Lieven (2020) argues that what is necessary are domestic reforms. Robert Hormats (2020) has suggested, in an article published in Barron's Magazine, eight ways for the U.S to better compete with China through domestic policy reforms. In this article, Hormats suggests that it is indispensable for the U.S to:

1. strengthen the U.S. domestic market and improve the country's competitiveness: China is America's strongest competitor especially in the technological sector and infrastructural one. For this reason, the U.S should focus on this by taking advantage of experts and providing greater government support to advanced research and development and to big infrastructure plans to compete with those of Beijing;
2. develop a long-term China strategy: Hormats suggests that the Trump administration – and future administrations – should go back to the strategic approach adopted by Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon in the 1970s. It is important for the U.S to identify not only its own international goals, but

² The Thucydides' Trap is a concept popularized by Graham Allison in his book *Destined for War*. He was inspired by the book *History of the Peloponnesian War*, in which Thucydides wrote that "it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable". Allison defines this trap as the phenomenon that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace the dominant one, making war inevitable.

understand those of China and whether these goals may or may not clash with those of Washington;

3. using 5G wireless network technology for advancing U.S' competitiveness: instead of waging war to Huawei, the U.S should focus on improving technology based in the cloud, software and silicon that will make Beijing's first generation 5G network equipment less prominent;
4. strengthen U.S-allies' relationships on China-related issues;
5. restore collective trade, investment, technology and economic talks with former-TPP partners: by cooperating with the countries that have joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (the new TPP) would signal that Washington is interested to play a major economic and trade role in the Pacific again;
6. restructure the U.S.-China strategic and economic dialogue: under Obama and Trump administrations dialogues with China were too bureaucratic and not successful in convincing China to change its policies in key areas. Talks with China need to identify two or three high-priority disagreements that could be resolved or minimized in the medium term;
7. cooperation on Covid-19 and broader health threats;
8. not to rush into a summit: before organizing an international summit, the two parties should focus on bettering their bilateral relationship on key areas on which there are still numerous misunderstandings.

From what we could gather after the analysis of this section is that China is not completely dissatisfied with the status quo, considering also that it was thanks to this world order that Beijing emerged as a superpower.

In the next section I will assess the Sino-American relations under the Trump administration and the Trade War.

1.3 An assessment of the Trump administration and the current state of the Sino-American Trade War.

During the presidential campaign of 2016, Donald J. Trump, the Republican nominee frontrunner and later 45th President of the United States, accused China of “raping the U.S.” (The Telegraph, 2016) with unfair trade policies, which he perceived as the “greatest theft in the history of the world” (The Telegraph, 2016). On that occasion, Mr Trump promised to reduce the large trade deficit with China, based, according to him, on

unfair economic and trading policies, mandatory technology transfer by U.S firms to Chinese ones, difficulties for American companies to access the market in China, currency manipulation, and negligent labor and environmental standards (BBC, 2016).

Fast forward to two years later, in 2018, President Trump kept his promises, and started the Trade War with China. On July 6, 2018, the U.S. places a 25% tariff on USD 34 billion of imports from China, starting a long series of mutual tariff-rounds between 2018 and 2019 (South China Morning Post, 2020). However, after a year of escalating economic and diplomatic relations, in January 2020 the U.S and China signed the *Economic and Trade Agreement Between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China: Phase One*, that entered into force on February 14, 2020. This deal encompasses a series of commitments, such as the pledge by China to purchase an extra USD 200 billion worth of U.S. products – considering 2017 as baseline – for a two-year period, namely from January 2020 to December 2021. The purchase covered four sectors: manufactured goods, services, agricultural products, and energy (Bisio et al., 2020).

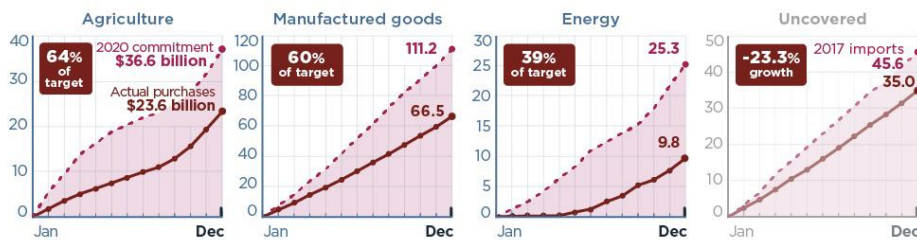
Through 2020, China's total imports for U.S goods were \$99.9 billion, compared to the commitment of \$173.1 billion, and U.S exports to China amounted to \$94.0 billion compared to the commitment of \$159.0 billion (US Census data elaborated by Bown, 2021). Below, a useful chart by the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE) provided by Chris Bown (2021) shows China's purchases of U.S goods in 2020, illustrating both the overall purchases in 2020 and the four sectors contained in the agreement.

US exports and China's imports in 2020 of all goods covered by the phase one deal

a. US exports and China's imports of all covered goods in 2020, billions USD



b. China's imports by product type, billions USD



c. US exports by product type, billions USD



#PIIECharts

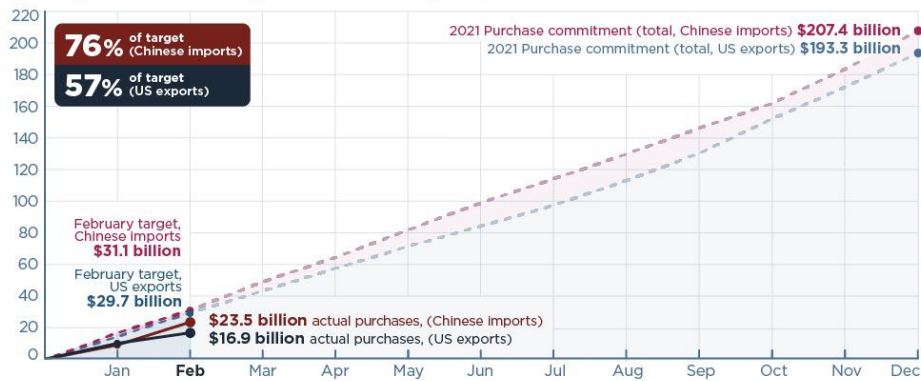
Learn more at [piie.com/research/piie-charts](https://www.piie.com/research/piie-charts)

Figure 1: US-China phase one tracker: China's purchase of US goods in 2020 (Bown, 2021)

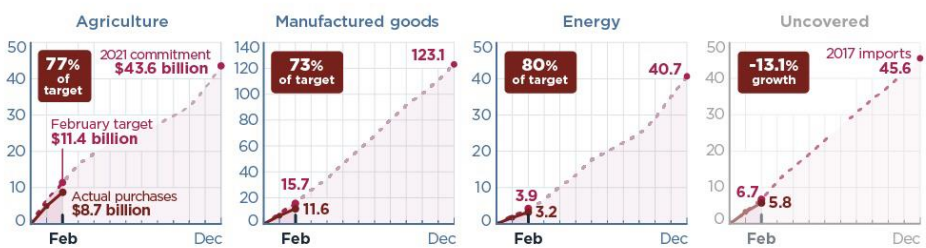
Considering, on the other hand, available data until February 2021, China's total imports from the U.S were \$23.5 billion compared to the target of \$31.1 billion. Over the same period, U.S exports to China were \$16.9 billion compared to the goal of \$29.7 billion (US Census data elaborated by Bown, 2021). Below, a useful chart illustrates US-China overall import/export and the four sectors comprised in the agreement.

US exports and China's imports of all goods covered by the phase one deal as of February 2021

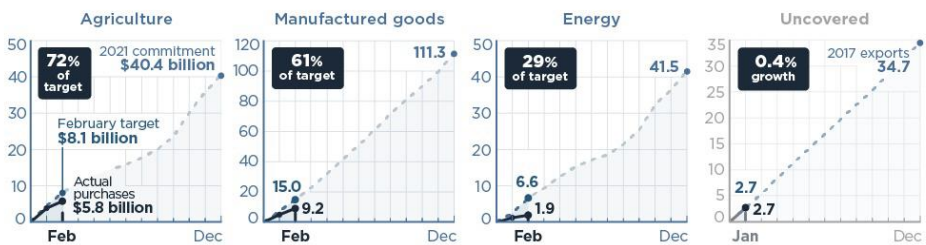
a. US exports and China's imports of all covered goods, billions USD



b. China's imports by product type, billions USD



c. US exports by product type, billions USD



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Figure 2: US-China phase one tracker: China's purchase of US goods in 2020 (Bown, 2021)

When the Phase One Deal was signed by the two parties in 2020, Mr. Trump insisted that negotiations for the Phase Two should have started immediately, to address issues like Chinese government subsidies to public and private firms, that were not discussed in the first deal (South China Morning Post, 2020). However, the rapid spread of Coronavirus outbreak from February 2020 postponed the negotiations.

During the signing ceremony, Trump self-proclaimed this deal as a historical one, a deal that would have led to fairer reciprocal trade relations with China. However, analyzing the data served by the two charts above, this agreement did little to achieve the set goals. Furthermore, during the Trump administration, the U.S total trade deficit with China – which was one of the main concerns of Mr. Trump – hit new records, reaching a total level of \$71.1 billion in February 2021.

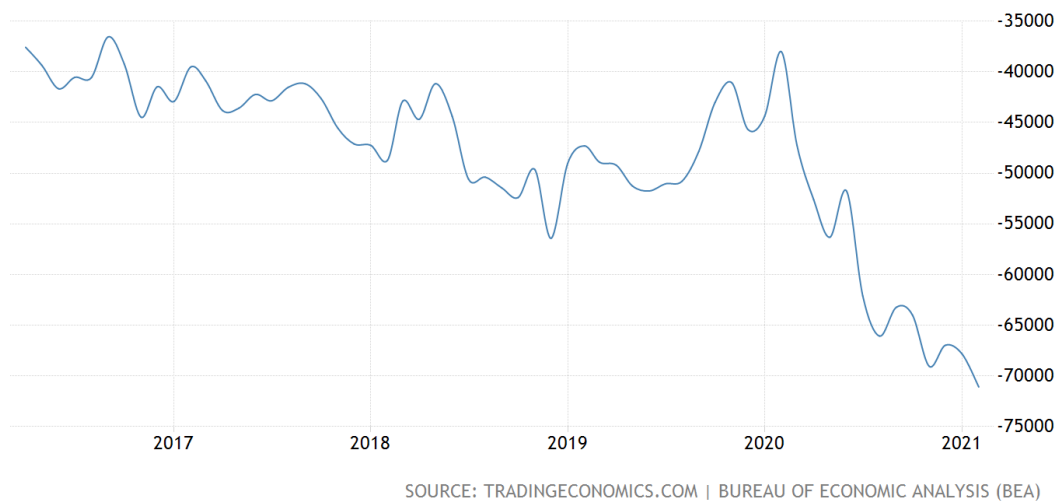


Figure 3: United States Bureau of Economic Analysis – BEA

With the election of Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States, and after four years of Trump’s presidency, the US-China Trade War seems to be still in place (Hsu, 2021). In fact, the Biden administration has not lifted the tariffs imposed by Mr Trump yet, planning to lean on and employ America’s alliances to build and develop a more predictable trade strategy vis-à-vis China (Disis, 2021).

Biden has also inherited an escalating tension concerning the technological sector: by targeting major Chinese companies, such as Huawei and TikTok, during the last weeks of his presidency, when Mr Trump imposed harsh penalties on these Chinese champions, it will be difficult for the new President to reset relations (Disis, 2021). However, from what the international community could gather from the first months of Biden’s presidency, it is not in the immediate plans of the President-elect to ease the confrontational relations between the two superpowers. In fact, the first face-to-face meeting between the two delegations in Alaska confirmed that harsh disagreements between U.S and China will be present also throughout Biden’s administration.

Following what the basic economic principles have taught us, trade is not to be perceived as a “zero-sum game”, but a “positive-sum game”: according to David Ricardo, by

allowing countries to produce the goods on which they have a comparative advantage, free trade is supposed to be beneficial for everyone involved. It seems therefore senseless that the world's two largest economies are currently engaged in a trade war, which has hurt not only their economies, but also those of other countries, given the world's reliance on the global chain of production. It is possible that the U.S. is worried – or as Allison (2018) puts it, afraid – about its declining hegemony, and China's rapid rise as a challenger is at the base of the U.S.-launched trade war with China (Kim, 2018).

Observing, on the other hand, how China is responding to this situation, Ryan Hass (2021) argues that Xi Jinping and his entourage think that “time and momentum are on China's side in its quest to move closer to the center of the world stage” (Hass, 2021). To overcome the obstacles that stand between China and its goals, China is pursuing three medium-term strategies: one, maintaining a hostile-free environment with external actors to focus on internal priorities; second, decrease the dependence on Washington while increasing the world's dependence on China; and third, growing the scope of Chinese influence abroad (Hass, 2021).

In other words, to compete with China, the U.S – especially under Trump administration – needed to abandon the idea of “America First”, fortunately dismissed by President Joe Biden. Under Trump's Presidency, rather than developing a deeper network of partners and allies in the Asia-Pacific region, the U.S focused on the Trade War and the return of supply chains to the U.S (Stangarone, 2020). In this framework, trade policies are increasingly going to be important. In fact, while the U.S was the dominant trading partner of most of the world, after the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, China has replaced the U.S as the dominant trading partner for most countries. In the chart below, provided by Alyssa Leng and Roland Rajah (2019), it is illustrated that, as of 2018, Beijing surpassed the U.S as the key trading partner of at least two-thirds of world's countries:

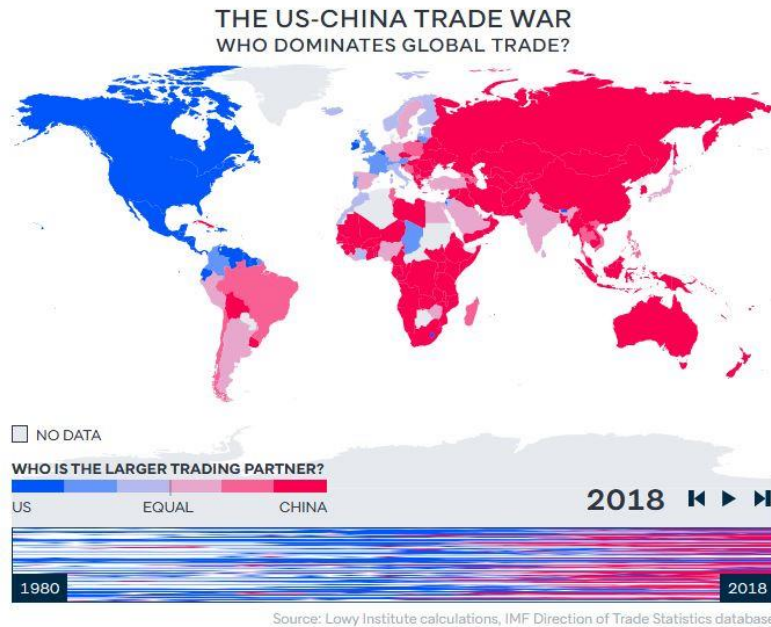


Figure 4: Leng & Rajah (2019) Who is the Larger Trading Partner?, The Interpreter

Only a U.S commitment to the open trading system and to the restoration of good relationships with its partners will allow the U.S to play an important role in addressing China’s challenges to the global trading system (Stangarone, 2020).

In addition, in November 2020 China succeeded in the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Promoted by Beijing, RCEP includes both Chinese close partners such as Cambodia but also countries reluctant towards Beijing, like Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. Broadly speaking, RCEP created the world’s most populous trading area, by bringing together 15 of the biggest economies in the world, accounting for 30% of world’s total GDP. Elvire Fabry (2020) argues that this partnership is important for one main reason: it marks the end of U.S leadership for free market, and the barycenter for trade-led growth is shifting in Asia. The goals of this agreement are gradual abolition of customs duties, improvements of the protection of personal data for e-commerce, facilitation of regional trade integration in the manufacturing sector, and promotion of trade within the region (Fabry, 2020).

Below, the graph illustrates in broad terms, how big the RCEP, comparing it to the U.S-Mexico and Canada agreement and the European Economic Area.

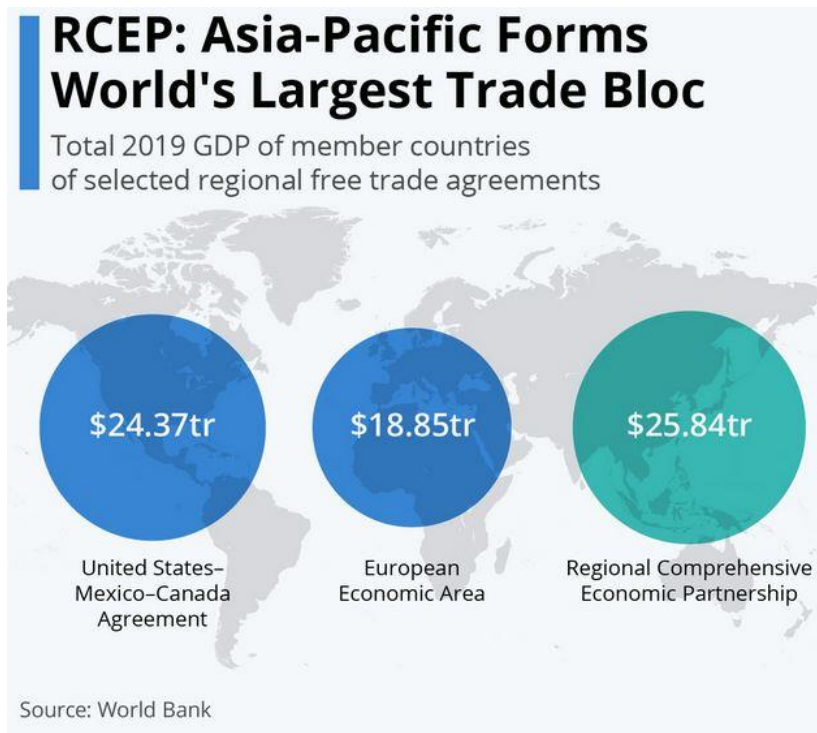


Figure 5: Richter (2020) RCEP: Asia-Pacific Forms World's Largest Trade Bloc, Statista

Considering the Power Transition Theory, the three most recent examples of China's challenges to the U.S are the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or One Belt One Road (OBOR), the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investments Bank (AIIB), and Xi Jinping's plan for "Made in China 2025" (Kim, 2019). Moreover, it is noteworthy that two out of these three projects are playing a key role in extending Chinese influence in the Middle East, a long-time bastion of U.S foreign policy agenda. Before analyzing China's growing presence in the Middle East, and what this means for the U.S (Chapter 2), I will briefly illustrate the BRI project and the AIIB, both important and key soft power tools used by China to impose itself in the international stage.

1.3.1 The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – One Belt One Road (OBOR)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – or else referred to as One Belt One Road (OBOR) – has been described as one of the most ambitious projects signed by China (Flint & Zhu, 2018). The project was born in late 2013, nearly a year after Xi Jinping's ascension as the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In fact, on a visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013 – happening at the same time as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – Xi announced his willingness to build a new-era "Silk Road", comprising of the traditional land Silk Road and a maritime one, that would connect China with its western

neighbors (Summers, 2018). For centuries, the Silk Road had facilitated trade and cultural exchange across Eurasia, thus this announcement had a great symbolic meaning because it also revealed that the new leadership was focused, now more than ever, on China's relations with its neighbors (Summers, 2018). The BRI's main goals are to foster trade and connectivity amongst China, Central and South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. This will be accomplished by promoting BRI's five main goals: policy coordination, transport connectivity, trade facilitation, currency convertibility, and people-to-people exchanges (Hughes et al., 2020).

The two projects of the land and maritime Silk Roads are detailed in the *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt And 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* (hereinafter "Vision and Action") promoted by the State Council, in which Chinese policy plans are explained. The preface of this document focuses on the historical importance of the Silk Road for trade and cultural exchanges in Eurasia, a project that has symbolized "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit" for thousands of years (Vision and Action, 2015).

The first section of the document (Background) acknowledges the difficult times in which the world finds itself: between the financial crisis and the world's slowness to recover from it, uneven redistribution of wealth and uneven development between regions of the world, the BRI is presented as a sort of cure to these problems: in fact, the Initiative:

"[...] is designed to uphold the global free trade regime and the open world economy in the spirit of open regional cooperation. It is aimed at promoting orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets; encouraging the countries along the Belt and Road to achieve economic policy coordination and carry out broader and more in-depth regional cooperation of higher standards; and jointly creating an open, inclusive, and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all" (Vision and Action, 2015: no pagination).

The first section concludes with China's willingness to commit to this project and to accept more responsibilities and obligations towards the goals.

The following sections of the Vision and Action paper are dedicated to further detail the BRI project, which is in line, as Section II illustrates, with the UN Charter and respects the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence". By including the five principles in the

official document of the BRI, China has a twofold aim: first, it is trying to demonstrate to its neighbors with which it has territorial disputes that the establishment of economic relations between them and Beijing will overcome their territorial and ideological disagreements; second, it is trying to send a message to the international community, saying that its rise has not the goal of disrupting the international order like the USSR did after World War II, and that China doesn't plan to export its Communism abroad (Sahakyan, 2020).

The major focus of this project is the infrastructure connectivity between Asia and Europe. The BRI envisions a wide network of highways, high-speed railways, pipelines, and fiber optic networks across Eurasia (Habova, 2015). The realization of this grand strategy will on one hand, strengthen China's economic integration with its Western neighbors, and, on the other hand, provide Beijing with a platform to foster its political influence westwards, in the heart of Eurasia (Habova, 2015).

The real motives of the BRI are today a great source of academic and political research, because of how much Beijing seems invested in the project. As Summers (2018) argues, nowhere in the Vision and Action document can we find indications that this project is driven by geopolitical/geoeconomic interests. He concludes in fact that the BRI economic and development goals far outweigh geopolitical ones. Zhexin (2018) and Sahakyan (2020), on the contrary, argue that BRI carries with it geopolitical goals, since the project has the purpose to mitigate tensions and enhance mutual trust between the neighbors, so as to ensure a peaceful environment for China's development. In fact, through investments and mutually beneficial trade agreements, Beijing is creating a stable and safe environment around its borders, strengthening thus, China's own security. With this Initiative China hopes that closer economic ties and people-to-people connection might help to resolve hostility and encourage security cooperation (Zhexin, 2018). Surely, Beijing's eventual goal is to fulfill its "China Dream." However, in Zhexin's opinion (2018), this is not to be perceived as a hegemonic dream, but a Confucian ambition, in which a peaceful, consultative, and mutually beneficial approach toward building a harmonious world are paramount.

Nevertheless, in Chapter 2, I will analyze how the Belt and Road Initiative is playing a key role in the Middle East, creating a real challenge to the U.S as the "exceptional" power in the region.

1.3.2 The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was established in 2016 as a sort of reflection of China’s soft power approach to influence international economy. The AIIB, as opposed to BRI, is more organized, structured, and transparent (Schichor, 2018). Apparently, there was no need for an institution like the AIIB in Asia: founded in 1996, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has 67 members, 48 of which from the Asia-Pacific region. However, China has always been reticent about the ADB and the World Bank because of their highly political objections (Schichor, 2018). Also, the fact that the U.S exerts major influence on the World Bank is an added bonus to China’s reservations. In fact, although Beijing became the second world economy and the first power in foreign exchange reserves, its voting shares in the World Bank are significantly lower than those U.S or Japan:

Country:	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development	International Financial Corporation	International Development Association	Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency
United States	15.86	20.31	9.95	15.03
Japan	7.46	5.90	8.36	4.22
China	5.06	2.23	2.26	2.64

Figure 6: voting shares in the World Bank, updated March/April 2021

The voting discrimination against China is even more evident in the ADB, where China has 5.437 per cent of votes against U.S and Japan’s 12.751 per cent (ADB Annual Report, 2019).

The AIIB, from the day of its entry into business in January 2016, has been perceived by Washington as a challenge for the established multilateral development banks (MDBs) and the global financial system. Moreover, the U.S has pressured, tried to convince, and sometimes threatened most of its allies not to join the institution (Schichor, 2018) – but it was unsuccessful: key NATO allies of the U.S., like Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, in 2015 decided to join the AIIB, with Germany having the largest non-Asian voting shares – 4.1 percent, as of 2015 data (Aiyar, 2015). With over 100 members as of 2020, the AIIB has become the second largest Multilateral Development Bank (MDB) after the World Bank. Having a great number of advanced economies among its members has given to this institution and to China the legitimacy for its new platform for economic diplomacy, increasing Beijing’s reputation as an advocate of multilateralism (Grieger, 2021). Unlike its position in the ADB and WB, China not only is the founder of the AIIB,

but also the largest shareholder, with a voting share of 26.5726 per cent. India and Russia, second and third shareholders, have respectively 7.6046 and 5.9825 per cent of voting shares (AIIB, 2021).

Ultimately, AIIB and BRI are supposed to work together: the first would provide for the necessary funding for investments within the BRI framework, very much like the U.S has been using the World Bank for its interests throughout the decades (Schichor, 2018). It is clear that these two initiatives have economic goals, but it is also clear that through these projects China aspires to upgrade its political profile in Asia at the expenses of the U.S mainly and, to a lesser extent, Russia.

Furthermore, in a system in which the U.S support for the liberal values and institutions at the global level has diminished – under the Trump administration mainly, China appears, on the contrary, more willing to assert its vision of the international order (Stephen & Skidmore, 2019) and to somehow proclaim itself as a champion of multilateralism. Throughout Trump’s presidency, the U.S has in fact: (1) withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), (2) unilaterally imposed import tariffs to the EU and China starting a Trade War with the latter, (3) withdrawn from the Paris Agreement, (4) withdrawn the U.S from the United Nations Human Rights Council, and (5) cut the financial support for the United Nations (Stephen & Skidmore, 2019). The Chinese government, on the other hand, has been straightforward in its willingness to defend the international economic order. In fact, (1) Beijing has increased its foreign aids, (2) has publicly pledged to support and respect the authority United Nations, (3) has recently committed to tackle efficiently climate change becoming carbon-neutral by 2060, (4) pushed for the Belt and Road Initiative to better redistribute development internationally (Stephen & Skidmore, 2019; McGrath, 2020). Another important and hot topic these days is the so-called vaccine diplomacy. In fact, while western democracies, that have an easier access to vaccines, have kept a huge number of available doses for themselves, many of the countries actually donating doses in high numbers are autocracies (Bollyky, 2021). China and Russia seem to be “winning” the vaccine diplomacy race with Beijing donating vaccines to 53 nations, and exporting them to 27, the majority of which are involved in the Belt Road Initiative (Merelli, 2021; Bollyky, 2021). Moreover, Ambassador Zhang Jun, Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations has informed UN Secretary-General António Guterres that China has decided to be the *de facto* sponsor of COVID-19 vaccines for UN peacekeepers in missions to Africa, donating 300.000 doses (PRC’s Embassy in Italy, 2021) and also for the athletes participating to the Tokyo

Olympics and next year's Beijing Winter Games (Bollyky, 2021). Russia follows, with bilateral agreements to donate and export its Sputnik V vaccine to 37 countries (Merelli, 2021).

In conclusion, in a world where competition rules, BRI/OBOR and AIIB would give China a considerable guarantee of its hegemony in Asia, so to reduce America's presence in its neighborhoods. Should in fact the BRI in conjunction with the AIIB succeed in its goal, the real loser will be (geopolitically speaking) the United States (Habova, 2015). The barycenter of global politics and economy has already shifted to Asia after the sudden American turn to protectionism under the *Trumpian* slogan of "America First". This illustrated the U.S fear that its hegemony – Pax Americana – is declining vis-à-vis China's growing importance. It is this fear of seeing their power transition from Washington to Beijing that eventually led to the U.S-launched trade war (Kim, 2018). In light of the PTT, the trade war between the USA and China may be an omen of a larger-scale conflict between the two powers, since war is more likely to occur when the power gap between a declining hegemon and a rising challenger is getting closer. "It was the rise of Athens and the *fear* that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable" writes Allison (2018: 67) and this could be likely applied in the future to the U.S and China. It is not China directly threatening the U.S to subvert the international world order, because as we said in this chapter, China doesn't seem dissatisfied with the current system in which it operates; it is rather China's growing presence and importance that is scaring America's position as the "first superpower", that could lead to an unwanted hegemonic war. However, it is also arguable that China is not ready yet to envisage a U.S-free Asia. Therefore, it is going to be interesting to observe how much China is able and/or ready to push back the U.S influence and presence in Asia. With BRI, Beijing has taken a risk to secure its place as dominant actor in the region, to change Asia's economic dynamics to its favor, to improve the socio-economic conditions of its western provinces, and to tie relations with countries who can guarantee new force for China's (seemingly) unstoppable growth. We can conclude by saying that, taking all these elements into account, it is arguable that BRI is not a hegemonic tool (yet) but a pragmatic one: it is not China looking back at its past glory and projecting it into the present, but a new China looking forward and creating new conditions for the evolving Asian system. In fact, in Section II of the *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-century Maritime Silk Road* (Vision and Action), we can find that BRI is in line with the UN Charter and respects the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence". By including

the five principles in the official document, China has a twofold aim: first, it is trying to demonstrate to its neighbors with which it has territorial disputes that by establishing economic relations, they will overcome their territorial and ideological disagreements; second, it is trying to send a message to the international community, saying that its rise has not the goal of disrupting the international order like the USSR did after World War II, and that China doesn't plan to export its Communism abroad. The real motives of BRI are today a great source of academic and political research, because of how much Beijing seems invested in the project. All in all, through investments and mutually beneficial trade agreements, Beijing is creating a stable and safe environment around its borders, strengthening thus, China's own security. With this Initiative, China hopes that closer economic ties and people-to-people connection might help to resolve hostility and encourage security cooperation.

CHAPTER TWO

CHINA'S PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE ROLE OF THE B.R.I IN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

After having laid down the basic principles of the Power Transition Theory and explained how the Belt and Road Initiative and the AIIB work, in this chapter I will focus my analysis on China's presence in the Middle East, in particular in the Gulf region. The two case studies I will bring are the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Here I will try to understand whether Chinese interests in the region are purely pragmatic, namely focused on investments and development as stated in the Vision and Action document, or if Beijing is trying to expand its influence in this rich but fragile region. In fact, in a short period of time, China went from having virtually zero diplomatic relations in the region to the signing of Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships, the highest form of Chinese diplomatic alliance. Moreover, in Iran, Beijing has invested a lot also in terms of credibility: Beijing was one of the few countries that remained in business with Iran even after the numerous U.S-led sanctions against the country, also playing a pivotal role in the P5+1 negotiations and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), that I will analyze later in the chapter.

As claimed in the previous chapter, China is nowhere near to openly and directly challenge the U.S, but it is also true that China's presence in this region has raised many questions about Beijing's real interests: is it more than just oil that China wants? Is China willing to engage more in the region now that the U.S, withdrawing its remaining troops, might leave a security vacuum? With investment contracts worth billions of dollars, is the balance of power in the region going to shift, once and for all, from Washington to Beijing? These are just a few of the questions that are driving my analysis on the matter and have inspired me to work on this topic.

I start the chapter with a brief historical analysis of United States and China's presence in the Middle East, assessing that until the 1980s, contrary to the U.S, Beijing had no real interests to expand its influence in the region, given the total closure of the country from the outside world. Thanks to Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening policy, the People's Republic of China (PRC) started looking outside its own borders. Then, I shift the lens to Chinese current relations with the Middle East in general, firstly assessing the four

reasons for which the region is fundamental to Beijing – ground for power confrontation, energy exporter, strategic extension of Beijing’s periphery, and geostrategic crossroads – the role of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the establishment of strategic partnerships, with a digression on the different levels of partnerships signed by the PRC, and lastly China’s smart use of non-interference and non-alliance principles in foreign policy. Furthermore, I continue with the individual study of Sino-Saudi and Sino-Iranian relations and their implications for the United States of America, in light of the Power Transition Theory. Is a hegemonic war for the Middle East ahead, or is the power transition underway going to be a peaceful one? This chapter will try to answer to these difficult questions.

2.1 History of American and Chinese presence in the Middle East

For the entire duration of the bipolar confrontation between the U.S and the Soviet Union (1945-1991), China has not been – for the most part – committed to the Middle East or any other country. On the contrary, the U.S has been present in the region since after World War Two. In fact, the Middle East has always been an important competition ground, since the Cold War: during the bipolar confrontation, the region’s energy supplies and the propensity of M.E countries to establish communist regimes made the region ground for the U.S-Soviet power competition. Case in point was the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989), an important event that not only marked the beginning of the end of the USSR and the Cold War, but also the start of U.S involvement in the region.

In April 1978, a coup led by the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) provoked an Islamic rebellion leading the country down a spiral of violence, sucking the Soviet Union into an escalating intervention (Greentree, 2019; Dixon, 2001). Secretary of the Politburo, Brezhnev, envisaged a six-month mission with the aim to stop the jihadist rebellion and to replace USSR’s radical communist client with a less violent leader. However, the Soviets never accomplished this task. Carter’s administration saw in this intervention an opportunity to deliver the Soviet Union its own Vietnam. Therefore, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s National Security Advisor, counseled the President to allow the Afghan resistance to continue the fight. Carter thus approved the CIA-led covert mission “Operation Cyclone”, a program that relied heavily toward the support of militant Islamic groups fighting against the Marxist-oriented Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (Greentree, 2019). In the decade-long intervention, that soon

became an invasion, Operation Cyclone has not only been the longest covert mission that the USA has ever led, but also the most expensive one, costing between \$6-\$20 billion (Dixon, 2001).

U.S. armament of mujahideen forces and Soviet intervention in Afghanistan has had crucial and long-term consequences considering that not only the War costed millions of lives, but it solidified the concept of global *jihād*, and offered a platform to Al-Qaeda and to the rise of the Taliban regime to emerge.

It was however after the 9/11 attacks that the U.S. involvement in M.E. skyrocketed (Byman & Moller, 2016). The terroristic attack to the Twin Towers and the Pentagon triggered the longest war in the region, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. George W. Bush, at that time President of the United States, aimed to dismantle the terroristic organization responsible for the attacks – Al Qaeda – by waging a Global War on Terrorism. Leveraging the UN Security Council Resolution 1386, Bush was able to invade Afghanistan. The United States intensified counterterrorism cooperation not only with longtime allies in the region, such as Egypt and Jordan but also with neglected countries or even adversaries, such as Yemen and Libya.

A pivotal moment of American unilateralism happened in 2003, when the United States, always under George W. Bush administration, invaded Iraq because of – later demonstrated unfounded – alleged harbor and development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by Saddam Hussein's regime. This invasion, culminating in the overthrow of Hussein's regime, triggered a crisis that destabilized an already fragile region, leading to a long-term and sustained U.S. presence in the country until the end of 2011 (Byman & Moller, 2016).

Contrary to the ever-present American involvement in the region, China's interest in Middle East have always been lukewarm. For decades, China was a closed country, with no real ties and diplomatic relations. The situation started to change during the 1980s, when Beijing was increasingly showing to be more interested in gaining global influence and expanding its footprints in the Middle East. This sudden involvement happened for two main reasons: firstly, Beijing was trying to establish itself as a valuable competitor of the two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union – and secondly, was supporting its efforts to establish greater international recognition at the expense of the Republic of China in Taiwan (Scobell & Nader, 2016). In fact, considering that the breaking of Sino-Soviet relations and the Korean War (which saw China and the U.S. as adversaries) both happening in the 1950s, China delved much of its resources into its

relations with the Third World (Xia, 2008). Mao Zedong thought that a solid alliance among countries of the Third World could have been crucial in the frame of Cold War confrontations. The pivotal moment of Beijing's effort towards this goal was the Bandung Conference of Asian and African states, in April 1955. However, at that time, Mao's China was not able to provide a strong economic assistance or adequate military equipment to sustain its alliances, thus, the efforts to build such coalition of Third World countries opposed to the two well-equipped superpowers mostly failed (Xia, 2008). After Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping became China's leader, after a brief power struggle with Mao's designed successor Hua Guofeng. Under Deng's leadership, China grew rapidly thanks to both the economic and social reforms and to Deng's decision to open the country to the capitalist international market (Xia, 2008). Even though, some early steps in Chinese diplomatic ties came in 1956, when Egypt and Syria first recognized and established diplomatic relations with the PRC, it was in the 1970s that the real breakthrough occurred: China was admitted a seat in the UN Security Council previously held by Taiwan. As a consequence, several countries in the Middle East, and beyond, recognized the People's Republic of China at the expense of Taipei (Scobell & Nader, 2016). In particular, Beijing had shown growing interests in the Middle East after the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee's historic plenum in 1978, that initiated China's domestic reform and opening to the West (Leverett & Bader, 2005). China's top priority was modernization, especially in the military sector, and needed liquidity for the success of its economic development. For this reason, in the 1980s China embarked on different projects with numerous Middle Eastern countries: Beijing sold arms to both conflicting sides of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), cooperated with Israel in the development of F-10 fighter aircraft, sold to Saudi Arabia CSS-2 intermediate-range ballistic missiles, and engaged in discussions with Libya and Syria about the eventual sale of M-9 ballistic missiles. China's interest and economic dependence on the Middle East rose in the 1990s, a time in which Beijing's GDP grew an average of 9% each year (Chen, 2011). Since the 1990s, the region became important to China economically, especially as a source of energy. In fact, in order to sustain this growth and providing jobs to the growing number of citizens entering the labor market, the government needed to, firstly, find new markets to export Chinese goods and secondly, ensure enough energy supply for its economy (Chen, 2011; Scobell, 2019). Since the 2000s, the Middle East has increasingly been seen by Beijing as a strategic extension of Chinese territory, with key

ethno-religious linkages that extend from the Middle East through Central and South Asia to China (Scobell, 2019).

2.2 Current developments in Middle East-China relations: Beijing's increase of soft power.

There is no denying that by 2016, the Middle East has become for Beijing increasingly important, since now China perceives the region as an extension of its periphery. There are mainly four reasons for which the region is important to China: first, the Middle East is viewed as an arena of great power competition (Scobell, 2019). As stated above, the region has always been a playground for superpower competition since the end of World War Two. While the Soviets and Americans exercised their power struggle in the region through proxy wars, China was mostly left out and had no virtual ties with the countries in the region. The Middle East gained abrupt importance to China after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, when the majority of Western countries sanctioned and condemned Beijing for its poor handling of the demonstration. During those months, China turned to Middle Eastern countries to counteract the cold shoulder served by Western democracies. This rapprochement coincided with Beijing's growing demand for imported oil and commodities, thanks to China's successful reform and opening policy (Scobell, 2019). With the turn of the 21st century, most countries in the region have broken their ties with Taiwan and established diplomatic relations with Beijing instead, recognizing the country as the sole legitimate government of China. Today, the PRC is a key economic player in the region: it has established modest military relationships, it invests heavily in the region through the BRI project – as we will see later in the chapter –, has proclaimed an interest in addressing the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and last but not least, has helped to facilitate the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 – the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus the European Union (EU).

Second, the region is an essential source of energy and China needs a lot of it.

From OEC data, in 2019, China imported \$204B in crude petroleum, becoming the first and largest importer of oil in the world. In the same year, crude petroleum was the most imported product in China (OEC, 2019). Furthermore, it is also noteworthy that about half (48%) of the imported crude oil comes from nine Middle Eastern nations as of 2019 (OEC, 2019), making the region the first supplier for Beijing’s thirst for oil. Third, as stated above, China is strategically starting to think of the Middle East as an

CHINESE CRUDE OIL IMPORTS BY COUNTRY (2018)

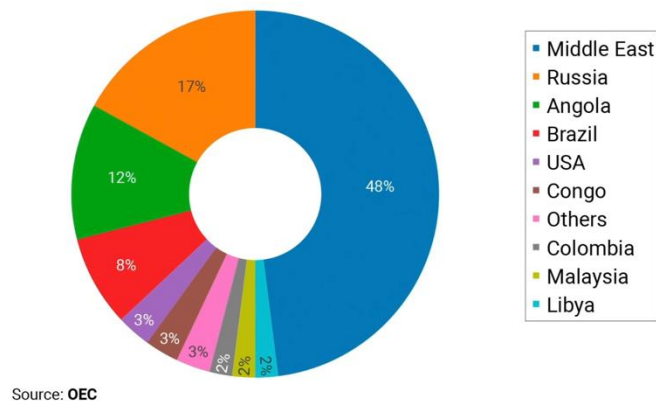


Figure 7: OEC (2018) Chinese Crude Oil Imports

extension of its own periphery (Scobell, 2019). Although less than 10% of China’s population is ethnically non-Chinese (namely non-Han), the minority groups, mainly Tibetans and Uyghur Muslims, live in strategically important border regions: Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia (Shirk, 2007; Scobell, 2019; Scobell & Nader, 2016). Especially Xinjiang, where the majority of Uyghurs reside, is an important region for Xi’s foreign policy agenda and the success of the BRI. In fact, being located in westernmost part of China, Xinjiang borders with strategic Central and Southeast Asian countries, such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Lipscomb, 2016). For its position, it is vital for China to foster integration and promote the development of this region, which is also one of the poorest of the country (Çaksu, 2020). Although China proclaims itself as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, Uyghurs have been victims of systemic discrimination and abuse from local government institutions. Çaksu (2020) writes that the ethnic composition of the region has dramatically changed in the past 50 years. In fact, if in 1953 – as stated on government census – Han Chinese were just 6% of the region’s population, while Uyghurs constituted 75% of people, in the 2000s, government census found that Han population reached 40.57% while Uyghurs 45.21%. This data shows a clear *sinicization* of the region, perpetuated through mass migration of ethnic Han.

Moreover, since Chen Quanguo became Xinjiang's new Communist Party secretary in 2016, mass detention and surveillance on Uyghur population have been registered. On a darker note, China is allegedly also sterilizing Uyghur women (Zenz, 2020). One would expect that such degrading treatment of Uyghurs in China would outrage Muslim partners. However, the majority of them have remained silent (Berman, 2019).

Nick Cohen (2020) in an article for The Guardian, provocatively claims that Chinese hefty investments and flow of FDIs in the region have “bought off” Muslim states. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, in 2019, even publicly endorsed Beijing's right to pursue “anti-terrorism” and “de-extremism” measures, in Xinjiang (Berman, 2019; Al Jazeera, 2019). The only sign of criticism against China's violation of human rights against its Muslim minority has come from Recep Tayyip Erdogan, accusing China of “near genocide” after a brutally repressed demonstration of Uyghurs in 2009. (Cohen, 2020; Scobell, 2019)³.

The most profound effect of China's growing presence in the Middle East, has been its negative influence on governance in the region. Berman (2019) argues that “today, the digitally enabled authoritarianism that China's government has used to great effect to reshape its own society in a more rigid, censored, and compliant direction has begun to proliferate in the countries of the Middle East” (Berman, 2019:7). Examples of these negative proliferations have been observed in Iran and Egypt, countries where China's tech and communication companies have helped the two governments to repress people and freedoms, enabling Middle Eastern autocrats to sensibly improve their tyrannical practices.

The fourth reason is that the Middle East is geostrategic crossroads (Scobell, 2019). This reason is quite self-explanatory, considering the geographical position of the Middle East between Central and Southeast Asia, North Africa, Horn of Africa, and Europe.

As enshrined in the Vision and Action document, the BRI has five cooperation priorities: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds (Vision and Action, 2015). Since President Xi announced the BRI in 2013, Middle Eastern countries, especially the Gulf states, have regarded it as a concrete possibility to enhance bilateral cooperation (Qian & Fulton, 2017). This initiative has been the biggest and largest projects of soft power perpetrated by China

³ More on this topic: Maizland, L. (2021), China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 March 2021, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-repression-uyghurs-xinjiang>

(Voon & Xu, 2020). When Xi Jinping's administration broke the news of this huge infrastructure project, the announcement was greeted with enthusiasm by Gulf States, which did not miss the chance to show their readiness to initiate cooperation (Qian & Fulton, 2017).

The Middle East is a hub of many civilizations, economically attractive, with a young and vibrant population, and a nascent upper middle class (Juan et al., 2018; Küçükcan, 2017). The BRI, with the investments and jobs openings it brings, promises to contribute to economic growth in the Middle East, which means a wide variety of things, namely wealth accumulation, better quality of life, and high levels of employment. Most importantly, in a region this fragile, economic growth would mean also political stability and refrain from armed conflicts, also including the support to violence and terrorism (Küçükcan, 2017).

Therefore, for the sake of enhanced cooperation in the region, Beijing has adopted scale of relations, ranging from a friendly cooperative partnership at the bottom to a comprehensive strategic partnership at the top, holding each category a specific priority (Fulton, 2019a).

At the bottom of this pyramid we find Friendly Cooperative Partnerships, mainly focused on bilateral issues like trade; then we find Cooperative Partnerships, characterized by bilateral issues based on mutual respect and benefit; further we find Comprehensive Cooperative Partnerships, defined by high-level exchanges and cooperation on issues of common interests; fourthly we observe Strategic Partnerships, aimed at coordinating with the partner/-s regional and international affairs, including the military sphere; lastly, at the top of the pyramid we find Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships, focused on the full achievement of cooperation and development on regional and international affairs (South China Morning Post, 2016).

The concept of "partnership" in the field of International Relations has a nebulous connotation, meaning that it is not always clear what it is meant with the term partnership and its implications for a State. We can observe different patterns of partnerships: they can be a form of alliance, much like the Trans-Atlantic Partnership, a form of economic cooperation, like the dawn of the European Economic Community (EEC), and sometimes interactions between rivals (Li & Ye, 2019). The European Union (EU) uses partnerships as tools to achieve economic goals, and other countries in the Asian continent have established their own networks of partnerships. However, what makes Beijing's approach unique is the fact that the country uses these types of deals as a tool to foster its foreign

policy agenda. Quan Li and Min Ye (2019) argue that the most authoritative explanation of the meaning and importance of Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships for China comes from PRC's former Premier Wen Jiabao. In a speech, he explained the meaning of those three words: the word "comprehensive" meant that cooperation had to materialize in a wide variety of fields, namely political, economic, technological, and cultural; the word "strategic" means that the bilateral relationship between parties has to foster stability and long-term benefits, overcoming ideology and political differences; lastly, the word "partnership" means that the parties have to cooperate respecting mutual interests, trust and equality (Li & Ye, 2019).

From this explanation, we can grasp the importance that the two countries object to the case study of this thesis, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, have for Beijing, since both of them have signed Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with China after Xi's accession to power, in 2016 (Fulton, 2020a; Fulton 2019a).

Despite the importance that a state gains from signing these kinds of deals with China, it is important to highlight, however, that these partnerships do not bind the signing parties and China to commit to an alliance. After being subject to both spheres of influence during the Cold War, China understood that alliances were only a breeding ground for military confrontations. Thus, since the early 1980s, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, Beijing decided to pursue a non-alliance policy, using its strategic partnerships to forge relations with other countries, without the formal commitment of an alliance (Rounan & Feng, 2016; Fulton, 2020b). This non-alliance strategy has both pros and cons; namely, a con might be the fact that without proper alliances, Beijing can never be seen as a real alternative to the U.S, while a pro might be the fact that China has the freedom to sign partnerships with a wide variety of States in rivalry one against the other (Fulton, 2020b). The partnership with China of both Saudi Arabia and Iran, two conflicting States in the Gulf, is a perfect example of this strategy. Beijing's engagement with both countries may seem unsustainable in the long run, but neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran have enough leverage to pressure the PRC to pick sides (Fulton, 2020b).

Most Arab countries, Saudi Arabia and Iran included, perceive Beijing not only as a key economic and business partner, but beyond. This is especially true in countries the U.S deems of vital geostrategic importance, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman etc. (Zambelis & Gentry, 2008). In fact, since the end of the Cold War, Middle Eastern countries started to worry about the U.S-dominated geopolitical scene and the continuous American pressure, after the 9/11 attacks, for these countries to comply to political

democratization and respect of human rights principles, shifting Arab autocrats away from the U.S towards non-interferent Beijing (Zambelis & Gentry, 2008).

Aside from oil import, infrastructure and development projects, the Middle East is a key region for Beijing also because of navigation security: in fact, most of Chinese vessels transporting goods to Europe must cross the Bab El-Mandeb Strait, in the Aden Gulf, between Djibouti and Yemen, famous for piracy, regional tensions and decades-long conflicts (Watanabe, 2019). Moreover, through the Middle Corridor and through the Sea Route, the new Silk Road will pass through the Suez Canal involving many countries in the region in the BRI framework of development (Küçükcan, 2017).

However, Beijing has been extremely careful not to become too involved in security matters, leaving this responsibility to the U.S (Lons, 2019). Up to this point, China has not played an important role in mitigating tensions in the region, as clearly shown by the distance its political agents maintain from major conflicts there (Lons, 2019). Things may however change in the foreseeable future. While Russia challenges the U.S presence in the region acting as a security partner for Middle Eastern countries, China's approach, guided by the non-interference policy, embraces just economic partnership with no strings attached. However, this approach is destined to not last: Beijing, in fact, is the largest importer of Middle Eastern oil, but relies heavily on the U.S-provided security umbrella and naval presence to ensure a smooth oil flow from the Middle East to home. As we are observing, however, the U.S is downsizing its presence in region, which will culminate in September 11, 2021 with the official withdrawal of U.S army from Afghanistan. For this reason, Washington won't be able to provide this security umbrella to Chinese economic interests anymore, leaving Beijing's energy flow vulnerable to the political instability of the region (Dalay, 2019).

In the next sub-chapters, I will analyze in detail the relations of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran with China, and what are the implications of these growing partnerships for the U.S.

2.3 Sino-Saudi relations: from strangers to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Last year, 2020, marked the thirtieth anniversary of Sino-Saudi relations, two countries that went from virtually no diplomatic relations to today's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, largely based on energy and oil trade, but also infrastructure projects and public diplomacy. Specifically, trade has gone from \$417 million in the early 1990s to

\$54 billion in 2019 (IMF, 2019) while, concerning oil import-export, it has been already

largely shown in Chapter 1 the relations of these two countries, namely China being world's largest oil importer and Saudi Arabia being a top crude petroleum exporter (\$145B) and thus, an oil superpower (Fulton, 2020b, OEC, 2019a). Just from these data on oil imports/exports, we can grasp the importance that Saudi Arabia has for the PRC, providing alone 20,7% of China's oil imports (OEC, 2019b).

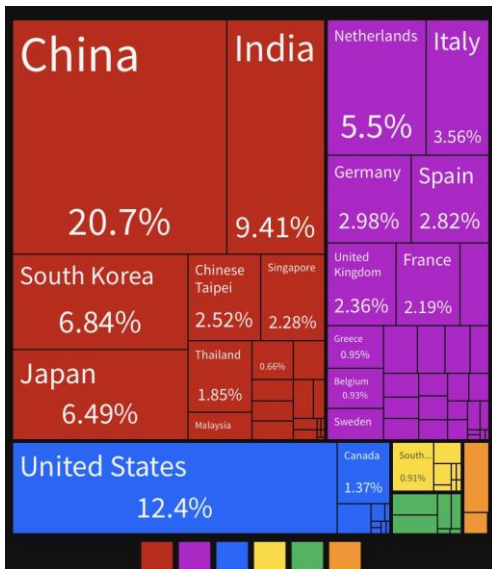


Figure 8: OEC (2019) Top Receivers of Saudi Arabia's oil

Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader (2016) argue that we can observe two main eras of Sino-Saudi relations: a before and an after 1990, the year in which the two countries established diplomatic relations and Riyadh broke its ties with Taiwan. As we have mentioned above, China was a latecomer in the Middle East, in the pre-1990 period, and was struggling to catch up with the two superpowers. However, Beijing found leverage in the military sector, and from the 1980s things started to change (Scobell & Nader, 2016). During that time, the Iraq-Iran War was raging, shuttering the delicate equilibrium of the Gulf region. With its two neighbors firing with Soviet-provided weapons, Saudi Arabia felt it needed some adequate deterrence, thus asked the United States to provide the Kingdom with Pershing missiles (Fulton, 2020b). However, having the Saudis armed with powerful nuclear weapons was not reassuring for Washington, because it meant putting under threat the security of Israel, life-long ally of the U.S. Therefore, the U.S. denied arming the Saudis, who for the first time turned to China for help (Fulton, 2020b). After a series of secret meetings between China and Saudi officials, the two countries cut the deal and Beijing sold to Riyadh fifty CSS-2 nuclear-capable intermediate-range ballistic missiles – IRBMs – for \$3.5 billion (Woodrow, 2002). This missile deal marked the material start of Sino-Saudi rapprochement (Fulton, 2020b; Juan et al., 2018). Beijing was willing to sell IRBMs to Riyadh for two major reasons: first of all, during this time, China needed liquidity to foster its domestic development goals and the sale of these weapons brought to Beijing a significant amount of funds; second, this sale enabled China

to gain political leverage in a key Middle East country which was also allied with the United States (Scobell & Nader, 2016).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), Riyadh decided to venture a tighter diplomatic rapprochement with Beijing, since although communist, was not seen as militarily and ideologically aggressive as the USSR. Moreover, after the massacre of 1989 Tiananmen Square, Saudi Arabia was the only country that did not distance from Beijing, but on the contrary moved to full diplomatic relations the following year, in 1990 (Scobell & Nader, 2016). On the other hand, Western countries plus Japan led a sort of diplomatic rupture and economic ban on Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) with Beijing following the incident (Aborhmah, 2010). Thus, that bloody event, made the Middle East grow of importance at the eyes of China.

The post-1990 era of Sino-Saudi Relations, is therefore characterized by China's growing thirst for oil and Washington's declining interests for the region's affairs. Thus, if little by little Beijing was increasingly growing its presence in the region, mainly for oil purposes, the U.S was showing declining levels of commitments in Middle East. The deepening of diplomatic ties between the two countries has also been characterized by frequent and reciprocal State visits. To date, the most important visit has been President Xi Jinping's trip to Riyadh in 2016 when the two countries elevated their cooperation both by signing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and Saudi Arabia's participation to the BRI (Yurong, 2020). In a joint communiqué, the two countries committed to enhance their cooperation in political, economic, commercial, cultural, humanitarian, military, security, and energy fields as well as at regional and international level (Fulton, 2020b). During this visit to Riyadh, Xi also received the King Abdulaziz medal, which is the Kingdom's highest civilian reward. In the following months, after Xi's visit to Saudi Arabia, the relation between the Kingdom and China were blossoming, while U.S-Saudi one was worsening (Foley, 2018).

On the side of Saudi Arabia, its interest in opening talks and start business with China is not a new phenomenon, since the so-called "Look-East" diplomacy strategy started to take shape during the time of the late King Abdullah (2005–2015). Late King Abdullah presided over the Look-East foreign policy meeting, signaling, already in 2005, that the Kingdom's economic and security interests were slowly moving East (Foley, 2017). This foreign policy strategy continues to be pursued by King Salman bin Abdulaziz (2015-present).

King Abdullah, in January 2006 chose Beijing and New Delhi as his first two official visits after his accession to the throne, signaling Saudi Arabia's growing interest in Asian affairs (Foley, 2018; Yamada, 2015). Thus, from the 2010s, the Kingdom has been pursuing the "Look East" policy and increasingly fostering its economic and diplomatic relations with China by working with Beijing under the BRI (Juan et al., 2018; Yamada, 2015; Lopez, 2020). Moreover, China's thirst for oil, its policy of non-interference, and its willingness to overlook human rights violations, makes it an attractive partner for Saudi Arabia, that looks at Beijing also to strategically hedge against the U.S (Lopez, 2020). In fact, in last years, the majority of Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, are trying to vary their portfolio when it comes to partnerships. For the Kingdom an increased relationship with Beijing would mean signaling to (1) Washington, that other countries are available to help Saudis achieve their objectives in the region and (2) to Iran, that the Kingdom has the means to successfully shift the balance of power away from the Islamic Republic (Lopez, 2020).

The partnership with Beijing is slowly shifting away from being exclusively based on oil and energy and it is increasingly expanding to other areas, thanks to the BRI. Despite the project not including specific policies dedicated to Saudi Arabia, in 2016, China published a document called "China's Arab Policy Paper", in which PRC's high officials articulated a model for how the cooperation pattern between Beijing and its Arab partners could develop. The model of cooperation is called "1+2+3", in which "1" stands for energy cooperation as the core field; "2" stands for the two wings of infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation, to foster cooperation on key development projects; "3" stands for cooperation in three key fields: nuclear energy, space satellite, and renewable energy (China's Arab Policy Paper, 2016).

Saudi Arabia is a fast-growing country, "with young demographic composition, growing population, and energetic development" (Juan et al., 2018: 365). However, the Kingdom is highly dependent on its oil earnings, which comprise 90% of government revenues, and for this reason the country has been severely impacted by the persistent decline in petroleum prices from 2014 onwards (Alqahtani, 2019). For this reason, in 2016 Riyadh launched the "Saudi Vision 2030" at the G20 summit in Hangzhou, comprising a series of reform strategies for the Kingdom's sustainable development, and to shift country's economy away from just oil production and export (Foley, 2017). With this ambitious plan, the Kingdom plans to shift its heavy reliance on oil revenues towards more diversified ones, i.e., including the enforcement of tax and the establishment of a

sovereign wealth fund. Also, the sources of investments are shifting, from government investment to private and foreign ones, case in point the opening of Saudi Aramco, a 100% state-funded company and the Kingdom's flagship, to private investment through a partial initial public offering (Alqahtani, 2019). Moreover, part of the plan is to also cut back state subsidies to companies, strengthen the private sector, and modernizing the Saudi educational systems and institutions from elementary school to university (Alqahtani, 2019). In brief, as mentioned above, the main goal of the Vision 2030 is to encourage and boost non-petroleum sectors, thus diversifying Saudi's economy.

These reforms are ambitious but at the same time they are well liked by Beijing; in fact, the Vision 2030 is consistent with China's BRI goals (Foley, 2017). In March 2017, during a State Visit of the Saudi King in China, President Xi officially expressed Beijing's support for the Vision 2030, reaffirming the importance of Saudi Arabia in the success of the BRI (Juan et al., 2018). The key areas of Sino-Saudi strategic alignment are based not only on classic energy-field and oil import-export, but also on non-energy sectors such as aerospace, communications, and investment projects to foster and develop renewable energy, such as solar and wind power. The second-largest area of cooperation rests on the establishment of technological and industrial capacity, including the Saudi's projects on smart cities and fostering the growth of e-commerce. Lastly, the final projects included in the memoranda concern cultural and investment projects, to promote students' exchanges in both countries (Juan et al., 2018; Alqahtani, 2019).

If Khaled Mohammed Alqahtani (2019) sees the BRI and Vision 2030 as tools enabling a closer and deeper cooperation between the Kingdom and China, Chen Juan et al., (2018) see the worsening of Saudi relations with the other Arab countries as a liability in the success and aligning of these two projects. Saudi Arabia has in fact issues with Qatar, a fellow member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Iran, and Assad's regime in Syria, aligning perfectly with U.S' foreign policy agenda for the Middle East. Moreover, the Kingdom is closely paying attention to the developments of the Sino-American trade war, initiated by former President Donald Trump (Juan et al., 2018). For this reason, it is important for Beijing to pay closer attention to any developments in the Middle East and particularly to the U.S-Saudi relationship.

Concerning security cooperation, China and Saudi Arabia have committed to this kind of partnership in 2006, during a state visit of former Chinese President Hu. However, the cumbersome security umbrella provided by the U.S has left Beijing with limited operating space (Fulton, 2020b). In fact, as with the first missile deal, Chinese arms sales have

remained a consequence of Saudi Arabia not getting its preferred weapons from the U.S. Jonathan Fulton (2020b) argues that the only weapons China has sold to Saudi Arabia are Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), since Beijing, not having signed neither the Missile Technology Control Regime nor the Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies, does not face the same restrictions as the U.S. As a consequence, the PRC has become the major provider of drones across the Middle East, and the Kingdom has been the main receiver in this regard (Fulton, 2020b; Scobell & Nader, 2016).

In conclusion, we can argue that China-Saudi Arabia relationship has been and will continue to be a success for both countries. Despite some loose ends provided by the weak security and military links, the two countries have mastered the economic and trade partnership. Geo-strategically, Beijing is soft balancing against the United States, securing the Kingdom's wealth and oil abundance. Moreover, both countries are united in their opposition of global norms dictated by the U.S and Western democracies, such as protection of human rights, democratization of the society, and protection of the fundamental freedoms. However, as Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader argue (2016) there are issues for which Beijing and Riyadh do not agree, such as Iran, Syria, and Beijing's partnership with Qatar. Nevertheless, despite these divergencies, both countries see in their relationship a win-win cooperation pattern. While the Kingdom looks forward to strengthening the defense ties with China, this seems, currently, unlikely for the PRC without a major downturn in the U.S. security commitment to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

2.4 Sino-Iranian relations

The establishment of official diplomatic relations between China and Iran dates back to 1971, the final decade of Mohammed Reza Shah's reign. However, relations during the Pahlavi reign were lukewarm, considering that the Iranian monarchy was extremely close to the U.S. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two countries is a natural one, characterized by shared national identities, historical ties, and strengthened by contemporary mutual interest (Scita, 2019; Gentry, 2005). The decade of the 1970s marked a major step forward in Sino-Iranian relations: in 1971 Iran backed Beijing's entry into the United Nations and that same year, both countries resumed their diplomatic ties and started to cooperate more (Gentry, 2005). Throughout the decade, the relationship between the two countries seemed to become warmer and warmer, however things changed at the end of the 1970s. The years 1978 and 1979 were crucial for both countries:

in fact, while Beijing was concluding a historical diplomatic rapprochement with the U.S, started at the beginning of the 1970s by President Nixon and the Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Tehran was in the middle of the so-called 1979 Islamic Revolution led by Ruhollah Khomeini, that culminated with the overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and the establishment of the Islamic Republic (Afary, 2020). One of the many results of this revolution was the increase of anti-Western sentiments, that peaked in November 1979 with the seizure of 66 hostages at the U.S. embassy (episode known as Iranian Hostage Crisis) by a group of protesters that demanded the Shah's extradition, who at that time was in the U.S for medical purposes (Afary, 2020).

Despite initial mistrust of Beijing by Iranian religious leader Khomeini, the relationship between the two States survived the radical change of the country (Scita, 2019). Beijing immediately recognized the new government, welcoming the new regime into the group of non-aligned developing nations and claiming "admiration" for the revolutionary, anti-Western spirit of its ideology (Gentry, 2005; Scita, 2019). The relationship between the two countries became deeper after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, a time in which both countries were labeled as pariah States.

The year 1997 was characterized by a set-back of the Beijing-Tehran relations. In fact, some years prior, in 1993, the Clinton administration adopted the "Dual Containment" policy against Iran and Iraq, and more specifically to our case, targeting China's military and nuclear cooperation with Iran (Scita, 2019; The Washington Institute, 1993). At the same time, disagreements between the U.S and the PRC were increasing because of episodes of violation of human rights by China and the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis (Scita, 2019). Thus, in an attempt to de-escalate tensions with Washington, Beijing sacrificed its ties with Iran, namely ending its nuclear assistance to Tehran (Scita, 2019; Davis et al., 2013).

Between the 1990s and the 2000s, four events led to a new Beijing-Tehran rapprochement: first, in 1997 PRC leader Jiang Zemin successfully seized power thanks to his clever handling of tensions with the U.S; secondly, in 1999 there was the unfortunate event of the U.S air strike to Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which killed three Chinese journalists and made relations between Washington and Beijing sour. In retaliation for this "barbaric attack", China resumed its cooperation with the Islamic Republic. Then, in 2001, after China's entry to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and thus to the global market, the U.S lost leverage over Beijing's affairs with Iran, since now Washington could no longer threaten the PRC to block its accession to the organization

if it cooperated with Iran. Finally, in 2002 Western companies found out the secret nuclear program fostered by Tehran and began to withdraw their companies from the country; this opened new opportunities for Chinese firms and diplomats to build economic and strategic ties with the Islamic Republic (Harold & Nader, 2012). During Mahmud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013), a round of nuclear-related sanctions were imposed on Iran by the international community, leading the Islamic Republic in the orbit of Beijing to counterbalance the economic isolation (Scita, 2019). Thus, China gained a privileged and almost monopolist role in the Iranian market, exporting cheap goods, promoting investment and infrastructural projects, and importing oil.

Things appeared to be heading towards a Washington-Tehran rapprochement in 2015, with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed by P5+1, i.e., the five Permanent States of the UN Security Council plus the EU. Under the JCPOA, Iran agreed to dismantle the majority of its nuclear program and open its facilities to broader international inspections in exchange of sanctions relief (Robinson, 2021). This deal was created in the hope to prevent a return of Iran's nuclear program and decrease the chance of an armed conflict between Iran and its regional rivals, namely Israel and Saudi Arabia (Robinson, 2021). However, the JCPOA lost much of its worth just two years after its entry into force, in 2017, when former U.S President Donald Trump withdrew from the agreement and imposed unilaterally a severe round of sanctions. The deal was in the making since 2006, and before the signing of the Resolution it was preceded by 2 years of intense negotiations. The agreement was ultimately unanimously approved by the United Nations Security Council in 2015 by the above mentioned P5+1 members. To summarize the 140 pages of Resolution 2231, we can say that the JCPOA has adopted a series of measures to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Moreover, the physical constraints put in the provisions should have prevented Iran to pursue its nuclear plans for at least 10/15 years. During this time, thanks to intelligence efforts, departures from the provisions would have been easily detected by the international community. Had Iran complied with the JCPOA, international sanctions would have been lifted, giving the country some much needed economic relief (Gary et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the deal had a short life, since in 2017, after only two years since the entry into force of the agreement, former President Donald Trump decided to withdraw the U.S from the JCPOA, reinstating sanctions on the country (Mortlock, 2020). As we can imagine, since the U.S withdrawal from the nuclear deal, and the sanctions imposed on any western firm who would continue to do business in the country, China found itself

being the main beneficiary of this situation and continued to build ties it initiated after sanctions were lifted (Yellinek, 2018; Jafari, 2020). In fact, after only two days after Trump's announcement, Beijing inaugurated a new railroad, which connects Bayannur (in inner Mongolia) to Teheran (Yellinek, 2018). Naturally, the works had started years before, but the timing of the inauguration was strategic, conveying the message that the PRC stood behind Iran against the whole international community. Moreover, after this event, China also invited Iran's President Rouhani to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit to discuss with the other members ways to maintain alive the JCPOA (Yellinek, 2018). The SCO is an organization composed of China, Russia as the dominant players and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The SCO has contributed to China's rise as the key player in Central Asia (Scobell & Nader, 2016). During Ahmadinejad's government, Iran was eager to become a full member of the SCO to counterbalance U.S presence in the region and to free the country from the looming isolationism that sanctions were providing. However, Ahmadinejad failed twice to gain Iranian membership in the organization for two main reasons: first, his aggressive anti-U.S rhetoric discouraged other members of the SCO into admitting Iran as a member; second, the rest of SCO members have a secular approach to politics, and the strong Islamist ideology of Iran was seen with caution by the other members (Scobell & Nader, 2016). Despite these reasons, it is however very likely that Iran might join the SCO soon as a full member, because Teheran's participation could consolidate Beijing's interests in Central Asia, Middle East and throughout the Muslim world (Scobell & Nader, 2016). The growing partnership between the two countries peaked on March 27, 2021: Iran and China signed a 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, based on the incorporation of the country in the BRI project and which has been under discussion at least since 2016. The agreement is designed to vastly expand Chinese presence in banking, telecommunications, ports, railways, and dozens of other projects in Iran worth \$400 billion. In exchange for the mega investments, China expects to receive a discounted supply of Iranian oil over the next 25 years (Blackwell et al., 2021). Even though non-energy related deals are developing within the framework of the BRI, energy is without a doubt the real driver of China's presence in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War, and in the Gulf region in particular. In the last decades, Iran has been China's top three oil exporters and possesses the fourth largest oil and second-largest gas reserves in the world and being extremely thirsty for oil, Beijing has found in Iran a valuable partner; during a time in which foreign companies were withdrawing from the country due to

international sanctions, China decided to remain and step up their investments (Calabrese, 2018; Mackenzie, 2010).

The Chinese and Iranian governments have both played important roles in consolidating energy relations. In fact, Iran recognizes that Chinese companies have high amounts of liquidity to spend, and Tehran offers them incentives to attract their investments. On the other hand, Chinese state-owned oil companies have a direct relation with Beijing which allows them to operate with more forgiving restrictions, less bureaucracy, and below-market project financing rates that other international corporations cannot have (Mackenzie, 2010).

In addition to oil and energy, China is also Iran's biggest foreign investor and Chinese companies have invested in many other Iranian extractive industries, such as aluminum, copper and coal (Mackenzie, 2010). Moreover, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed by the two countries includes a number of non-energy related fields, such as infrastructural projects and initiatives under the umbrella of the BRI, such as the construction of the metro-line in Tehran and mining operations as well as construction business and the sale of consumer goods, cooperation in telecommunication and software development fields, investment in Tehran's special economic zones and coastal areas, and cooperation in the military sector (Harold & Nader, 2012; Scita, 2020).

To this regard there is also a mentioning in the document of the creation of a joint commission for military industries, exchange of knowledge, and counterterrorism cooperation (Scita, 2020). From Beijing's point of view, it is a strategic move to help Iran's military capabilities in order to counterbalance U.S dominance in the Gulf region (Harold & Nader, 2012). In fact, U.S alliance with GCC has granted a security regime in line with Washington's interests in the Middle East. However, being U.S-Iran relations hostile, the Persian Gulf does not fall into the U.S security umbrella, providing thus fertile ground for China to sell its weapons to the Islamic Republic and preventing a U.S control of this geostrategic region (Harold & Nader, 2012).

Concerning the cooperation of Tehran and Beijing in the framework of the BRI, Iran is one of the key countries of the project, also purely from a geographical perspective: Iran is the only viable connection to a non-Russian sea and to the landlocked Central Asian states, inhabited by over 65 million people, and the three states of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – (Calabrese, 2018; Vatanka, 2021).

China has considerably increased its diplomatic engagement with Iran since 2015, simultaneously with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and

the gradual lifting of the international sanctions on the country in compliance with the JCPOA (Green & Roth, 2021). More importantly, however, has been China's continued diplomatic engagement with Tehran, even after the 2018 U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, exploiting the Sino-Iranian closeness to signal to Washington that Beijing has a strong geopolitical influence in the Middle East.

In the spirit of a growing partnership between the two countries, several analysts argue that Beijing might eventually establish a formal defense relationship with Tehran, as economic entanglements grow. At present day, it is still unlikely for China to commit to such plan, given the negative implications that this decision would have for China's relations with the U.S, the Arab partners, and Israel (Harold & Nader, 2012).

Although everything indicates a continuing expansion of Sino-Iranian economic partnership, there are signs of growing disagreements between the two countries. On Iran's side, its business environment is highly problematic for foreign investors like China. The combination of unreliable prices and contractual terms attached to government and political conditions might drive Beijing's investments away from the country, favoring the more stable economic environment of the Gulf rival Saudi Arabia (Morris, 2012). Moreover, the omnipresent international sanctions might start to take a toll on Chinese businesses, which could start to see more losses than gains. Furthermore, China invests a lot of capital and credibility in its relations with Iran, which complicates its relations with the U.S and its role in the UN Security Council (Morris, 2012).

On China's side, Beijing's growing relations with Iran's adversaries in the Gulf, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and with Israel, constitute an important limiting factor in a further deepening of Sino-Iranian bilateral relations (Green & Roth, 2021). Moreover, China has mostly enforced United Nations and U.S sanctions against the Islamic Republic, benefitting of Iran's nuclear dispute with the West (Scobell & Nader, 2016). In fact, Beijing has used its close ties with Teheran as leverage against Washington, obtaining concessions from the U.S that have allowed Beijing to remain Iran's largest trading partner, in exchange for the application of U.N sanctions (Scobell & Nader, 2016).

2.5 U.S-China competition and its implications for the Middle East

As heavily discussed in this chapter, we can understand that the Middle East is becoming as important – if not vital – for Beijing as the Asia-Pacific region, and the reasons are linked to energy and oil dependence, domestic instability (with the Uyghur issue), and the idea that the region is the key player for China’s geostrategic goals. The United States, since Obama administration, has tried to broaden its foreign policy agenda to include increasingly more Beijing, without, however, losing sight of their allies in the Middle East. China, on the other hand, is moving westward and its agenda is focused on protecting its economic interests in the region by leveraging its strategic partnerships with the two countries analyzed in this chapter, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Saudi Arabia, on one hand, is the most stable country of the two, willing to cooperate with China on long-term projects, supply China with abundant oil, and aligning their interests in the BRI and Vision 2030 projects. Iran, on the other hand, is a “close but complicated” partner (Scobell & Nader, 2016, p.74), with a poor international reputation and subject to ever-lasting UN and U.S-led sanctions, but a valuable source of oil, energy, and economic collaboration. All in all, up to this point, China has avoided to foster a clear and specific Middle Eastern policy, limiting its agenda for the region to the China-Arab Policy Paper, discussed in this chapter. Using direct references to the secular trade routes of the Silk Road, Chinese officials have sponsored a vision of mutual economic development across land and by sea, through the project of the Belt and Road Initiative (Scobell & Nader, 2016). Beijing’s main interests in the Middle East and the subsequent success of its projects imply a peaceful and stable environment, something that the region heavily lacks. Moreover, China does not contribute to military and security efforts, leaving the U.S as the only actor able to fulfill this role. It is exactly China’s unwillingness to embroil itself in security matters in the region, that prevents Beijing from being a real alternative power to the U.S, despite Middle Eastern sympathies.

The study of this thesis takes into consideration a power transition, in which China pursues its peaceful rise, without the occurrence of a hegemonic war between the Dragon and the Eagle. The friendly relations established by Middle Eastern countries with both the U.S and China have helped to uphold the status quo. Almost all regional countries, with the exception of Iran and Syria, have good ties with the United States, notably concerning the security, military, and economic fields, while most countries share progressively increasing economic relations with China (Alsulami, 2021). The fact that both the U.S and China strive to ensure stable oil and energy supplies from the region,

contributes to the relative calm between two countries that face such harsh competition (Alsulami, 2021). The status quo, as argued in Chapter 1, is working well for both Washington and Beijing and for Middle Eastern countries, since all of them are benefitting from the strategic partnerships established. Moreover, regional developments might help the fostering of the status quo, such as for example the Abraham Accords, signed between several Arab countries and Israel, with the mediation of the U.S could have helped the U.S assert its position in the region (U.S Department of State, 2020; Alsulami, 2021). However, the U.S through its last administrations has sent ambiguous messages about its involvement in the region, culminating with Biden's declaration of the troops' withdrawal from the region and several countries in the region have turned to China and Russia for assistance. Moreover, the self-proclaimed ideological superiority of the U.S and its belief in spreading democracy abroad, have turned many of the autarchic Arab countries towards the non-interference attitude of China (Alsulami, 2021; Scobell & Nader, 2016). The situation starts to get complicated concerning security issues: the U.S in fact, does not see China as a competitor in the region in this field, presuming that China is either unable or unwilling to take any real military position in the Middle East (Scobell & Nader, 2016; Alsulami, 2021). In fact, as discussed in this chapter, Beijing's influence in the Middle East has largely been economic. However, the increased role as a trade and investment champion also gives China a high-profile geopolitical status, and the PRC's growing energy needs make the region of paramount importance to China's economy (Scobell & Nader, 2016). Jonathan Fulton (2019b) recognizes that Beijing's lack of a long-term security and policy plans for the region might give the impression that China does not care to be involved in security issues and, as a consequence, to take any sides in regional rivalries. Nevertheless, Fulton argues, this view neglects to take into account, first of all the hierarchical nature of China's partnerships: as argued above in the Chapter, Beijing privileges relations with countries with which it has signed Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships above others, and secondly, it does not take into account China's interests for stability in the region (Fulton, 2019b). In fact, as diplomatic and economic relations between China and Middle Eastern countries continue to grow, it is highly probable that security cooperation will increase. In this sense, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been present in the ports of the Arabian Peninsula for quite a while now, as contingent for anti-piracy missions, and China has contributed also to several UN peacekeeping operations in Lebanon since 2006 (Fulton, 2019b). Moreover, also China's arms sale to countries in the region are increasing: in fact, Beijing

has been selling arms that the U.S cannot provide because of congressional oversight, such as armed drones and ballistic missile systems (Fulton, 2019b).

As a consequence, to the U.S slow but steady disengagement from regional affairs, and, on the contrary, a growing Chinese presence, Middle Eastern leaders have welcomed Beijing's growing interests in regional affairs. The BRI, for example, responds well to regional needs for development, also signaling the active involvement of the PRC as an investor country. All of this comes at a moment in which Western powers, and the U.S in particular, are slowly shifting away from the region due to what Jonathan Fulton calls "Middle East fatigue" (2019b:17).

In the next chapter, I will discuss the future of U.S-China competition in relation to the Middle East. In fact, presuming that China will pursue for the foreseeable future its "peaceful rise", in light of the Power Transition Theory the transition underway will arguably be a peaceful one, since it is happening at time in which America's disengagement from the region has natural causes. However, shall Beijing change its foreign policy agenda in the Middle East and become as assertive in the region as it is on matters concerning the South China Sea issues, or shall Washington become more aggressive with its rhetoric and its actions against Chinese firms, prolonging the Trade War initiated by Trump, it is highly probable that a clash between the two powers might occur. Analyzing Biden administration's plans for China and for the Middle East, I will try to understand whether PTT applies to explain the events or not. If not, I shall provide other theories that might do so better.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FUTURE OF U.S-CHINA POWER TRANSITION

In the previous Chapter, I tried to analyze in depth the relations that Beijing is establishing in the Middle East, specifically in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the consequences of these partnerships for the U.S, affirming that the “Middle East fatigue” is playing a crucial role in American disengagement from regional affairs. This Chapter is going to be focused on how we can foresee (with today’s instruments) the future of U.S-China relations, and most notably, what kind of power transition we can expect to take place in the Middle East in the next decades, taking into account the U.S declining image as a capable superpower in the region. Analyzing first the foreign policy agenda of the Biden administration towards China, and its differences and analogies with the previous ones of Mr. Obama and Mr. Trump, I will, secondly, try to go more in depth concerning the reasons why the Middle East is not going to be the ground of a conflictual power competition between the two superpowers, as it was during the Cold War, because the variables taken into account throughout the thesis, i.e. engagement in the region, dependence on oil and crude petroleum, and military presence, all point to the direction of a natural and possibly peaceful transition of power in the region. However, having said that, it is highly probable that the relations between the two superpowers could easily go sour for reasons not concerned with the Middle East, most notably a degradation of the situation in Taiwan, a military strike in South China Sea, or a cyberattack could cause the worsening of U.S-China relations to the breaking point. Then, I will conclude the chapter with an assessment of the foreseeable consequences that the U.S disengagement from the region will have for China, the two case studies, KSA and Iran, and for the region in general.

3.1 The Biden administration's "China policy": differences and analogies with Trump and Obama administrations

Before analyzing the analogies and differences between Biden and Trump administrations, it is important to take into account also the Obama administration's "China policy", considering that President Barack Obama was the first to publicly announce the famous "pivot to Asia" during his first term (2008-2012). When Obama took office in January 2009, the world was just four months into the Great Recession and at that time China was contributing to 35% of the growth of the global economy (Bader & Barboza, 2020). Thus, in a climate of economic crisis and uncertainty, the U.S felt that China, although already considered as a possible competitor, was needed to address some global issues linked mainly to the recession. The first real action of Obama's "pivot to Asia" was the State visit by the American President to Beijing in November 2009: it was the first time that a U.S President visited China in the first year of taking office (Li, 2016). The U.S "pivot" was seen as an attempt at a sustained and deepening of Washington's engagement with the Asia-Pacific region, in response to the region's growing relevance, and the international repercussions of China's rise (West, 2017). Nevertheless, Obama's pivot to Asia was not a successful move for his administration, considering that during the time he was President, the global scenario was deeply clashing with his plans: a global economic meltdown, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan still being an issue, a civil war in Syria and Yemen, and the failure of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Years later, the pivot is actually happening, but not because of Obama, but because of his former Vice President, Joe Biden and, ironically, Mr. Trump's administration (Pindell, 2021; Dunne, 2021a). In fact, as Charles W. Dunne argues in an article for the Arab Center Washington DC:

"the Trump Administration's success in encouraging normalization between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain through the Abraham Accords, as well as midwifing Israeli diplomatic ties with Morocco and Sudan, may prove a major boost to Biden's would-be pivot to Asia. By opening new avenues of regional cooperation, especially against Iran, the previous [Trump] administration may have contributed to regional stability and rendered Israel and America's partners in the Gulf somewhat more trusting of one another, and more willing to undertake joint action against common threats, particularly Iran" (Dunne, 2021a: no pagination).

James Pindell (2021) argues that the first and the biggest clue that Biden was going to carry out Obama's legacy came when he selected Antony Blinken to be the Secretary of State, since he was the appointed expert of Asia – the Deputy Secretary of State – under the Obama administration. At the time I am writing this thesis, Joe Biden has been the 46th President of the U.S.A for eight months. It is at this point clear to the majority of political observers that the Biden administration's "China policy" has been very similar to what Donald J. Trump left as legacy (Parpiani, 2021; Zadehali, 2020; Dollar, 2021). In fact, while Democrats and Republicans disagree on many domestic and foreign issues, China has been a noteworthy exception, connecting both parties to the same goal (Zadehali, 2020). Both parties and both administrations have been highly judgmental against Beijing's poor treatment of religious and ethnic minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang, and the violent repressions in Hong Kong (Zadehali, 2020). Similarly to Trump's policy agenda, bilaterally, Biden has not removed his predecessor's tariffs on goods coming from China and has continued to request compliance with the "Phase One" agreement – discussed in Chapter 1 –, including Chinese assurances to increase their imports of American goods and services by at least \$200 billion (Parpiani, 2021; Bown, 2021). Furthermore, concerning the technological sector, Biden has imposed prohibitions for U.S companies to invest in 59 Chinese defense and surveillance firms (Parpiani, 2021). Moreover, under the new President, the Federal Communications Commission has formally declared five Chinese companies, inter alia Huawei and ZTE, as "threats to U.S national security" (Parpiani, 2021, no pagination).

In his *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (INSSG), Joe Biden writes that the aim of his agenda is to strengthen U.S' advantages, spanning from technological development to cybersecurity and health management, all elements that will allow America to prevail in the strategic competition with China. In this sense, the President-elect Biden writes that:

“By restoring U.S. credibility and reasserting forward-looking global leadership, we will ensure that America, not China, sets the international agenda, working alongside others to shape new global norms and agreements that advance our interests and reflect our values” (INSSG, 2020: p. 20).

A lot of emphasis is put on the need for the U.S to re-gain international credibility and the trust of the allies. This happens because of the four year-mandate of Mr. Trump and the consequences that his personality, leadership style and policy agenda brought about. Richard Wike in an article for the Pew Research Center (2020), provides several surveys, made in 37 nations, demonstrating the degree of dissatisfaction of U.S allies with the former President Trump.

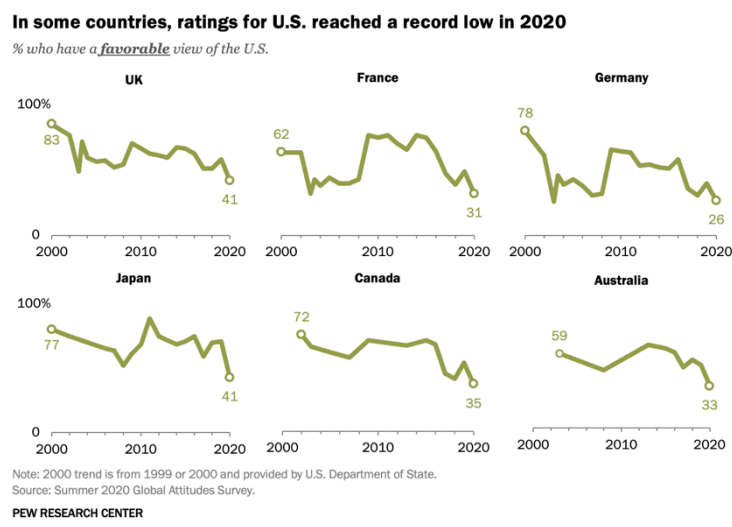


Figure 9: Wike (2020) 2020 Global Attitudes Survey, Pew Research Center

As this image demonstrates, U.S' credibility was at all time low among its allies, and especially in the U.K there was the sharpest decline registered: the percentage of those who had a favorable view of the U.S went from an 83% of people in 2000 to just 41% in 2020 (Wike, 2020). Also, Germany and France registered the same decline in favorability towards the U.S in 2020 as they did back in 2003 at the time of the Iraq War (Wike, 2020). The election of Joe Biden brought a new wave of trust and credibility in the U.S by its allies, giving new chances to the West to be better equipped for what is about to come. Other than the similarities in the "China policy" between Trump and Biden, there are also discontinuities and deviations from the Trump administration, especially in the rhetoric and choice of words of the two Presidents. Joe Biden is, politically speaking, more sophisticated than Trump, therefore, he does not need a sanctioning policy strategy towards China, because his predecessor already prepared the ground for that. In this sense, the Biden administration has not yet introduced new policies or a sanction regime against Beijing, because it is following what the Trump administration left (Kai, 2021). The real change we can observe from the two administrations is that the Biden administration decided to cancel the Trump-led bans against TikTok and WeChat, saying however that

apps created by Chinese-owned businesses may still face some challenges in the U.S (Parpiani, 2021; Claburn, 2021). In fact, in Biden's Executive Order 13873, it is stated that any threat to the information and communication supply chain of the U.S "poses an unacceptable risk to the national security of the United States or the security and safety of United States persons" (E.O. 13873, 2019, p. 22690). For this reason, TikTok and WeChat, although safe for the time being, could find themselves again into dangerous waters if they fail to provide verifiable privacy claim or to provide more transparency concerning the operation of their software (Claburn, 2021).

Moreover, always going back to Biden's moderate tones, he has definitely changed the American attitude towards China and the CCP, preferring an approach based on dialogue and communication between U.S and Chinese officials.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken has suggested that, concerning the "China policy", there are three types of issue areas: ones characterized by confrontation, ones characterized by competition, and ones characterized by cooperation, on the basis of common interests (Dollar, 2021). In general, as observed also in the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, Washington's focus has definitively shifted away from terrorism and its issues and it is much centered on great power competition, such as China's rise. Washington's foreign policy agenda has ultimately changed, bringing end to an era characterized by the "War on Terrorism" and the promotion and export of democracy abroad. In this sense, Blinken has said that:

"We [the U.S] will not promote democracy through costly military interventions or by attempting to overthrow authoritarian regimes by force (...) we've tried these tactics in the past. However well-intentioned, they haven't worked. They've given 'democracy promotion' a bad name, and they've lost the confidence of the American people" (Blinken, 2021: no pagination).

3.2 U.S-China power transition in the Middle East: does PTT apply to the power competition in the region?

"Hot" wars have been the rule more than the exception in past power transitions and Graham Allison (2017) clearly states this in his book, *Destined for War*: out of sixteen power transitions happened in history, twelve of them resulted in war. This data should worry us concerning what will be the future of Sino-American relations, but we should try to analyze this notion carefully.

It has become a cliché to describe the U.S-China relationship with the same lens as we analyzed the U.S-USSR relationship in the 20th century: Cold War. As I have previously mentioned in this thesis, the current U.S-China power competition cannot be labeled as such because it lacks the three elements that instead characterized the U.S-Soviet Union bipolar confrontation:

“the United States and China are not involved in a global ideological struggle for the hearts and minds of third parties; today’s highly globalized world is not and cannot easily be divided into starkly separated economics blocs; and the United States and China are not leading opposing alliances systems such as those that fought bloody proxy wars in the mid-twentieth century in Korea and Vietnam and created nuclear crises in places such as Berlin and Cuba” (Christensen, 2021: no pagination).

Adopting unilaterally the same cold war policies, Washington would antagonize its allies, who are heavily dependent, economically, to adopt hostile policies towards Beijing (Christensen, 2021). For this reason, Biden administration’s next step should be focused on nurturing its alliances (over 60 countries with which the U.S has tied relations and security partnerships throughout the 20th and 21st centuries), rather than continuing with the rhetoric started by Mr. Trump, and as shown by the INSSG, focus on the, and which comprise the greatest comparative advantage in the U.S arsenal (Christensen, 2021). Moreover, calling the current competition between Washington and Beijing “Cold War” clearly underestimates the magnitude of the power transition underway: in fact, the Chinese economy is far stronger and far more integrated with the international system than the late-20th century Soviet one. Plus, today the majority Western countries suffer from deep internal divisions, which contribute to making the U.S-China competition more challenging for the West than the Cold War was (Tran, 2021). The biggest clue, however, that cancels any opportunity to call the U.S-China power struggle “New Cold War” is the BRI itself. Oftentimes compared to the Marshall Plan and bearing some similarities with it, the two projects have completely different aims: the common point we can find between the two mega-projects is the economic and political background that characterized their creation: for the Marshall Plan, the background was the end of World War Two and the devastation it brought to Europe combined with the leavings of the Great Depression; for the BRI, the prolonged effects of the Great Recession and the global economic stagnation. We can call these two different historical moments as characterized

by “market failure” or “global power vacuum” (Shen & Chan, 2018, p. 2), but what matters is that both the Marshall Plan in 1948 and the BRI in 2013 were announced at times when the world system was lacking stability (Shen & Chan, 2018). Other than the historical context, the two projects do not have further similarities. The Marshall Plan, the highest achievement within the framework of the Truman Doctrine, was an *exclusionary* aid program, backed by the U.S, with the clear intention of carving out an important share of influence in Western Europe and Japan in order to contain the Soviet Union and the likely spread of communism in the devastated areas in Europe (Chance, 2016). In contrast, the Belt and Road Initiative is a much more inclusive program, which includes a high amount of countries across all continents, namely 40 countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa, 34 countries in Europe and Central Asia, here included also 18 countries of the EU), 24 countries in East Asia and Pacific, 17 countries in Middle East and North Africa (MENA), 19 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 6 countries in South East Asia (Green BRI Center, 2021).

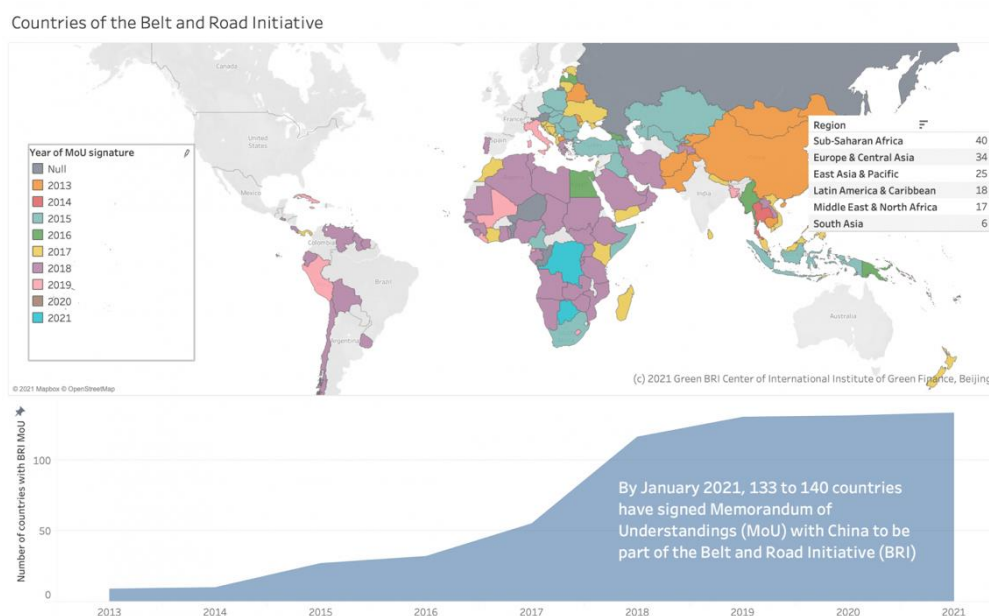


Figure 10: IIGF Green BRI Center, 2021

The AIIB and the BRI have been highly criticized and demonized by U.S officials since their establishment. The Obama administration took the establishment of these two institutions very seriously, without however understanding that both projects aim to meet infrastructure demands that are not being satisfied by any existing institution (Chance, 2016). While it is obvious that the programs clearly attempt to increase China’s status as an international actor and a regional champion, it is likewise true that the main motives

behind these initiatives are very concrete economic considerations (Chance, 2016). Thus, again, it would be an underestimation to refer to the current state of U.S-China relations with the same lens of the Cold War, because the engines at play at this stage of the 21st century are much more complicated, interconnected, and interdependent than they ever were.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, we cannot consider China to be a dissatisfied country, because the country has largely benefitted, and is currently benefitting, from the present world order, although still disagreeing with some aspects of it, namely deeming the international system too unbalanced and advantageous more for the West than the Rest. Beijing is not looking to overthrow the current global system, but it is instead trying to gain more space within it to assert its status (Bremmer, 2020).

Having said that, it is important however to note that there are areas of disagreement, and even danger, between the two countries: just to name a few, the Uyghur issue, the status of Taiwan, the militarization of South China Sea, the violent repression of pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, and, last but not least, the technological decoupling between the U.S and China, that will likely leave little room for cooperation in the future (Bremmer, 2020). Having assessed that it would not be correct to call the U.S-China power transition a “New Cold War”, “Second Cold War” or “Cold War 2.0” and acknowledging that there are nonetheless areas of danger between the two countries, it is now important to recognize the policy options at U.S disposal in order to successfully and peacefully deal with China.

3.3 Policy options at U.S disposal to tackle the “China threat”

According to Jeffrey A. Bader (2016, pp. 4-5), who served as senior director for East Asian affairs on the National Security Council during the Obama administration, the U.S has three policy options to respond to the “China threat”: the first is accommodation: this policy option sees China as an inevitable key player in the Western Pacific region and Asia in general, and it is pointless for the U.S to fight this situation. What Washington should do is to accept this situation because resistance to Beijing’s ambitions in this region will only feed China’s hostility toward the West. In a sense, this policy refers to the policy embarked by Henry Kissinger in the 1970s during the opening of the Sino-American talks in the hope to find a new way to contain the USSR.

The second is containment: those who support this view argue that China’s ambition is to dominate the Western Pacific and to weaken, isolate and expel the U.S from the region.

The proponents of this policy option argue that the interests of both countries in the Western Pacific and in the rest of the world are fundamentally different and incompatible. Thus, in order to properly advance policy options, this incompatibility should be acknowledged. The third is global cooperation: the supporters of this policy option argue that the relationship with China cannot, and should not, be reduced and oversimplified to one of pure rivalry.

Out of the three policy options, the most feasible and sustainable for the long term is option three. According to Bader (2016), there are several problems with just accommodation and the containment policy options, because they focus too much on security issues, without taking into consideration the fundamental role played by economic interdependence. In this sense, option three gathers elements from option one and two, recognizing that a level of accommodation for China's rise is necessary, and so is a level of strategic rivalry: the goal should be to find a compromise able to protect the different (and sometimes conflicting) interests in play (Bader, 2016, p. 8).

Simon Lester, in an article for CATO Institute Journal (2020), argues that “what is needed is a nuanced and thoughtful approach to the many real concerns that exist” (Lester, 2020, p. 704) in the relations between the two superpowers. In fact, the core argument of the scholar's article is the renewal of the relations between the U.S and its allies, especially the EU and the United Kingdom: a group composed by like-minded countries, who share the same values of democracy, rule of law, protection of fundamental freedoms, and role of the market could foster the U.S to undertake international projects that reinforce these same values and limit the tones and rhetoric of containment towards Beijing. (Lester, 2020, p. 704).

3.3.1 Engagement in the region: U.S' “Middle East fatigue” vs. China's growing presence

What suggests a possible peaceful outcome of U.S-China competition in the region is the role of the two countries in the Middle East. In fact, as comprehensively argued before, China is building and establishing high-level relationship with a number of key countries in the region, especially in the Gulf, investing in infrastructures and long-term projects through the framework of the BRI. China's growing interest in the Middle East comes at a time in which the American engagement in the region is at an all-time low. Not only has the country withdrawn from Afghanistan in a matter of two weeks, but in the last years, Washington has withdrawn air defense capabilities from several other Arab

countries: Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and Jordan. However, the highest number of withdrawals have been registered in Saudi Arabia, an important American ally. Another sign of disengagement from region's affair came right after Mr. Trump took office in 2017, when his administration decided to resign the long-awaited and over-negotiated JCPOA – the Iran's Nuclear Deal, and the withdrawal of U.S troops from Syria (Wise, 2020). Moreover, during his 2019 election campaign, Mr. Biden has stated that if he were to be elected President, he would not have continued Mr. Trump's practice of "coddling dictators" of the Middle East at the expenses of U.S national security and interests (Erikson, 2019, no pagination). In this sense, the U.S-Saudi relationship has been heavily impacted by the election of Mr. Biden, especially for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's alleged involvement in Jamal Khashoggi's murder and the destructive Saudi-led war operations in Yemen, two actions that have been highly criticized by the President-elect (Dunne, 2021b). Today, the U.S-Saudi relationship is complicated, with the U.S on one side, seeking to deemphasize its diplomatic and military engagement in the region in order to focus more of its assets in the Asia-Pacific region, and Saudi Arabia on the other side, judging Washington's distancing as an additional evidence of U.S' long-term goal to decrease its security commitment to the region, and eventually leaving the Gulf states vulnerable to an Iranian aggression (Dunne, 2021b).

In this sense, the principle for which, as Organski originally argued, a power transition is characterized by the dominant superpower being threatened/challenged by an ascending power to the point of risking the outbreak of a hegemonic war, does not fully apply to the situation in the Middle East. In fact, what we can observe in the region is a natural shift of the balance of power away from the U.S and towards Beijing, enabled by the "Middle East fatigue" and sharpened by the natural distancing of the U.S from the dynamics of the region. Naturally, this process is just at the beginning and not yet near to a full U.S estrangement from Middle Eastern affairs, but this tendency is underway.

3.3.2 Dependence on oil and crude petroleum: U.S toward energy security vs. China as top importer of crude petroleum.

This is perhaps the most controversial aspect of this thesis, considering that, as far back as the 1960s and 1970s, the Middle East was the center of American foreign policy for its oil abundance and the first oil shock of 1973 strengthened, in a way, the relations between Washington and the oil producing countries. During that time, in fact the "petrodollar interdependence", as David M. Wight writes in his book *Oil Money: Middle*

East Petrodollars and the Transformation of US Empire, 1967-1988, replaced the previous and highly unequal relationship between the U.S and the oil-producing countries, (Wight, 2021; Del Pero, 2021). The petrodollars were born after Nixon's announcement of the suspension of the dollar convertibility into gold the 15th of August 1971, putting *de facto* end to the Bretton Woods international monetary system. More or less in the meantime, the Nixon administration struck a deal with the richest oil producing country in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, to standardize oil prices in dollars. This system allowed the U.S dollar to become the world's reserve currency for oil trade because the petrodollar recycling created a continuous demand for U.S. assets. Thus, instead of providing cheap oil, the oil-producing countries started to offer generous amounts of petrodollars. On one hand, it is true that Washington had to accept higher prices for oil, but in return for that, the U.S maintained a hegemonic role that somehow strengthened the *Pax Americana*, i.e., the U.S-led international system, enjoying advantageous opportunities to export its goods and services to these rich but still underdeveloped partners. However, the most important outcome of this petrodollar interdependence was an apparently unlimited source of liquidity for American banks. The U.S dollar, replacing gold as the global monetary unit, gave the U.S an unparalleled economic and financial dominance that we can observe also in the oil industry (Del Pero, 2021)⁴.

Having said that, it would seem difficult, if not impossible, to argue that energy and oil could be an important clue that backs the hypothesis that the two powers, China, and the U.S, are not competing for the Middle Eastern oil. However, it is also true that today's dynamics are a lot different than those of the 1970s, and U.S' own standing in the international arena is a lot different today than it was back then.

China, as already mentioned before, has an insatiable thirst for oil, needed to support its impressive economic growth. For this reason, Beijing has quickly become the first and largest importer of crude petroleum, importing almost half of its oil from Middle Eastern countries, with Saudi Arabia and Iran being its major providers (OEC, 2019). On the other hand, the U.S last year, in 2020, "exported about 8.51 MMb/d and imported about 7.86

⁴ For more in-depth history about the First Oil Shock of 1973 and the establishment of the petrodollar system, I recommend reading the following books:

Gowan, P. (1999) *The Global Gamble: Washington's Faustian Bid for World Dominance*, London: Verso.
Terzian, P. (1985) *OPEC: The Inside Story*, London: Zed books.

Spiro, D.E (1999) *The Hidden Hand of American Hegemony: Petrodollar Recycling and International Markets*, Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press.

MMb/d of petroleum, making the United States a net annual petroleum exporter for the first time since at least 1949” (EIA, 2020).

Thus, concerning the energy sector, it seems that the U.S will no longer need the abundant oil supply provided by middle eastern countries as it did from the 1970s onward, lowering thus American interests to secure energy from these countries.

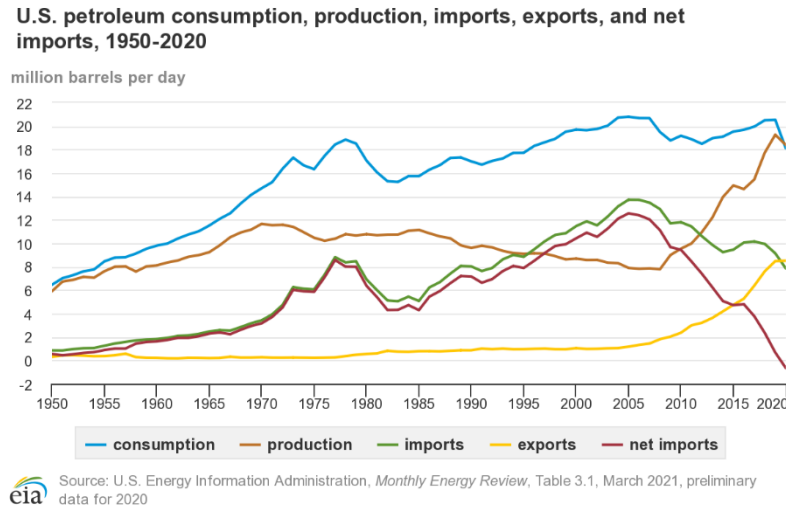


Figure 11: EIA (2021) *Monthly Energy Review*

3.3.3 Military presence

Militarily speaking, from the Obama administration, the U.S has slowly but surely cut the expenses and the contingents present in the territories, to focus more on the Asia-Pacific region, initiating the famous “pivot to Asia” in 2010 (Lieberthal, 2011). Simultaneously with these developments on the U.S side, China is increasing its soft military approach in the region: always rejecting the “spheres of influence” mentality, Beijing’s policies allow temporary military deployment when Chinese interests are threatened, and in the last years, in the name of peaceful development and stability, the non-military role of Chinese navy has broadened to different tasks, such as naval diplomacy, fight against piracy, disaster relief, and ocean rescue, which have become crucial functions of the Dragon’s navy in the region (Sun, 2015). According to Degang Sun, it is probable that China will continue to consolidate economic and trade exchanges in the region, by integrating them with a soft military presence, to be located around the most important areas of Beijing’s overseas interests. Doing so, China will likely increase its wealth and achieve a peaceful, gradual transfer of power (Sun, 2015).

In this sense, it would be smarter for the two superpowers to not look at each other as competitors, but as allies in the region. In fact, even if several economic investments made

by China in the region could undermine the U.S, such as China's pursuit to incorporate surveillance technologies that could have negative implications for human rights throughout the Middle East and other Central Asian countries, other investments made in the infrastructure sector could foster real regional growth (Rhoades & Kaye, 2021). According to Ashley Rhoades and Dalia D. Kaye (2021), it would be counter-productive for the U.S to waste resources and energy to cast China out from the region, when Washington could profit from Chinese healthy investments, on one hand, and mitigate China's negative aspects on the other.

3.4 Middle East as possible ground for Sino-American cooperation

Both countries have a wide array of reasons to be in contrast with each other: the U.S has founded apprehension regarding Beijing's policies in the region, namely the sale of weapons to countries who are accused of harboring terrorists, China's growing relations with countries openly hostile to Washington, and China's lack of compliance with nonproliferation norms and human rights issues; China, on the other hand, is concerned about what it perceives to be a strong U.S hegemonic and unilateral approach to the Middle East, and most importantly, Washington's support for and attempts to arm Taiwan. However, as already discussed in the previous chapters because Beijing's interests in the region ultimately need some degree of stability and security, the PRC has to depend on the U.S military to ensure safe shipping lanes for oil and goods transportation and promote political stability in the region (Dorraj & English, 2012).

Today, the U.S-China rivalry for oil in the Middle East is not a major concern for scholars and policymakers, considering that as of 2021, the U.S imports most of its oil from Canada and Mexico, respectively 4088 and 631 thousands of barrels, and only about 15% from Arab OPEC nations (Dorraj & English, 2012; World Population Review, 2020). However, as global demand for energy keeps increasing and supplies grow tighter, it is foreseeable that the U.S might seek oil security from the Middle East again, and when it will happen, China's role in the region might be stronger than today's, resulting in one of Manochehr Dorraj and James E. English' three possible scenarios:

“[first] the United States will have to look elsewhere for energy, [second] China and the United States could cooperate in the Middle East to deliver greater quantities of energy to the global market, or [third] competition

between the two petro-powers could intensify to the point of conflict” (Dorraj & English, 2012: p.188).

In this sense, the most desirable outcome for both powers would be the cooperation route and more interestingly, as Joshua Jahani in an article for *The Independent* magazine (2021) puts forward, the Middle East could represent itself the ground of this newfound cooperation. In fact, the Middle East could be considered nowadays a sort of “new Europe”, in the sense that much like Europe was the middle ground for the U.S-USSR Cold War, the Middle East is more or the less the same for the China-US relationship – geographically, politically, and economically (Jahani, 2021). In fact, rather than focusing on past conflicts and lost causes, the Biden administration should have the vision to craft policies based on the reality of today’s Middle East, which is a transforming society shifting from a “20th century defined by conflict and insecurity to a 21st century where the Silk Road is once again the social, economic, cultural, and political center of the world” (Jahani, 2021). In this sense, Jahani has provided a clear and far-reaching position regarding the so-called U.S-China “power struggle”: instead of looking at the Middle East just for its oil, American policymakers and investors should learn from Beijing’s pragmatic and business-oriented approach and propose their own version of it, by utilizing the Middle East’s neutral ground to increase cooperation with China and leave behind political clashes. The two powers have without a doubt a variety of conflicts of interest in the region, but their common ground can be found in their mutual interest in resolving lingering instability that promotes transnational terrorism and violence (Ross, 2020). Some signs of this more cooperative attitude on both sides are emerging, such as both countries’ vital interests in nuclear non-proliferation technologies in Iran, for example. What could help the cooperation process might also be to limit U.S use of military action in the region and give up once and for all the unilateral actions, preferring multilateral initiatives (Dorraj & English, 2012).

However, in the current state of Sino-American precarious relations in East Asia, the continuation of the trade war, and the absence of a sustained and functional dialogue between the two, Chinese cooperation with the U.S concerning nuclear non-proliferation efforts has not seen the light of day (Ross, 2020). Moreover, as Washington withdraws from Afghanistan, the security and power vacuum left in the country might be filled by either China or Russia while the new Taliban government is establishing itself, and not allowing an American presence in the territory for the foreseeable future. We will see in

the following paragraphs the consequences that this withdrawal will have for the two superpowers and for the regional countries, keeping in mind Saudi Arabia and Iran as protagonists of this thesis.

3.5 Consequences of U.S disengagement for Saudi Arabia and Iran: China and Russia enter the picture

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (also known as MBS), understanding that the relationship with the U.S could go sour any time, has started since the beginning of 2021 to sew ties with unlikely partners: Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Oman, Turkey, and improving relations with Qatar after putting an end to the four-year blockade (Bostock, 2021). Saudi Arabia's recent engagements with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and other countries in the region indicates that Riyadh knows it can no longer count on the U.S to have its back. In a sense, this is what Washington was hoping: encourage regional dialogues, without the mediation of the U.S, in order to open new corridors for cooperation and trust-building. U.S' disengagement from the region has encouraged two decades-long enemies, Iran and Saudi Arabia, to finally end the diplomatic frost and start talks about security in the Gulf region (Bostock, 2021; Dunne, 2021). However, it is also clear that, whether needed, China could enter the talks and mediate a possible peaceful cooperation process between Tehran and Riyadh, and Beijing would have all the motivations to do so. First, the two countries are the most important countries for Chinese commercial activity in the Gulf, but also in the Middle East region in general. As already discussed, besides China's heavy reliance on crude petroleum from these two countries, Saudi Arabia and Iran are also the largest recipients of Chinese capital in the region (Burton, 2021). For these reasons, it is clear that the instability that emerges from their rivalry is the enemy of China's business interests in the area. Second, Guy Burton (2021) argues, China has the means to engage with both countries on a substantive basis: its explicit pledge to non-interference in domestic affairs gives Beijing the impression of an "honest broker". Moreover, both countries enjoy the highest form of ties in China's diplomatic arsenal since 2016, and such partnerships aim to widen relations beyond the mere economic sphere to include in the foreseeable future political interactions and exchange (Burton, 2021).

Concerning Iran, the signing of the 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China meant that a new challenge was created for the U.S to handle in the region. The agreement has been the outcome of 40 years of rising economic, trade and military

relations between the two countries and this new partnership, considering also both countries' close ties with Russia and the trio's confrontational relations with Washington, carries with it a solid possibility for changing the regional geo-strategic scenery. Up to this point, Beijing has been careful not to jeopardize its profitable relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Saikal, 2021). However, China's deal with Iran is destined to be perceived as concerning for the Gulf states, Israel, and Washington itself. In fact, the Gulf states and Israel live in a state of anxiety because of the perceived "Iranian threat", provided by Tehran's increased influence across the Levant (Iraq, Syria and Lebanon) and Yemen as well as its support for the Palestinian cause against Israeli occupation (Saikal, 2021). If we combine Tehran's close relations with both Moscow and Beijing, it is possible to foresee a strong alliance between the three powers, which could give Iran a strong bargaining position at the negotiation table for a new JCPOA with the United States. President-elect Joe Biden has in fact encouraged a return of Washington to the Nuclear Deal, after Mr. Trump withdrawing from agreement after years of negotiations to make it happen, but on the condition that Tehran should re-establish a number of commitments it revoked as a retaliation for Mr. Trump's withdrawal. Iran, however, has dismissed this request and has demanded instead that the U.S should first lift all of its sanctions against the country (Saikal, 2021). In fact, while the Biden administration has affirmed the willingness to restore the JCPOA, Washington has continued the "maximum pressure" sanctions-policy launched by former President Trump. Therefore, it could be expected that now that the U.S is no longer willing to engage in a deeper level in the region, Russia and China could fill the vacuum and establish high level relationship with Tehran.

Moscow could enter the conversation too. In fact, Russia very recently, August 24, signed a military cooperation agreement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Despite the elements and aims of the agreement being still very vague and not transparent, the fact that these two countries even took the effort to sign an agreement is very significant, considering that just one year ago, in 2020, the Moscow and Riyadh were in the midst of an oil price war⁵. Thus, this agreement, signed in the aftermath of the collapse of the US-

⁵ Saudi-Russian Oil War happened in March 2020, when members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and Russia (together forming the OPEC+) decided, in response to COVID-19 pandemic and the shrinking of demand for oil, to collectively reduce the production of oil and cut supply for 1 million barrels a day. Russia was destined to be the most hit by this reduction, with a cut of 500.000 barrels a day. Saudi Arabia, which is the leading country of OPEC, proposed this strategy in order to keep oil prices high and continue to provide high revenues for OPEC, whose countries heavily depend on oil

backed Afghan government and the consequent establishment of a Taliban one, is a signal that the KSA does not feel that it can count on the U.S and for this reason, is “willing to hedge its bets by turning to Moscow” (Katz, 2021). Moreover, Crown Prince MBS had good relationship with the previous Trump administration, something that President Joe Biden cannot claim. In fact, the Biden administration has been more critical vis-à-vis Riyadh for the Kingdom’s violations of human rights and, most importantly, the alleged involvement of MBS in the murdering of Washington’s Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Thus, the signing of this agreement is also a sign for Washington that not only Saudi Arabia has no intentions to change its conduct, but that there are other countries Riyadh can work without the human rights strings attached (Katz, 2020).

Moreover, the newly announced China-Iran-Russia naval cooperation in the Gulf adds to the list of agreements between China, Russia, and the Gulf states. In fact, as the U.S withdraws and decreases the number of naval forces left in the region, it is vital for the three countries to be proactive and find security solutions against piracy in the Gulf, since their oil shipments and imports highly depend on safe and secure waters for cargos and ships (Zhang, 2021; Zhongping, 2021). The announcement of this maritime project between the three countries has a significant political weight: because of the timing, the maritime cooperation shows that Beijing and Moscow support Iranian foreign policy agenda and nuclear demands under the pretext of securing international shipments and protecting them against pirates in the Gulf (Zhang, 2021; Zhongping, 2021). The three countries have highly criticized the chaotic withdrawal of U.S forces from Afghanistan, blaming Washington for creating an unstable and unsafe environment in the region. Against this backdrop, in fact, countries such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have agreed to drop their objections about Iranian full membership to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) following regional security troubles in Afghanistan (Zhang, 2020; Shira & Associates, 2021). Tehran’s full membership will encourage the SCO’s security system and assist Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with intelligence and military assistance (Shira & Associates, 2021).

revenues. However, Russia, opted out this plan, effectively dissolving the OPEC+ partnership. Saudi Arabia, in retaliation for Russia’s behavior, started to dramatically reduce its oil export prices, starting an actual price war with Moscow. This resulted in an unprecedented drop in global oil prices throughout March and April 2020 as consumption remained low while production continued (Ward, 2020; KVB Prime, 2020; Ng, 2020).

3.6 Regional consequences of U.S disengagement: how the Afghan issue is going to shape regional and international relations

The U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent insecurity in the country has been the most important and destabilizing event of 2021, raising major concerns among neighboring countries, regarding threats of cross-border terrorism and drug trafficking that might affect domestic and regional security and stability (Sakhi & Pforzheimer, 2021). Regional actors in Central Asia are particularly worried because recent outbreaks of violence in Afghanistan are affecting parts of the provinces bordering with the north of the country. This includes the escalation of the armed conflict at the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border which prompted a Russian intervention in support of the former Soviet Republic, Tajikistan (Sakhi & Pforzheimer, 2021). Beijing, without having been directly involved in the U.S 20-year war in Afghanistan, has succeeded in the past few months at promoting itself as a valid alternative to Washington, fostering its role as a “sponsor of stability” in the country and willing to play a key economic role in the future of Afghanistan, a role that will become increasingly important as the Taliban consolidate their power (Gili, 2021; Bertolotti, 2021).

Beijing has wisely and patiently focused its efforts on the economic sector, winning numerous contracts for the construction of transport infrastructures, obtaining the rights to exploit the largest mineral and energy deposits in Afghanistan. However, the willingness of the Chinese to be present in the country is not limited to these aspects only. For some time, even before the collapse of August 2021, China had opened a political channel of collaboration with the Afghan government, on one hand, and, since 2015, also an official channel of dialogue and negotiation with the Taliban; a dialogue that has thus paved the way for the strategic agreement between Beijing and Kabul, which is in the interests of Beijing, and of the Taliban themselves (Bertolotti, 2021; Nouwens et al., 2021). However, it is also very likely that China is more concerned about the return of the Taliban than it shows publicly. The PRC has fostered and sustained communication channels with the Taliban over the years and since the U.S announced their withdrawal from the country, China has asked for security assurances during meetings with Taliban delegations, while offering to contribute to the economic reconstruction of the country (Nouwens et al., 2021). Despite the potential for economic gains through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the large reserves of rare earth-elements in the country, since 2007, Beijing has only invested \$3.5 billion in the country, and none of these investments were part of the BRI framework (Gili, 2021). This means that China is worried to invest and

sponsor infrastructure projects through the BRI in a country so fragile and so destabilized, fearing reputation issues.

Back to the Gulf states, Iran has gone from rival (in 2001) to somewhat “friendly” (today) relations with the Taliban regime. The word “friendly” is maybe stronger than the actual state of relations between the two regimes, since for decades the Taliban and Iranians, ethnically and religiously divided, have been killing each other. Today, Iran and the Taliban continue to not share the same religious and cultural values and political ideology, but both recognize that a strategic partnership might be ideal than enmity of rivalry. The alignment of the two countries stands on two basic principles: first, they both share a strong repudiation of U.S influence in the region. Iran has done everything in its power to remove the U.S from Iraq on its western border, and the Taliban have done more or less the same thing in Afghanistan on its eastern border (Nouwens et al., 2021).

Second, both Iran and the Taliban need what John Raine calls “strategic depth” (Nouwens et al., 2021), meaning that both countries need allies in strategic provinces: Iran needs an ally in Herat and western Afghanistan, while the Taliban needs it on all sides, in order to counteract the likely inexistent/very limited support it will have as a regime from the international community (Nouwens et al., 2021). However, these alignments rest in very fragile foundations. In fact, sectarian tensions over the Hazara community, water sharing disputes, drug trafficking, and refugee crisis might have negative impacts on the precarious dialogue between the two parties.

Saudi Arabia was one of the very few countries to back and recognize the Taliban regime back in 2001, but today’s Saudi Arabia is very different from 2001-Saudi Arabia. Sponsoring a Taliban government is no longer a tempting offer for Riyadh: today’s Saudi leadership is less prone and willing to support distant causes out of religion solidarity and is more focused on building a modern country through its Vision 2030 project and limiting religious influence at home (Nouwens et al., 2021). Emile Hokayem argues that what will be interesting to observe as things unfold is the Tehran-Kabul relations and what will a possible cooperation between the two means for Riyadh (Nouwens et al., 2021).

Conclusions

At the time I am writing this thesis, American engagement in the Middle East is at an all-time low: Biden administration decided to maintain the Trump-signed withdrawal of the U.S troops in Afghanistan, trusting that U.S-armed and trained Afghan troops could contain and win over the Taliban. However, for a different array of reasons, the Afghan army failed to stop the Taliban advance, letting them, therefore, reach undisturbed the capital Kabul. In the last few days, the international community has witnessed the collapse of a country, with the international airport being stormed by Afghan citizens, scared to go back to how things were not less than 20 years ago; children and newborns being handed over Western troops to spare them a life under a regime in which basic human rights are not respected, especially women's rights. These images have touched and affected the public opinion everywhere, because, thanks to social media and the fast communication instruments that we have today, we know what is happening in this exact moment thousands of kilometers away from home. Seeing people seeking to escape Kabul, climbing on Western military airplanes while taking off, and seeing the same people falling from these airplanes, has given enough evidence that the U.S has failed its 20 year-long effort in the country. And while Western embassies are rushing to close and evacuate the diplomatic personnel, China and Russia have decided to keep their doors open and try a rapprochement with the future Afghan government, allowing China, thus, to expand its reach also in this country, and maybe in the future, allowing Afghanistan to take part to the Belt and Road Initiative. During a phone call between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, the two leaders reiterated the willingness to foster cooperation and communications between the two countries and actively participate to the process of a peaceful transition in Afghanistan and promote the fight on terrorism, interruption of the corridors of drug smuggling, prevention of the spillover of security threats from the country, and safeguarding the regional stability (Keyue & Xin, 2021). Thus, for the time being, the two countries seem to have come to an agreement concerning the imminent future of their relations in Afghanistan now that the U.S has left the country. Will this "gentlemen's agreement" last, or are we about to assist to an arm wrestling between Xi and Putin over influence in Afghanistan and in the rest of Central Asia? Only time, I guess, will give us answers.

At the beginning of this research, the core argument of this final dissertation was the U.S and China competition for geopolitical power and influence in the Middle East. For months I have been convinced that the Middle East was going to be the next ground for

a great power transition, with important geopolitical arm wrestling between the two powers. However, and I think this to be the beauty of research, I was proven wrong by recent developments. There are numerous variables that suggest a possible peaceful power transition in the Middle East between Washington and Beijing, with engagement in the region, dependence on oil, and military presence being the ones taken into account in this thesis. From what we could gather from this in-depth analysis of United States and China's foreign policies, with special regard to the Middle East, it is arguable that if the two countries play their cards well, a hegemonic war (with disastrous consequences for the entire world) might be avoidable. It is also true that neither Washington nor Beijing are willing to go that far, for the reasons already shown in this thesis, and among them economic interdependence is at the top of the priority list. Plus, in light of the Power Transition Theory, China, except for some rare cases, has been supportive of and benefitting from the international order, removing any doubts about a probable dissatisfied power willing to take over the current world system and set the international agenda, creating a sort of renewed *Pax Sinica* opposed to the *Pax Americana* in place from 1945 to at least the 2000s (Sargent, 2018; Golub, 2010). China has found a way to align its economic interests with the dominant system, actively promoting multilateralism and mutual development with its two main projects: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

Thus, the first hypothesis that saw Beijing as a dissatisfied power, willing to challenge the U.S power stance in the international arena is not applicable, demonstrated also by China's participation in most important international institutions such as the World Trade Organization, (WTO), United Nations, (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank (WB) and its occasional compliance with international norms.

The second hypothesis too, that expected that a conflictual power transition would happen in the Middle East between the two powers, is not applicable. As largely shown in Chapter 3, even though at a first glance it looks like it, the Middle East has not the same weight for the two powers. A different argumentation could have been done if today's events were happening 20-15 years ago, but of course, back then, China was not today's Dragon and the U.S would have reacted very differently to Chinese presence in the Middle East. As of 2021, the U.S is slowly withdrawing from the region, after two decades of failed and unsuccessful military operations to free the region from terrorism and export their democracy. On the other hand, China is relying its foreign policy in the region only on economic gains and mutual development agreements. Beijing's detachment from

domestic interference, human rights and democracy demands have caught the attention of regional leaders, who saw in Chinese investments and heavy reliance on crude petroleum an opportunity for their own economic growth. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, thanks to Chinese investments in the framework of the BRI and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed by the two in 2016, is trying to shift its economy, which is largely based on oil revenues, to a modern country with a diversified portfolio. Iran is leveraging its ties with both Russia and China to strengthen its bargaining position at the negotiation table for a possible American return to the Nuclear Deal (JCPOA). Thus, now that the United States is slowly moving away from the region, Gulf states are increasingly looking East to satisfy their development goals. In this sense, the power transition underway in the region, has not the elements to become conflictual and war-prone simply because the U.S is tired of being the police of the Middle East – what Jonathan Fulton called “Middle East fatigue”. Given that a war between the two superpowers in the Middle East is unlikely, Washington and Beijing could seize this opportunity and try the cooperation route. As discussed in Chapter 3, there are all the elements to carry out mutual beneficial talks, and the Middle East could represent the cooperation ground (instead of the competition one) between the two.

The U.S messy withdrawal from Afghanistan has in fact, changed the dynamics at play in the region, considering the highest U.S contingency was displaced precisely in Afghanistan itself. In Chapter 3 I tried to set out some possible consequences of this act for China, for the two case studies, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, and also for Russia, concluding that the power and security vacuum left by the U.S will be quickly filled by Beijing and Moscow, with possible negative consequences for Washington.

I purposely neglected the costs and benefits of this situation for the European Union because it would have opened another topic of discussion in itself. In fact, the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan has pushed E.U’s top diplomats, among them Josep Borrell himself, the E.U’s High Representative for foreign affairs, to declare that it is time for the Union to establish an active “EU expeditionary force”, i.e., the much coveted but also much discussed European army (Boffey, 2021). It seems like Afghan crisis has moved something within the E.U, to the point where the discussions over the hypothetical European army are re-emerging, stronger than ever. Since the events of August 2021, there has been this controversial debate going on, about how the American failure in Afghanistan has also represented the failure of European strategic autonomy. Ulrike Franke, senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR),

reminds us that even if the E.U failed to show strength and ability to act independently from the U.S, European forces did not stay longer in Afghanistan, because it did not make sense for them (Franke, 2021). Many have forgotten that the only reason for which the E.U even sent contingencies in Afghanistan in 2001 was only to support the U.S in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, thus a response to a NATO ally invoking article 5 of the mutual defense clause. However, willing or unwilling, this situation has brought up old scars of the E.U integration process, specifically of the Union's defense system. Annagrett Kramp-Karrenbauer, German Minister of Defense, in an article for Politico writes that "[the] illusions of European strategic autonomy must come to an end: Europeans will not be able to replace America's crucial role as a security provider" (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2020, no pagination), declaration that caused a firm response from French President Emmanuel Macron, for whom strategic and military autonomy are the ultimate goals of the E.U integration process. Has the Kabul debacle really moved something among E.U's top diplomats and policymakers? Surely, the creation of a Union army, in the talks since the dawn of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), is still far but perhaps the events in Afghanistan have stirred some troubled waters, namely E.U's heavy dependence on American military capabilities (Puglierin, 2021). It is imperative for the E.U to ask itself what to do now that the U.S has withdrawn, since a stable Middle East is vital for Europeans, given migration and terrorism challenges that have often divided Member States (Barnes-Dacey, 2021).

September 15, 2021, E.U Commission President, Ursula Von der Leyen, delivered her annual speech on the State of Union at the European Parliament in Strasburg and the situation in Afghanistan made it to the discourse. During the speech, E.U Commission President stressed the importance of a strong NATO alliance, affirming that the E.U is currently working with Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on an EU-NATO Joint Declaration, in order to tackle the issues that stemmed from the Afghan crisis, namely the lack of communication between the different troupes in loco (Von der Leyen, 2021, p. 11). Although this new E.U-NATO agreement is important in itself, the core of Von der Leyen's speech was the inability of the Union to do more by itself, without relying on its allies for everything. The President of the Commission herself stressed the importance of the creation of the long-overdue European Defense Union, because, as she argued, "there will be missions where NATO or the UN will not be present, but where the E.U should be" because "Europe knows better than anyone that if you don't deal in time with the crisis abroad, the crisis comes to you" (Von der Leyen, 2021, p. 12) and she blames the

failure of the creation of this institution to the lack of political will of Member States. Therefore, as she delivered in her speech, President Von der Leyen will convene a Summit on European defense with French President Emmanuel Macron under the E.U Council French Presidency (Von der Leyen, 2021, p. 14), that will start in the first half of 2022, to unpack the “Strategic Compass”, a common vision defense policy that:

aims to give new impetus to the new security and defense initiatives, develop and update a common strategic perspective on key issues, while also tackling the different factors that have impeded full implementation thus far (Molenaar, 2021: p. 4).

To conclude this thesis, the relations between the United States and China are today difficult, but in the Middle East there could be a noteworthy opportunity and possibility for the two countries to cooperate towards a common end: safety, security, and stability of a fragile yet profitable region. All of this is achievable if the two countries put aside their thirst for power in favor of multilateralism and dialogue. The U.S should rely more on its NATO partners and on the E.U, a bloc of 27 member states in which democracy, rule of law and respect of human rights are of paramount importance to become members. The European Union could do more on the international stage such as increasing its engagement with China in the Middle East, monitoring China’s important role on the region under the lens of stability and political dynamics, particularly regarding sensitive issues such as surveillance technology and arms sales (Lons et al., 2019).

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