

Obstacles and opportunities to expand the role of China in middle east economy policy

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ABSTRACT

The attention of China to the Middle East is because of a combination of internal and external factors, and efforts toward proceeding economic growth and emerging as a powerful and influential international actor have forced China to become more connected to its surroundings. Subsequently, this country has put the strategy of expanding influence at the top of its foreign policy. Its interactive priorities in the Middle East (such as the vast market, energy resources, and capital markets) combined with the new diplomacy of Chinese leaders, all of which can be explained in the form of pragmatism, have drawn China's attention to the Middle East. Therefore, two approaches of regional convergence and power balance have been used in this regard, each of which has its own advantages and disadvantages. In the regional convergence approach, advantages are: the decline of US influence, regional stability, the realization of China's model of development and governance, but this approach has many disadvantages, among which are: reducing competition, increasing control over energy supply, reducing regional tensions and easing the desire to buy arms, reducing the importance of free trade agreements and tariffs, reducing the possibility of trans-regional investment and regional consensus about the situation of Muslim areas in China. The balance of power approach also has advantages such as; persistent tensions and the consequent need to purchase arms from China, expanding free trade agreements with each of the countries in the region, and creating competition through environmental attractions regarding the heartland of China to attract foreign investment from the region. The most important disadvantages in this approach are the continued strong US presence in the region and the emergence of intra-regional tensions and the disruption of the security of energy supply to China. Thus, it can be considered that due to the limited interests of China in its regional convergence approach, the country has used the method of balance of power to achieve its economic interests and influence, and economic and diplomatic tools have been used in this method. In this method, in a descriptive-analytical method, using the theory of " Neoclassical realism ", an attempt has been made to examine the obstacles and opportunities for the expansion of the role of China in Middle East economic policy.

Keywords: regional convergence, the balance of power, influence, Middle East, the Chinese economy.

Introduction

Nowadays, China has replaced Russia as the main contender to challenge US hegemony internationally. This has been achieved with the help of the undeniable economic power of this country in recent decades. Moreover, China is the world's second-largest economy after the United States and one of the most important beneficiaries of globalization. Since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, its exports have increased almost tenfold in 15 years, making it the largest exporter in the world. Additionally, the Chinese model of development, which, unlike the liberal model, is not based on a combination of economic and political liberalization but relies on limited capitalism with political repression, has been very successful. Also, China is using its economic value to cooperate with the world, and its importance as a foreign investor is growing. "The country paid more than \$ 350 billion regarding infrastructure loans between 2000 and 2014; loans which with less political conditions than loans from the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank has created dependencies for the country in many parts of the world. Considering these conditions, the level of debt to China is so high that countries are unable to repay loans; therefore, China demands strategic concessions in exchange for debts. An example of this is Sri Lanka "debt-trap diplomacy" whose debt to China was so high that handed over the port of Ha, Bentota to China for 99 years; a strategic port located at the intersection of several trade routes. East African Djibouti represents another similar case, where China is expected to take over the main port this country due to unpaid debts" (Creutz, et al., 2019, p.29).

The Chinese loan model performance has also been used in the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB), which provide both development and finance infrastructure projects. The creation of new international financial institutions has been complemented by China's Belt and Road Initiative, formerly known as a Belt, a Road, which aims to increase the connection between Europe and Asia by land and sea. More than eighty countries and international organizations have signed agreements on the initiative, which shows a growing willingness to cooperate in the project.

However, despite the success of the Chinese model; this pattern faces challenges. One of the challenges of the Chinese model is that China does not act as an economic powerhouse. The commitment of China to free markets is ambiguous because it promotes free trade when it exports and blocks its markets when it imports. Also, China's growing self-sufficiency, as well as its reluctance to make international investments in certain sectors, make other countries less likely to benefit from its economic growth. Another outstanding property of China's economic power is its strong dependence on the United States. Economic ties between the two largest economies of the world, unbalanced trade, along with the prospect of decreasing global trade growth have caused tensions in trade relations between China and the United and imposed trade restrictions.

China's growing military power also shows that it can become a serious competitor to the United States in the long run. Economic growth has allowed the country to steadily increase its military spending over the past twenty years, ranking second in the world in military spending after the United States (Lyll 2019; Singh 2014, P.6). The modernization of China's armed forces has progressed faster than expected due to defense cooperation with Russia as well as the development of the domestic defense industry. This can be seen, for example, in the Chinese navy, which has been heavily invested in recent years. However, the gap in military spending and existing arsenals (including nuclear weapons) is still significantly in the US interest. Although China is not currently seeking to replace US hegemony and directly challenge the Western order, at least in its declaratory policies, but what is gradually happening in practice is the fact that as the country's economic power grows, so do its political and security interests on the international stage. Therefore, China has a special focus on the Middle East in order to achieve its political and security interests and economic goals. Because the Middle East region, given its geostrategic position and its role as a bridge between Central Asia, Europe, and Africa, has a significant position in the Belt and Road Initiative. Since the introduction of this project, various countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and the Zionist regime, have joined the project by signing various agreements with China and have hosted huge Chinese investments considering infrastructure issues (Yahya, 2019).

As countries in the region join the Belt and Road Initiative and significantly considering the increased presence of Chinese foreign capital in the region, the question that has been raised is that what is the Middle

East's position in the foreign policy of China, and is China pursuing the goal of weakening the US position by expanding its presence in the region? Is China seeking hegemony and becoming a dominant foreign power in the region? What are the obstacles and opportunities for expanding China's role in Middle East economic policy? These questions are especially important because Iran is on the verge of signing several agreements with China to implement the 25-year agreement, and undoubtedly, the presence of foreign powers in the Middle East will affect the future of Chinese-Iranian relations. For this purpose, in this research the descriptive-analytical method has been used and considering Neoclassical Realism theory, the obstacles and opportunities for expanding China's role in Middle East economic policy were examined.

1- Theoretical Framework

Among the theories of realism according to the common principles and internal debates of realism, Neo-classical realism seems to have more explanatory power to examine the factors and motives that drive governments like China to pursue a strategy of expanding their foreign policy. Classical Realism emphasizes the power-seeking nature of man and the characteristics of the state in explaining foreign policy and ignoring the systemic factors. Moreover, this theory, because it includes a wide range of theorists, each of whom focuses on specific dimensions and points to explain the behavior and foreign policy of the government, makes it difficult to form a coherent theory and thus derive a specific research program for foreign policy analysis. Also, this theory is mostly based on historical-philosophical approaches and methodologies and does not have the characteristics of new scientific theories in the field of international relations and foreign policy. In neo-realism, the emphasis is on macro-systemic variables and not paying enough attention to single-level factors. In neo-realism, the main dependent variable that theorists are explaining, international components and outcomes, and the study of foreign policy are not given the main attention. But neoclassical realism considers its dependent variable as foreign policy, and this theory is primarily a theory to explain the foreign policy of governments. Neoclassical realism integrates elements and assumptions of classical realism and neo-realism. On the one hand, like neo-realism, it acknowledges the impact and importance of anarchy on the behavior of countries and begins with the assumption that the anarchic international system limits and restricts their foreign policy options and choices; that means, the priority in foreign policy determinants is with Systematic independent variables; but on the other hand, like classical realism, it considers and analyzes the effect of the characteristics of countries and single-level variables. By the way, beyond the imperfect and defective nature of human beings, their behavior is considered and analyzed. Therefore, the impact of the possibilities of power on foreign policy is complex and indirect; because systematic pressures and constraints affect foreign policy through single-level mediator variables such as perceptions of decision-makers and the structure of government. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how the distribution of power in the international system, along with the internal motives and perceptions of countries, shape their foreign policy (Rose, 1998: 144). Robert Jarvis leads the mind to decision theories. According to Jarvis, in a complex and dynamic foreign policy scenario, individual and individual decisions play a major role, which is influenced by important issues such as perception, misperception, and psychology that give meaning to the decision-making process and politics. Additionally, he also emphasizes the perceptual environment of political elites as a mediating and intervening variable in directing the behavior of states in the international anarchic system. Robert Jarvis considers perception to include images, beliefs, and goals, with a greater emphasis on goals; of course, not as a reaction to others to achieve specific interests and goals, but as a set of government actions that try to predict the behavior of other actors (Jarvis, 1967, p.117).

It must be mentioned that influence is the main strategy in the foreign policy of countries from the perspective of neoclassical realism. Neoclassical realists oppose the neo-realist idea that governments seek security in the first place, but at the same time they do not return to the concept of Morgenthau's power; rather, influence is the focus of their attention. Generally, influence means the ability of a government to control and shape its environment (4.p, 2007, Kunz). "History has shown that governments, as they become increasingly wealthy, build large armies, engage in issues beyond their borders, and seek to increase their international influence", stated Zakaria (1998, Zakaria 3.p). Despite the various ways in which governments

may define their interests, this school argues that governments are likely to seek more outside influence and pursue such influence to the extent that they can (152: 1998, Rose).

In this regard, it should be noted that by intensifying the process of globalization and imposing the resulting consequences on societies with the index of expanding interdependence and the need for decision-making based on the calculation of all aspects, the path of shaping international relations is moving in a direction in which the functional priority of governments has shifted from military issues to economic growth and development. This issue has become so important that today it has taken as its basis the legitimacy of many countries. China is one of the countries that has benefited a lot from the globalization of the economy and has been able to improve its position in the international system. The Middle East is also very important for China's influence and serves China's interests in many ways.

In addition to expanding the scope of economic activities, the type of diplomacy, and foreign policy approach, China is also pursuing this situation with strategies such as "harmonious world", "peaceful emergence", "marginal diplomacy" and "trans-regional". For this reason, with the importance of the idea of ascent and development in the world hierarchy and as a result of the need for energy supply and consumer market, the Middle East has become increasingly important (Ghafouri, 2009, p.8).

2- Recognizing the position of the Middle East

Understanding the position of the Middle East in the world system and consequently understanding the logic governing it, is possible by using the following criteria:

-Type of government: Unlike the type of political systems governing the central and quasi-peripheral regions, the type of governance and political system in the Middle East and its peripheral countries is mainly traditional and undemocratic. With the exception of Iran and Iraq, where republican regimes are almost accepted, other countries, using the traditional sheikhdom system, do not envisage the minimum roles for their society in the field of action. In addition to the minimal status of the people, these political systems are often closed, which deprives them of the ability to survive in changing conditions. As a result, lack of internal cohesion, the formation of a crisis of legitimacy, identity, permeability or distribution and participation become its main characteristics.

-Exports: Since the discovery of hydrocarbon resources, economic indicators and characteristics of Middle Eastern countries have been strongly affected. The oil resources of these countries have generally been exported, rather than being used domestically to change their status, due to internal crises, low production costs, and relatively low prices (Roshandel and Seifzadeh, 2031: 211; 2005, Darag).

The Middle East with foreign exchange reserves in the oil sector with an estimated 813 million barrels of oil (55% of world-known reserves) and 2 billion and 500 million cubic meters of gas (equivalent to 22% of proven global reserves) (Daragahi, 2005), has the highest volume of hydrocarbon resources and therefore has overshadowed the initial gradual export and further expansion of its scope in industrial production in other sectors.

-Import of industrial goods: Simultaneously with the huge export of raw materials, the import of industrial goods is another economic indicator in the Middle East. Due to the weakness of the production sector because of the mere focus of exports on large oil industries, the possibility of investment and technology necessary for the development of other sectors has decreased and as a result, the import of industrial goods has become another indicator in this region of the world system. In addition, in cases where we see the transfer of capital technology to these countries in order to strengthen industries, the incompatibility of this advantage with the conditions governing the old structures of these countries provides the ground for mass unemployment and the transformation of economic rationality into the allure of prestige-based relations (Roshandel and Seifzadeh, 2031: 218). Therefore, as a result of these special economic conditions prevailing in these countries, welfare services have always been at a low level, although despite their existence, certain groups are able to use them.

According to these indicators, the position of the Middle East and the countries of this region in the surrounding environment can be defined; as an environment that, by being in an unequal exchange in terms of division of labor, only produces cheap raw materials for the center and its surroundings, and by transferring the surplus capital of these countries to these areas, the import of industrial products and their

consumption is the indicator of its economic system. Therefore, in recent years, by making minimal moves in the discussion of institutionalizing behavioral patterns and also creating more consensus for decision-making in the subsystem environment, it seems that the countries of the region have shown their desire to get out of the current situation by carrying out some internal (albeit minimal) reforms in various political and economic sectors. In this regard, by strengthening the mutual economic need such as China to change its position in the world system and become its center, the interactions and interdependencies between these two areas have taken on more depth from the world system, and in a reciprocal process, each party considers a kind of interactive interest in relations with the other.

3- Interests and priorities of China in the Middle East and the reasons for the change of this country approach since 2016

At first glance, however, it may seem that the Middle East region, given the developments and turmoil it has experienced over the past two decades, and given its geographical distance from China, it cannot be of strategic importance to this country. But over the past four decades, the Middle East has become increasingly important in the foreign policy of China. In general, three main variables over time have made the Middle East of strategic and intrinsic value to China: First, the Middle East has long been a battleground for major powers. Second, the energy security of China, as the world's second-largest economy, depends on oil purchases from oil-producing countries in the region. The Middle East has overtaken Russia to become the energy supplier, supplying 46.7% of China's energy needs in 2020 (2021, Begcecanli). Third, the Middle East has the central position in the Belt and Road Initiative, and so China is seriously seeking to expand diplomatic relations with countries in the region (Lons ;2018, Scobell 2019). China's presence has taken a different form since 2016. In this regard, first, the interests of the Middle East are examined in general, and then the change in China's approach since 2016 and its reasons are examined.

3-1-1 Energy priorities

China became an oil importer for the first time in its history in 1993, and in 2003 replaced Japan as the second-largest importer of oil (after the United States) (Shariati Nia, 2010,166). In 2012, the country consumed about 10 million barrels of oil per day, of which about six million barrels were imported. In 2019, the country surpassed the United States in terms of oil imports (Lons, 2019).

The rapid expansion of China's needs for oil and natural gas reflects its staggering economic performance on the one hand and its lack of proven domestic oil and gas resources on the other. Growth rates of about 20 percent over the past decade and growth forecasts of at least six to seven percent over the next two decades show a significant correlation with China's rising energy consumption. In addition, the rapid increase in the number of cars, the rapid expansion of the transportation network, the government's policy of reducing coal consumption as China's main source of fuel now, and the government's decision to establish strategic reserves (a decision made in 2004 and its implementation is very important for the Beijing authorities), make it possible to understand the cause of China's growing interest in Middle East energy resources. (Haman;168) On the other hand, according to BP, China has about 2.1 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and only 2 percent of the world's proven gas reserves. So, it is not surprising that Chinese oil companies around the world are negotiating for oil and natural gas contracts and are in serious competition with their Western and Russian rivals. Although Beijing is currently exploring new oil and gas fields within its borders, experts believe that imports will continue to play a growing role in the country's energy consumption. (Gholami, 2020: 57) China is responding to these challenges by pursuing a global energy policy on several fronts. The policy aims to increase energy security and reduce the country's vulnerability to fuel shortages or price shocks. The end result is a zero-sum energy strategy based on the strictly Neomercantilism approach, with the aim of gaining direct control over open water oil and gas resources. This strategy is pursued in two ways:

A) The purchase of foreign oil and gas fields by three major Chinese oil companies, CNPC, Sinopec, CNOOC.

B) Concluding pipeline construction agreements with neighboring countries for the direct storage of oil and gas on Chinese soil.

The active energy diplomacy of Beijing seeks to establish closer ties with major oil and gas exporters through an extensive program of bilateral meetings and financial and economic cooperation to expand trade and large military contracts. In fact, resource diplomacy in China includes diversifying energy suppliers, expanding bilateral relations with producing countries, encouraging domestic oil companies to invest across borders, and finally creating strategic alliances for cooperation in maintaining security and developing energy resources in different parts of the world (Kolaei and Tishe Yar, 2011, 125). The main focus of this diplomatic effort, of course, is the Middle East. However, in lower levels and to lesser extents, it includes Central Asia, Russia, Africa, Latin America, and in recent years Canada. As a result of these efforts, the Chinese government entered into a "strategic energy pact" with at least eight countries between 2001 and 2006. Moreover, the strategic importance of Middle East energy for China is not limited to the region's oil resources, but also to its vast gas reserves. According to BP in 2011, about 38.4% of the world's proven gas reserves are in the Middle East. On the other hand, about half of the proven Middle East gas reserves are located in Iran. With about 16 percent of the world's proven gas reserves, Iran is the world's second-largest holder of gas reserves after the Russian Federation. Qatar is next with about 12% of the world's gas reserves, and other countries in the Persian Gulf each have a small percentage of the world's gas reserves. It must be stated; of the 38.4% share of Middle East gas reserves, 38% is in the Persian Gulf. The importance of the huge Persian Gulf gas resources for China becomes even clearer when we know that China was the fourth largest consumer of natural gas in the world in 2011 and its natural gas consumption this year is 50% higher than in 2009. Rising energy consumption poses a real threat to China's energy security. The mentioned threat has taken on a complex dimension with speculation about the end of the oil age. The only way out of these dangerous cycles for China seems to be to find sustainable and secure sources of energy for the country on an ongoing basis and away from fluctuations. Additionally, considering the rich energy resources of the Persian Gulf becomes understandable in the context of such a plan (Shariati Nia, 2011; 172-173).

3-1-2 Military political interests

When Deng Xiaoping began the process of reforming and opening up China in 1979, he believed that strengthening the domestic economy took precedence over investing in the military. But about 12 years after that decision, the first Persian Gulf War was a wake-up call for Beijing. The Chinese clearly saw in this war how Western forces quickly destroyed an army weaker than themselves. In 1991, the Pentagon used some of its most advanced weapons, including anti-radar technology and guided weapons, against the Iraqi army. The United States and coalition forces quickly overcame Iraqi military hardware, which was largely a Warsaw Pact equipment model. It immediately became apparent that Manu's doctrine of attacking human waves (advising you to have more soldiers than your enemy bullets) did not meet China's defense needs in the 21st century (Shariati Nia, 2009; 173). Chinese defense designers began studying doctrines and searching for superior foreign technologies in order to use them in the Chinese military in the early 1990s. In fact, they entered a strategic shift by adjusting the number of the military forces and instead focusing on new technologies that could enable the Chinese military to engage with the United States and its other supposed enemies. Since then, many aspects of China's military strategy have changed, to the point where China is now one of the world's largest manufacturers and exporters of weapons. The countries of the Persian Gulf have always been one of the largest importers of weapons due to their vast oil wealth. Also, for many years before the Islamic Revolution, Iran was the largest importer of weapons in the region. But now Saudi Arabia, with its abundant oil wealth and fearing the expansion of Iranian power and the intervention of the Zionist regime in the region, has occupied this position. Additionally, it is clear that the presence of rich countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, whose oil dollars are enough to buy weapons from several sellers; simultaneously, revisionist countries such as Iran, which are interested in using the weapons technology of countries such as China due to restrictions on arms purchases from Western countries, especially the United States, make the Middle East a desirable region for advancing China's military and economic strategy. Moreover, China is seeking a safe haven in an area that is increasingly being considered by the United States. In doing so, China hopes to gradually challenge US control of the Persian Gulf through greater influence in the region. US influence to disrupt China's economic

growth and reciprocal efforts by Chinese officials to disrupt this negative influence could be the reason for its multilateral orientation towards the Middle East. Naturally, Chinese leaders are concerned about US restrictions on energy. The United States' reliance on economic means to punish some governments in recent years makes this Chinese concern comprehensible. Accordingly, one of the predictable and reasonable actions of the Beijing authorities is trying to establish closer ties with as many countries as possible holding energy-rich resources. Such a plan reflects and complements China's global ambitions (Shariati Nia, 2011; 174-175). The policy of China towards the G.C.C is one of the elements of Beijing's overall goal to change this situation by exerting its real influence. China-Tehran relations, in particular, can be analyzed regarding this perspective: China considers Iran as a regional power that seeks to challenge the (if not hegemonic) power of the United States in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. For this reason, (and for economic reasons), China has established important defense and security relations with Iran. Therefore, China is helping Iran develop its military capabilities to counter US dominance in the Persian Gulf, an issue that is of strategic value. The US alliance has led to the formation of a kind of security regime in line with US interests in the Gulf Cooperation Council with the Middle East countries. But as long as the Islamic Republic of Iran opposes the US presence in the region, the Persian Gulf will not be completely and safely within the US territory and desirable orbit. Equipped with relatively advanced military hardware, Iran helps China's goal of preventing US domination of this geostrategically significant region, and on the other hand, shifts the US focus away from the Pacific Ocean (which is important to China). In addition, by arming Iran with weapons such as anti-ship cruise missiles, China will have the opportunity to put into practice its hardware and operational plans, which it may one day use in a conflict with the United States.

3-1-3 Commercial and economic priority

The People's Republic of China has to establish and maintain operational legitimacy (executive-functional) in order to maintain its security. This kind of legitimacy is the continuation of power through dramatic economic progress and significant development (Huntington, 2011;260). In fact, since China's architect of economic reform, Deng Xiaoping made the main goal of China's economy to achieve economic development, the foreign policy of the country has shifted from ideological priority to pragmatism. China wanted a worthy place in the international system and accordingly mobilized all its forces to achieve this goal because the Communist Party considered its survival to be dependent on the realization of this goal. Considering the fundamental economic reforms (including free trade and a policy of non-isolation), China has averaged nine percent annual economic growth over the past 30 years, three to four times more than that of the global economy (Gholami, 2019; 112). In a world where the notions of human rights and democracy are relatively hegemonic, one way to perpetuate the legitimacy of a regime that has not yet institutionalized the basic characteristics of democracy and has the label of an authoritarian regime on its forehead is to resort to operational legitimacy. The legitimacy at the heart of which is an economic success (Mousavi Shafaei, Darabi, 2011: 55; Shariati Nia, 2009: 177). Although access to energy resources is a significant issue regarding the economy of China has an undeniable role to play in the policy of China in the Middle East, but the impact of the economic variable in this regard is not limited to energy. The relationship between China and the Middle East is not one-sided. China is a major importer of energy from the region and a major exporter of capital, goods, and technology to the region. Economic and trade ties between China and the Gulf Arab states have grown rapidly since the late 1970s, with bilateral trade growing more than 100-fold from 1978 to 2007, in 30 years (Gholami, 2019; 243). In addition, the economies of China and the Gulf states are highly complementary. In particular, the Arab countries of this region are large markets with large populations, in which the manufactured and consumer goods that China produces at low prices are in great demand. Therefore, due to the relative inefficiency of labor in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, China can even export labor to this region (Sun, 2019). These exports not only slightly reduce the unemployment pressure in China, a populous country, but can also increase China's foreign exchange earnings. Another point is that the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf are the only developing countries that have the ability to invest in large quantities in China due to the large volume of oil revenues. For example, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have invested in downstream trade and China's oil

refining, which has deepened the level of bilateral cooperation and interdependence between the two countries.

3-1-4 Reasons for China's changing approach in the Middle East since the beginning of 2015

Since the beginning of 2010, with the beginning of widespread political and social changes in the Arab world, on the one hand, and the reduction of US troops in the region, on the other, a new perception of the importance of the Middle East has been formed among Chinese policymakers. The United States is no longer as dependent on Middle East energy resources as it once was, and unlike the first decade of the 21st century, in the second decade, the main threat to its security is the emergence of strategic rivalries, not terrorism. The fading US presence in the Middle East has created a vacuum that has inevitably paved the way for China to play a greater role. In fact, it should be added that since 2015, China's presence in the Middle East has taken a different form; because in 2015, two years after the official announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative by the President of China, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce of China jointly issued a vision and action document, while outlining the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative, they outlined the priorities for cooperation between China and Chinese private companies with developing countries (Vision and Action on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, 2015). In the same year, China hosted the Asia-Europe Meeting in Chingqing. At the meeting, six economic belts were announced for the Belt and Road Initiative, which started in China and stretched along with the Eurasian and Indian Oceans. One of these corridors, the China-Central Asia - West Asia Economic Corridor, ends in West Asia. Since the announcement of this plan, China has tried to develop its relationship with the countries of the region based on a win-win approach. Unlike the United States and European countries, China has no history of colonization or interference in the internal affairs of Middle Eastern countries. Thus, the various countries in the region, despite numerous differences from each other, have a positive view of establishing relations with China as the second-largest economy in the international system. Since the beginning of 2015, China has tried to establish relations with all countries in the region, from Iran to Saudi Arabia, with a development-oriented logic. This approach has allowed China to advance its interests in the Middle East without getting involved in the current political disputes in the region (Fulton,2019).

China's diplomatic tool for advancing its relations with the Middle East is cooperation diplomacy rather than the US approach based on forming coalitions. In a coalition, the stronger side is always worried about getting involved in problems that the weaker side may face, and the weaker side will always depend on the stronger side to provide security and advance its goals. The strategic cooperation model will address these concerns by reducing commitments. According to this model, the parties try to cooperate in areas of common interest and manage political rivalries. In other words, cooperation on the realization of common interests is goal-oriented, not threat-oriented. China's use of cooperation diplomacy is based on a hierarchical system, and at each level, China pursues different priorities. At the top of this hierarchy, relationships are defined in the context of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. At this level, the goal is comprehensive cooperation in regional and international affairs. However, the parties do not engage in costly political and security arrangements. It should be mentioned that China has so far signed comprehensive strategic cooperation agreements with five countries in the Middle East and North Africa region. It is worth noting that China has defined its relations with only those countries in the region at this level which they are the most important powers in the region in shaping Middle East relations and securing their interests. These countries include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria, Egypt, and Iran. This issue also shows that the significance of China's policy in West Asia is more inclined towards the Persian Gulf. At the second level, relationships are defined in the context of Strategic Partnership. In West Asia, China has signed Strategic Partnership Agreements with eight countries, including Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and Turkey. In the third level, relationships are defined in the framework of comprehensive participatory partnership, in the fourth level, relationships are defined in the framework of participatory partnership, and in the fifth level, relationships are defined in the framework of friendly participatory partnership. The table below shows the year in which China signed a cooperation agreement with each of the West Asian countries (Struver, 2017).

Table 1. The strategic partnership between China and the countries of the region

Year	Relationship level	Country
2014	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Algeria
2017	Strategic Partnership	Djibouti
2014	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Egypt
2016	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Iran
2015	Strategic Partnership	Iraq
2015	Strategic Partnership	Jordan
2018	Strategic Partnership	Kuwait
2016	Strategic Partnership	Morocco
2018	Strategic Partnership	Oman
2014	Strategic Partnership	Qatar
2016	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Saudi Arabia
2010	Strategic Partnership	Turkey
2018	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	United Arab Emirates

In addition to the partnership agreements between China and the countries of the region, various documents have been published on the basis of China's cooperation with the countries of the region (Fulton, 2019). The first document in this regard is the vision and action document that clarifies the position of West Asia in the Belt and Road Initiative. The document cites two multilateral initiatives, including the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, the China-GCC Strategic Dialogue, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (Deputy for Political Studies, 2020; 12). Another important document that clarifies how China cooperates with West Asian countries is the Arab-China Security Document was released in 2015, at the same time as Xi Jinping was visiting West Asia. This document introduces the 1 + 2 + 3 cooperation model (Ibid). According to this model, China and the Arab countries of the region made the energy debate the core of their cooperation and the expansion of infrastructure and the facilitation of trade and investment as two wings of cooperation. Moreover, they identified advanced technologies in the field of nuclear energy, space satellites, and new energies as three important steps toward achieving successful collaboration (Deputy for Political Studies, 2020; 12).

Considering the above-mentioned issues, the Middle East is of intrinsic value to China, and it is clear that China seeks to reduce the dominance of other major powers over the region in order to protect its interests and ensure access to the resources and markets of the region. In recent decades, the United States has been the most important foreign interventionist power in the Middle East. Hence, reducing US influence in the Middle East is a priority for China. The intensification of U.S.-China rivalry at the global level also highlights this goal in China's foreign policy.

However, China's approach to achieving this goal is different from that of the United States and it is also different from the history of other major powers in the Middle East; China prefers diplomatic and economic means rather than using military power and expanding its military base or deploying troops in the region (Ghiselli, 2021, P.10). In other words, without a direct and extensive military presence, China is trying to balance the influence of other powers in the region and define its role in the Middle East using diplomatic and economic means. A review of China's approach to the war in Syria, the war in Libya, and the nuclear negotiations with Iran also confirms this. To put it more clearly, China has replaced the balance of influence by economic and diplomatic means with the balance of power by military means. The most important advantage of this approach for China is to avoid direct conflict with the United States and its exorbitant costs while advancing its goals in the region.

China is trying to indirectly reduce US influence in the region in two ways, and to balance the power in the region to the detriment of the United States without military conflict: First, by supporting those regional actors whose political system is anti-Western in nature, and second, by using existing regional and global institutional arrangements.

4- Advantages and disadvantages of China's approaches in the Middle East

Considering the pervasive but soft presence of the Chinese in the Middle East in the last decade or two and the expansion of bilateral or multilateral economic cooperation with countries in the region, it seems that China's approach has included two modes of regional convergence and balance of power. Also, by

applying these approaches, as has been stated, the strategy of expanding influence has become the headline of its foreign policy. However, each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages for this country, especially from an economic point of view; advantages and disadvantages of a simple computational process that will show which arrangements can support China's interests and needs in the region:

4-1 Middle East Regional Convergence

China's first interactive interest in the region is defined in terms of regional convergence. In other words, it remains to be seen to what extent regional convergence is in line with China's interests, especially its economic interests, compared to the balance of power. Thus, given China's interactive priorities (as it was mentioned), the most important benefits of Middle East regional convergence with China are:

Reducing US Influence: One of the most important issues of China in the Middle East is regulating how it relates and competes with the United States. Despite rapid economic growth, China still cannot be a serious competitor in various fields, especially in the military field, against the United States. Hence, more than destructive conflict and rivalry, it considers negative cooperation with constructive rivalry. Manifesting this relationship in the Middle East, the establishment of a joint regional institution with the presence of all countries in the region will undoubtedly weaken the US position compared to the past, because first, intra-regional cooperation will be a priority for subsystem countries, and second, regarding the participation of Iran in these arrangements, other member states will also have to consider the nature of its relations with the United States.

Coordination and solidarity in decision making: considering the cooperative role of China with all countries in the region, it seems that if regional convergence is achieved, this cooperation will continue with greater solidarity and, consequently, with a wider scope, because in this case, firstly, the relations between the parties are not affected by the systemic pressures of other powers, and secondly, the existing interdependence with greater depth will encourage the parties to continue cooperation.

Regional stability: One of the major challenges facing China after the intensification of economic growth is to ensure energy security because the energy component is an important factor for the continuation of modernization and therefore related to the legitimacy and efficiency of China's political system. Thus, establishing joint regional arrangements prevents the number of tensions that could potentially disrupt the energy supply process.

Realization of China's model of development and governance: The Chinese model of development, which has been proposed in the Beijing Consensus after competing with the US capitalist model after its stunning economic growth, considers the realization of economic growth and development possible regardless of the political system (Salehi, Hassanzadeh, 2016; 73-96). According to the authoritarian governments of the countries of the Middle East, if the regional convergence is realized and the countries of the region develop with the existing political systems, the successful application of this model will undoubtedly be raised again (Sanusi, 2012, p.48).

The most important disadvantages of regional convergence in the Middle East in relation to China are:

Reducing rivalry: The element of rivalry in gaining various benefits has always been one of the indicators of governing international and internal relations in the Middle East,

The winner of this rivalry have always been the world powers that contributed to the needs of the regional countries (better say, their allies).

Therefore, with the reduction of competition between countries as a result of convergent arrangements, it is China that will inevitably seek to expand cooperation by expanding the scope of relations.

More control possibility over energy supply: With the realization of regional convergence and consequently coordination in decision-making, undoubtedly, how to regulate the price of energy and its supply will be followed more carefully by the countries of the region to bring the most benefits. As a result, access to the cheap and high amounts of energy may become more difficult for China.

Reducing regional tensions and easing the desire to buy weapons: Middle Eastern countries have planned to buy weapons for three main reasons: 1- Regional threat factor (providing security against external threat); 2- Systemic factor (under the influence of sponsor-follower relations and technological factors); 3- Internal factor (need to ensure the security of the regime against internal threats and use the

military force component as a means of social and economic modernization) (Hassan-yari, 2009, p.110). Undoubtedly, with the establishment of convergent arrangements that have resulted in peace and cooperation based on interaction and development in its various dimensions, in the long run, arms purchase with the current volume will be reduced and as a result one of China's important markets will be lost.

Reducing the importance of free trade agreements and tariffs: Perhaps one of the tangible results of convergence in a region is the expansion of intra-regional economic interactions; as with the sharp reduction of customs tariffs and the establishment of free trade in the region, trade with extra-regional units should be done with a common and non-preferential mechanism. In this case, China's bilateral free trade agreements with each member state either will lose their validity or will be subject to a process of consensual oversight.

Reducing the possibility of trans-regional investment: Following the previous case, the volume of capital in converging countries usually flows to each other and the strengthening of regional infrastructure is the focus in this regard. Therefore, by changing the priority of the investment location, many of the capitals used in China by the Arab countries in the region will undoubtedly face the reverse process and exit.

Regional consensus about the situation of China's Muslim-populated areas: Considering the common religious ties of the Middle Eastern countries with the people of Xinjiang, China, regional convergence can double the consensus and pressure on China by creating a consensus on the type of relationship with the issue of this Muslim province. However, in the current situation, following international relations, we are witnessing various positions, especially silence in the face of this challenge from the countries of the region. In conclusion, in a rational calculation of the Chinese position on regional convergence and an examination of its advantages and disadvantages, it can be expressed that despite the significant advantages, the disadvantages of this type of arrangement far outweigh China's national interests in the region.

4-2 The balance of power with the logic of self-help in the Middle East

The balance of regional power in the Middle East is one of the axes of regional security that has a long history. In addition to the period of American hegemony during the British rule, this policy was also followed with changes (Sazmand, 2017, 121). In this type of regional arrangement, assuming anarchy, each unit of the region is responsible for maintaining its own order and security, and in cases of reduced regional peace and stability, the intervening power will strike a balance. The most important advantages of this type of security arrangement, especially in relation to China, are:

Persistence of tensions and consequently the need to purchase weapons from China: The continuation of the existing security arrangements in the Middle East, which is mainly conceptualized as the balance of power, is based on the restraint of power with power in its realistic approach. Therefore, the purchase of weapons and the increase of military power are important to maintain the balance, and this will be an important factor in the expansion of China's arms sales markets, which in a way facilitates the process of export of oil dollars.

Expand free trade agreements with each of the countries in the region and create competition through environmental attractions in the heartland of China to attract foreign investment from the countries of the region.

The most important disadvantage of this design is:

Continued strong US presence and intervention in the region and the emergence of intra-regional tensions and disruption of energy supply to China.

Considering the above axes as advantages and disadvantages of any intra-regional security arrangements (balance of power or regional convergence), especially in relation to China's interactive priorities, It becomes quite clear that first of all, the establishment of convergent arrangements is mainly aimed at strengthening the cooperation of powers within the region; second, a minimal rational calculation shows that although the role of United States in the region has diminished with the establishment of convergent arrangements, and this is an important factor in the success of China's (interregional) diplomacy, yet it will also limit China's interests. This becomes even clearer when we consider that in the medium term, China will be able to draw the attention of the United States to its regional interests by playing political deals in

the international system. However, establishing security arrangements (in the general sense) of a region with a priority of domestic development will undoubtedly continue China's past capabilities in the region.

Conclusion

The spread of the second wave of regionalism since the 1990s and its consequent interests, on the one hand, and the growing periphery of Middle Eastern countries in the world system, on the other, have revived the idea of expanding intra-regional cooperation in the form of convergent arrangements against the balance of power. Therefore, despite the role of important countries in the region, we cannot ignore the position of the great powers in the approach to intra-regional arrangements, especially with their broad interests in the Middle East. For this reason, with the aim of recognizing China's possible stance against strengthening the idea of regional convergence in the Middle East subsystem, this important axis was examined that due to the importance of economic development in the international system, the current system is more and more in line with Wallerstein criteria in the division of the world system. In this division, by prioritizing the logic of profit and accumulation of capital and the division of labor and the general goal of promoting the position from the periphery to the quasi-periphery, and finally moving towards the center of the world system, China's quasi-peripheral position is shifting to the center of the world system, making its interactive priorities in the Middle East (such as the vast market, energy resources, and capital markets) sensitive to intra-regional arrangements, and by examining the pros and cons of each arrangement in relation to China's interests, it is conceptualized in favor of its interaction in the absence of convergent arrangements. However, it should not be forgotten that, first, the move towards regional convergence in the Middle East is still in its infancy and faces many major internal and systemic challenges; second, the logic of the political game in the international arena is subject to temporal conditions, and it is never unlikely that the position of supra-regional units in modern formats will be considered in the above-mentioned arrangements.

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