China–MENA Relations: Outside In and Inside Out

3 April 2019
Introduction

On 3 April 2019 Chatham House’s Asia-Pacific and Middle East and North Africa programmes convened a one-day research roundtable on China–MENA relations. The goal was to pool knowledge and experiences and build a cross-regional network of experts, as well as to identify areas for further research. While academics and other think-tanks have started to focus on this important issue, a review of their efforts to date suggests that few have sought to understand the many nuances of the relationship in much depth.

The following summary provides an overview of some of the issues discussed, and provides a foundation for further policy research enquiry. The roundtable agenda is included as an appendix, although it should be noted that this summary does not necessarily follow the order of the day.

Some of the key questions under consideration during the day included:

- Does China have a coherent overarching strategy for MENA, and will Beijing’s existing MENA strategy be compatible with the Belt and Road Initiative?
- Will China’s involvement in the MENA region challenge its strong insistence on state sovereignty, non-intervention and non-use of force in other countries (outside of internationally mandated interventions)?
- What difference, if any, is there between Beijing and provincial government views and policy practices towards MENA countries?
- Are MENA countries engaged in a regional geoeconomic competition to attract China’s attention? Or are they more bilaterally focused?
- Where does China fit in the various ‘Vision’ programmes of the GCC states?
- What do China’s Arab Policy Paper and its Syria envoy mean in practice?
- Will China be able to extend further economic and political influence in sanction-imposed Iran?
- Has Israel become an exception when it comes to engagement with China on technology and innovation sector?
China–MENA: the geopolitical context

In June 2014, speaking at the sixth ministerial conference of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASF), President Xi Jinping outlined his ‘1+2+3’ strategy. This was a comprehensive and wide-ranging vision encompassing energy, trade and investment as well as nuclear power, technology and renewables. China’s Arab Policy Paper, published in 2016, expanded on this vision and set out in greater detail Beijing’s vision for engagement with the Arab world. The foundation of this approach was predicated on the belief that greater economic development can foster peace and stability in the Middle East.

Through a forward-looking trade relationship, China intended to leverage energy cooperation, infrastructure, trade and investment and renewable energy diversification in the MENA region, all supported through the expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for trade, connectivity and infrastructure investments. President Xi affirmed the centrality of the MENA region, stating:

Instead of looking for a proxy in the Middle East, we promote peace talks; instead of seeking any sphere of influence, we call on all parties to join the circle of friends for the Belt and Road Initiative; instead of attempting to fill the ‘vacuum’, we build a cooperative partnership network for win-win outcomes.

To this end, in 2018 President Xi pledged $20 billion in loans to Arab countries, including more than $100 million in financial aid. Xi called this financing ‘oil and gas plus’, as it went beyond energy resources to cover infrastructure and other forms of support. Speaking of China’s intention to also form a strategic partnership with the Arab League, Xi asserted that the partnership would become ‘the keeper of peace and stability in the Middle East’. The scale of envisaged engagement and the ambitions conveyed in these public statements apparently confirm that China perceives economic development as the means to reduce conflict and promote stabilization. Importantly, in contrast with many Western democracies, China also sees economic cooperation as primarily a state-to-state endeavour rather than something distributed through a range of actors – such as international, regional or national non-governmental organizations.

China’s stance is markedly different from the long-standing US approach to the region. The Carter Doctrine (so called after President Jimmy Carter’s State of Union address in 1980) designated the Persian Gulf as a vital national interest of the US where it would use military force, if needed, to protect US interests. China’s Arab Policy Paper, in contrast, identifies the region not as essential for its national interests, but as a region with opportunities for deep economic engagement.

However, this is not to say that there are not securitized aspects of China’s engagement in the region. For example, military exchanges have increased between China and Saudi Arabia. China has also built interim technical service stops in Oman, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. From Beijing’s perspective, this expansion is necessary to protect China’s commercial investments and safeguard Chinese overseas workers in an unstable region. In 2015, notably, a Chinese naval vessel took part in an operation to evacuate Chinese and other foreign nationals from Aden, in southern Yemen; this was the first time China’s military had undertaken such action in a conflict zone.

Increased security engagement also allows China to hone its military and naval capacities and capabilities. However, its security engagement is entirely predicated on strict adherence to long-standing principles of non-alignment, respect for international boundaries, and non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs. But it is clear that keeping the peace, in this context, is primarily about safeguarding Chinese economic investments and strategic interests. Is this a sustainable position? With its expanding footprint in the region, it is questionable whether China can avoid being drawn into the highly complex conflicts and geopolitics of the region.
In response to conflicts or crises, China is often wary, making statements and appeals for political dialogue between parties to a conflict without taking a strong mediation role. That it does not align itself with any side in conflicts or tensions between other countries stems in part from long-standing principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty – although it is important to understand that non-interference is not necessarily the same as being neutral. China’s non-alignment is also a product of its wariness of being drawn into complex conflict dynamics. In this respect, China is not seeking to replace the US as a security actor. Indeed, it could be argued that it suits Beijing for the US to play that role, so that China is seen by the rest of the world as a more neutral actor. A notable exception is with regard to the Koreas, where China does exercise a more ‘muscular’ diplomacy, as the state of relations between North and South more directly impacts China’s security and interests.

So while Beijing makes much of its role as a mediator contributing to international peace and security, it actually does very little mediation in practice. And there are very similar dynamics at play as regards its security presence. In the Middle East context, mediation diplomacy helps Beijing position itself internationally and domestically as an ‘honest broker’ that does not have its own agenda and is only interested in building peace and stability. While determinedly cautious, mediation diplomacy also provides Chinese diplomats with an opportunity to develop and broaden their exposure to and experience of mediation in a conflict/crisis context. Some of these challenges related to ‘outlier’ states such as Syria and Iran are discussed later in this summary.

For Middle East states, the implications and opportunities stemming from the rise of China are potentially profound. The range of conflicts and limits to regional unity has historically meant that ties have been bilateral. The BRI paves the way for geostrategic diversification, increased eastern linkages and much-needed ‘no strings attached’ economic investment that in the short term has been very well received by regional actors ranging from the Arab Gulf states to Israel, Egypt and the countries of North Africa.

Moreover, China is viewed in appealing contrast to the US and Europe, both of which have interventionist legacies. Iran, Iraq and Syria, for instance, see China’s regional presence as useful to offset pressure from the US. Since the 1990s, growing energy demand from China has driven Middle East interests to seek to extend trade ties. The Arab Gulf states and Egypt have profited from China’s investments and its appetite for energy. As ties with China have developed, some regional states have begun to see the ‘no strings attached’ development model as an attractive alternative to what’s on offer from the West.

It could be that China is playing a very skilful diplomatic game. But it is worth noting that, despite the proliferation of multilateral agreements, in practice China tends to focus more on bilateral relationships such as the strategic partnership agreed with Qatar in 2018. It remains the case that China’s engagement in the MENA region is driven primarily by geoeconomic interests, explored in further detail in the next section.

**China–MENA: the Chinese perspective**

There has been a monumental shift in China’s foreign policy in recent years. Deng Xiaoping’s approach – to ‘keep a low profile’ and ‘hide capability’ – is being replaced by Xi’s much more proactive strategy, which seeks to promote China’s core political and economic interests more forcefully while asserting its ‘rightful’ place in the global order – ‘striving for achievements’. This shift has most certainly translated into China’s ongoing engagements with the MENA region. Since 2016, notably, it has become the leading investor in the region. This investment is underpinned by the CASCF and – particularly emblematic of Xi’s ambitious foreign policy agenda – the BRI, with MENA being one of the regions critical to the success of the initiative.
After decades of trial and error, Beijing appears to have become more self-assured as regards its approach to the MENA region. It has considerably amplified its strategy towards the region, embarking on various new policies that are aimed at ultimately serving China’s various strategic interests in the wider Middle East. And in sharp contrast to its previously ambivalent record in the region, China now asserts, via its official media, that it ‘has never been an onlooker in Middle Eastern affairs’.

But unlike other external stakeholders in MENA, China’s direct engagement with the region has been overwhelmingly economic, through energy imports, trade in manufactures, and contracts for infrastructure and other construction projects – the ‘1+2+3’ strategy referred to by President Xi in 2014. According to the ‘1+2+3’ formula for China–Arab cooperation, energy cooperation will be the ‘core’ of the relationship, with infrastructure construction, and facilitating trade and investment as the ‘wings’ supporting that core. The ‘3’ refers to ‘three breakthroughs’ – aspirations for future cooperation in the areas of nuclear energy, new and clean energy, and aerospace (particularly satellites, but also including ‘cooperation on manned spaceflight’). The BRI will serve as the framework for all ‘1+2+3’ cooperation.

For example, in just under a decade, the value of commercial exchanges between China and the GCC states doubled, from $57 billion in 2007 to $114 billion in 2016. Right now, China’s relationship with the Arab world is largely defined by its energy imports – i.e. oil. As noted in China’s Arab Policy Paper: ‘Arab countries as a whole have become China’s biggest supplier of crude oil.’ The fact of the matter is even more striking: Saudi Arabia alone is China’s largest supplier of oil; and once Iraq, Kuwait, Oman and the UAE are factored in, the Arab world accounts for over 40 per cent of China’s total oil imports.

What China is seeking to do in the MENA context is to add to its reach by emphasizing economic diplomacy and the prospect of mutual gains, while limiting the contributions it makes to ‘hard’ security or to strengthen institutions of economic governance. China’s gamble is that others will continue to contribute sufficiently as regards regional security and economic governance in a way that will sustain the value of Chinese investments and allow it to reap the benefits of regional engagement without expanding its own commitments.

Diplomatically, China wants to have positive relations with a variety of states in the region. Its perception is that major powers such as the US provoke animosity by choosing sides. This is evident in the way that successive Chinese special envoys on ‘the Middle East Issue’ were not given enough authority or a sufficiently high profile to enable them to contribute significantly to the Israel–Palestine peace process arising from the 1993 Oslo accords. More recently, its non-partisan approach has also been evident in response to the severe tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. And China has been keen to be an impartial onlooker in the context of the rift between the ‘Arab Quartet’ (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt) and Qatar, which has created a deep rift within the GCC and seriously jeopardized the stability of the wider region.

It is important to note that a number of China’s provincial governments have played a role in furthering the country’s investments in the MENA region. Thus, China should not be regarded as a single entity in its engagements in the region. Beyond the central government, there are numerous actors involved in shaping China’s foreign policy agenda, including provincial governments and state-owned enterprises, each keen to make their own mark. The participation of provincial governments in China–MENA relations illustrates that China is far from being a homogeneous foreign policy player. Contrary to what might be assumed, China’s MENA engagements are not wholly driven from Beijing: rather, its top-down approach is not incompatible with provincial governments leading some substantial investments in infrastructure and utility sectors.
When operating overseas, the US generally seeks to reach beyond state-to-state relationships in order to establish direct ties with business elites, academics and civil societies. China, by contrast, engages mainly with state authorities. At the same time, as is particularly evident in the MENA region, China benefits from a state of affairs in which the US invests billions of dollars in security operations, while avoiding any direct hostility towards securitized interventions.

In summary, China wants to have the status of a major powerbroker in the Middle East, but it does not want this to come at a high security cost. Unlike Russia, it is not interested in engaging in major power rivalries with the US and other actors in a contested and volatile region.

**MENA–China: the MENA perspective**

To date, the relationship between China and Middle East states has been largely economically transactional, based on meeting China’s growing energy demands and its entry into lucrative markets in Iran and Egypt, and in the high-tech capitals of the Arab Gulf states. Meanwhile, the latter have sought to invest in downstream ventures in China, as a means of developing a value chain for their hydrocarbon exports. Despite considerable effort by Arab Gulf leaders to cultivate and deepen relations, China had, until recently, kept them at arm’s length.

Three key factors will transform the nature of the relationship between China and the MENA region from transactional to strategic – and downgrade US relations with the region from strategic to transactional. These factors are: China’s growing energy demand and MENA oil producers’ need to diversify into new fossil fuel-intensive markets; the impact of slow US disengagement from the region; and the Arab Gulf states’ search for a new long-term security arrangement.

The strategic importance of the MENA region to China’s development is clear. At present, China imports 49 per cent of its crude oil and 21 per cent of oil products from the region; and 37 per cent of the region’s oil exports are destined for China, amounting to nearly $123 billion in 2016, while imports from the region are valued at $87.5 billion. China has made a number of significant upstream investments in Iraq and Iran, while Qatari and Saudi investors have invested in downstream operations in China as a means of developing a value chain that ties the long-term economic interests of the countries together. At the same time, MENA countries, as noted above, need the large-scale investment that China brings with it as part of the BRI. The MENA region’s ageing and ailing infrastructure needs the capital boost that China is prepared to bring to the table, although that in itself poses a not insubstantial challenge to Saudi- and Dubai-based businesses, which find themselves unable to compete on a level playing field.

The relationship between the US and its allies in the region has been strategic, predicated on strong military, economic and energy relations: in simple terms, energy for security. Although, given the close ties between militaries, the provision of secondary and tertiary education to Arab elites in the US, and the close links between government agencies (including the NSA, the CIA and the State Department and their MENA counterparts), the relationship has been much stronger than that. However, the US ‘pivot to Asia’ under President Obama, together with his administration’s determination to reach a nuclear deal with Iran, and its seeming disengagement from the region, as evidenced in Obama’s interview with *The Atlantic* in April 2016,\(^1\) severely undermined the confidence that many MENA leaders had long placed in the US as regional security provider.

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In recent years, therefore, the region’s leaders have increased the diplomatic traffic with Beijing. There have been a number of high-profile visits: King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain travelled to China in 2013; the then Saudi Crown Prince (now King) Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud visited in 2014, as did Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad of Qatar; President Sisi of Egypt visited China in 2014, and again in 2017; and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia visited China in February 2019. President Xi made visits to Saudi Arabia and Egypt in 2016, and to the UAE in July 2018. Although Mohammed bin Salman and his UAE counterpart, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, welcomed the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016 and his early commitment to help ‘push back’ against expanding Iranian influence (notably in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon), they continue to worry about long-term US engagement in the region.

There are two main beneficiaries to any US withdrawal from the region – be it real or perceived: Russia and China. With its limited resources, Russia can only seize opportunities as and when they appear. While the US slowly disengages, the doors and the sea lanes are opening for a strategic partner. And while it may be some way off on the horizon, China is slowly coming into view.

China has made a clear effort to diversify its energy sources, well aware of the risks inherent in relying on a region long beset with conflicts and rivalries (Israel–Palestine, the ‘cold war’ between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and, latterly, the alignment of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Israel against Turkey, Qatar, Syria and Russia). All the same, China needs MENA. Moreover, as already noted, the MENA region will only grow in strategic importance, especially as its serves as a gateway to both African and European markets.

An ‘economy only’ approach has, until now, allowed China to navigate the choppy waters of the Gulf and neither choose between Saudi Arabia and Iran nor engage in the thorny issue of Israel–Palestine. Nevertheless, four key factors – a diminishing security role played by the US in the region; the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under President Trump; the emergence of new leadership among Arab Gulf states intent on reordering the region; and China’s BRI entering the maritime waters of the Gulf – mean that Beijing will, in time, have to step up its political, diplomatic and military engagement. It is not clear what specific event, or series of events, could lead to a clear shift in Beijing’s approach, but the framework for such a shift is already taking form both in the emerging international order and, more importantly, on the ground in both China and MENA.

The ‘outliers’: China–Iran, Israel and Syria

China’s growing economic and political clout in the MENA region extends well beyond the Arab Gulf states. Exploring Beijing’s relations with Iran, Israel and Syria provides further insight into its diversified regional engagement strategy. Both the range and the limits of China’s ties with these ‘outlier’ states are indicative of its approach to the region more widely: the possibilities for greater economic engagement abound, but these prospects are, for the time being, constrained by Beijing’s policy of non-intervention, as well as by the risks of being drawn into the numerous conflicts in the Middle East.

In July 2018 China allocated $20 billion in loans, and over $100 million in aid, to Arab countries, as part of its ‘oil and gas plus’ model to revive economic growth in the region. Part of this package has been allocated specifically to Palestine, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, in line with Xi’s argument that ‘the solution to many issues in the Middle East lies in development’. Beijing’s appointment of new special envoys to Syria and to the Middle East peace process suggests that China is considering new strategies that could include greater investment and mediation to support regional stability.
At the same time, however, China’s Arab Policy Paper does not reflect the political realities and the many governance challenges evident in the region; instead, it offers a blanket strategy for regional engagement. Some critics do not see the paper as setting out an integrated regional vision. Moreover, the Arab Policy Paper does not offer a roadmap or strategy for overcoming the level of regional conflict; nor does it address the mitigating impact of the US or other powers. Challenges stemming from Syria, Yemen, the threat of Islamist terrorism, the influence of non-state actors, Israel–Palestine, and tensions with Iran over the JCPOA all loom on the horizon. In the absence of active US engagement in the MENA region, these issues could necessitate growing Chinese diplomatic intervention to stabilize the investment environment. Uncertainty over the future of the US in the region could force Beijing to re-evaluate its strategy there.

Strategic hedging has, for the time being, allowed China to maintain a diverse portfolio of relationships in the MENA region without alienating any country. Beijing has navigated relations with competing powers – ranging from Saudi Arabia to Iran and Israel – without wading into their internal conflicts. China has, moreover, long benefited from the US security presence, and from US management of regional crises. This has allowed China to build, and reap the rewards of, economic ties without also committing to military and security investment – as is evident in its approach to relations with Iran, Israel and Syrian.

**Iran**

Iran is geographically and strategically essential for the BRI, and China’s relations with Iran, already elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership level. Ties have been further strengthened by shared historical links and cultural exchanges. Xi Jinping visited Iran in 2016; and his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, made a reciprocal visit to China in 2018.

In the current context, however, relations remain challenged by Iran’s role in the MENA region, and by the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the reimposition of US sanctions on Iran under President Trump. China (as a permanent member of the UN Security Council) was a facilitator and signatory of the JCPOA, and continues to support the implementation of the deal. China was also an economic beneficiary of the agreement, undertaking numerous investment projects including in Iran’s energy and infrastructure sectors.

The US withdrawal from the JCPOA has added a new dimension to China’s relations with Iran. The Trump administration’s maximum-pressure approach and the impact of restored sanctions have made Chinese investors cautious about engagement with Tehran. While the Chinese government is opposed to sanctions and sees them as a violation of the core principles of the WTO, China has not come to the aid of Tehran as many expected it to. This reluctance to intervene stems from the ongoing US–China trade dispute, the $1.1 billion fine imposed by the US government on the Chinese technology firm ZTE for sanctions violations, as well as the Huawei case, which many assume has an Iranian technology-transfer dimension.

Seeking greater Chinese economic assistance in the context of renewed US sanctions, Iran has developed a ‘look East’ strategy. As part of this, Tehran hoped that China, in absence of European competition and Western companies, would take advantage of potentially lucrative investment opportunities in Iran. Prior to the renewal of US sanctions, China, along with India and Japan, was the largest buyer of Iranian crude, but in the absence of oil waivers has not continued such significant purchases. Moreover, large Chinese investment has dampened, and economic exchanges are generally at the level of small and medium-sized enterprises. Thus, while Iran is strategically central to the BRI, it remains to be seen if the current level of commercial activity will be enough to steer and sustain the relationship, particularly in the event of years
of further sanctions. Another dynamic that could complicate relations between Beijing and Tehran will be China’s growing relationship with the Arab Gulf states. Most notably, if relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia deteriorate further, Beijing will, more than ever, be forced to balance its bilateral ties with the two sides.

**Israel**

China’s relations with Israel have been developing into a growing economic interdependency, with a particular focus on the innovation and technology sectors. The stalled peace process between Israel and the Palestinians has meant that Beijing has deliberately focused on the economic realm, rather than a wider strategic partnership. Following Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s visit to Beijing in 2018, China and Israel have ramped up trade ties particularly in the science and technology fields. China has also shown interest in a proposed ‘Red-Med’ railway, connecting the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, which, if developed, would provide an alternative to the Suez Canal as a transit route. An estimated 120 Israeli companies have received Chinese investment. Tourism – not just to Israel, but to the region as a whole – has increased in line with investment. There were some 185,000 Chinese visitors to Israel in 2017, up 46 per cent on the previous year.

The Israeli government welcomes Chinese investment, seeing this as an opportunity to diversify away from the US and Europe. All the same, Israel must balance its growing ties with China as a trade partner against its strategic alliance with the US, particularly as US reticence concerning Chinese investment is growing. The US National Defense Authorization Act includes not-so-veiled concerns about the Shanghai International Port Group’s planned operations that are set to begin in Haifa in 2021, implying that concerns over military and technology transfers could become a future point of tension in the context of China–Israel–US relations.

From Israel’s perspective, China’s neutrality and non-intervention policy is an important delimiting factor in the bilateral relationship. China has long supported a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine and has begun free-trade talks with the Palestinians, and Chinese officials have visited Ramallah to sign initial memorandums of understanding on trade initiatives. Israel would like China to wade into regional disputes rather than sidestep them. Beijing could, for example, be a balanced interlocutor for Israel and Iran. Aware that China has never missed a UNSC vote against Israel on the issue of Palestine, Israel would like to change Beijing’s position.

**Syria**

China’s ties with Syria are complicated by the political dynamics of the civil war that began in 2011, as well as by Beijing’s view of the Libya crisis. In contrast to China’s abstention at the UN Security Council vote on Libya in 2011 Beijing has vetoed a number of Security Council resolutions on Syria. Based on its experience in Libya stemming from the outcome of the NATO-led intervention, China seeks to ‘delegitimize’ regime change as a policy and to engage in ‘norm-shaping’, rather than following what it perceives as US ‘rules’.

Beijing has appointed a special envoy on Syria, has provided some $48 million in humanitarian assistance, and has indicated interest in contributing to post-conflict reconstruction. Concerns over the number of ethnic Uighurs fighting in Syria and Iraq, including the Uighur jihadist Turkistan Islamic Party fighting in Idlib, are increasingly focusing China’s attention particularly on Syria, in a context in which Beijing’s treatment of its indigenous Uighur population has drawn international condemnation. China’s growing economic interests in Syria are evidenced by, for example, its 35 per cent stake in Syria Shell
Petroleum Development; and Chinese companies are looking to invest in renewable energy and infrastructure development should the political environment stabilize.

Such developments have been interpreted as an indication of China’s growing regional engagement. At the same time, however, Beijing has not involved itself in any meaningful mediation efforts in Syria. In fact, the Korean peninsula is the only area where Beijing has an active mediation policy. And in the case of Syria, China’s influence in both conflict resolution and investment could be limited in an already competitive playing field filled with multiple regional and international actors. Even so, the Syrian government is trying to coax Beijing into a role of balancer against Russia and Iran.

Gaps in research and areas for further analysis

The opportunities and challenges discussed at the roundtable underscore a number of questions regarding China’s ability to balance its economic agenda, tied to the BRI, and its long-standing policy of non-intervention against the weight of Middle East tensions. Opportunities for further focused research on the dynamics of China–MENA ties are plentiful.

Specifically, a study focusing on regional perspectives on China’s presence within the MENA region, would shed valuable light on regional strategies, challenges and potential competition. A closer look at bilateral relations between China and key countries and military ties as well as defence spending by and purchases from China across the region, soft power investment via education, the Confucius Institutes, media, tourism, technology and post-war reconstruction could provide further insight and identify areas where China could contribute towards regional stability. It will also be useful to analyse the growing European and US responses to China’s Middle East strategy. Finally, with many questions remaining about Beijing’s Arab Policy Paper and the future of China’s multilateral engagements, an examination of the practical application of China’s strategy with regard to the MENA region is also worthy of further study.
Appendix: Agenda

10:30-11:00  Registration
Tea/coffee

11:00-11:15  Opening Remarks
Champa Patel, Head, Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House
Neil Quilliam, Senior Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

11:15-12:45  Session One | China’s Power Shift in the Middle East
- Does China have a coherent overarching strategy for MENA and will Beijing’s existing MENA strategy in compatible with the Belt and Road Initiative?
- Does China have the political interest - and institutional capacity - to move beyond its current economically oriented approach?
- Will China’s involvement in the MENA region challenge its strong insistence on state sovereignty, non-intervention and non-use of force in other countries (outside of internationally mandated interventions)?
- Is there a difference between Beijing and Provincial government views and policy practices towards MENA countries?

Jonathan Fulton, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Zayed University
Karen Young, Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute
Yu Jie, Research Fellow, Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House
Chair: Champa Patel, Head, Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House

12:45-13:45 Lunch

13:45-15:15  Session Two | Economics, Oil and the Curse of Security: China’s challenging dance in the GCC
- How are MENA countries balancing economic opportunities and other strategic interests vis-a-vis cultural/religious ties to China?
- Are Middle Eastern states engaged in a regional geo-economic competition to attract China’s attention? Or are MENA states more bilaterally focused?
- Where does China fit into the various Vision Programmes of the GCC?
- How has China developed/used soft power strategies to win regional ‘hearts and minds’?

Najla Al Qassimi, Director of Global Affairs, b’huth (Dubai Public Policy Research Centre)
Mohammed Al-Sudairi, Researcher, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (via skype)
Jue Wang, Associate Fellow, Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House
Chair: Neil Quilliam, Senior Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

15:15-15:45 Coffee Break

15:45-17:15  Session Three | Iran, Israel and Syria—China’s stringent test to great power relations in the MENA
- What does China’s Arab policy paper and Syria envoy mean in practice?
• Will China be able to extend further economic and political influence in sanction-imposed Iran?
• Has Israel become an exception when it comes to engage with China on technology and innovation sector?
• Will China use MENA as a good opportunity to explore multilateral engagements and third parties’ cooperation both economically and politically?

Xiaolu Li, Associate Professor, China National Defense University
Assaf Orion, Senior Research Fellow, Director of China Program, The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)
Yahia Zoubir, Professor of International Relations and International Management, KEDGE Business School

Chair: Sanam Vakil, Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

17:15-17:30  Closing Remarks
Yu Jie, Research Fellow, Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House
Sanam Vakil, Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

18:00  Dinner
Aubaine Mayfair, 31 Dover St, Mayfair, London W1S 4ND