

CHINA'S GEOECONOMIC STATECRAFT IN THE MIDDLE EAST: ASSESSING THE ROLE OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN RESHAPING REGIONAL POWER DYNAMICS



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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reshapes power dynamics in the Middle East through goeconomic statecraft rather than military dominance. It argues that China's influence is derived from structural power embedded in economic networks such as energy cooperation, infrastructure development, and digital connectivity. Through case studies of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran, the article shows that BRI engagement creates durable economic interdependencies while avoiding direct security commitments. Middle Eastern states actively use cooperation with China as a strategic hedging tool to diversify partnerships without abandoning existing U.S. security ties. Consequently, the BRI contributes to a more flexible and multipolar regional order by transforming the mechanisms of influence rather than replacing the prevailing security architecture.

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ÇİNİN YAXIN ŞƏRQDƏ GEOİQTİSADİ DÖVLƏTÇİLİYİ: "BİR KƏMƏR BİR YOL TƏŞƏBBÜSÜ" NÜN REGIONAL GÜC DİNAMİKALARININ YENİDƏN FORMALAŞDIRILMASINDAKI ROLUNUN TƏHLİLİ



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Açar sözlər:

Kəmər və Yol Təşəbbüsü,
Geoiqtisadi dövlətçilik,
Yaxın Şərq,
Struktur güc,
Təhlükəsizləşdirilməmiş
yanışma,
Çin

ANNOTASIYA

Bu məqalə Çinin Kəmər və Yol Təşəbbüsünün (KYT) Yaxın Şərqdə güc dinamikalarını hərbi dominantlıqdan deyil, geoiqtisadi dövlətçilik vasitəsilə necə yenidən formalaşdırdığını təhlil edir. Məqalədə iddia olunur ki, Çinin təsiri enerji əməkdaşlığı, infrastrukturun inkişafı və rəqəmsal əlaqəlilik kimi iqtisadi şəbəkələrdə formalaşan struktur gücdən qaynaqlanır. Səudiyyə Ərəbistanı, Birləşmiş Ərəb Əmirlikləri və İran nümunələri əsasında aparılan təhlil göstərir ki, KYT çərçivəsində əməkdaşlıq birbaşa təhlükəsizlik öhdəlikləri götürmədən davamlı iqtisadi asılılıqlar yaradır. Yaxın Şərq dövlətləri Çinlə əməkdaşlığı mövcud ABŞ təhlükəsizlik əlaqələrindən imtina etmədən tərəfdaşlıqları şaxələndirmək üçün strateji hedcinq aləti kimi fəal şəkildə istifadə edirlər. Nəticə etibarilə, KYT mövcud təhlükəsizlik arxitekturasını əvəz etmədən, təsirin həyata keçirilmə mexanizmlərini transformasiya etməklə daha çevik və çoxqütblü regional nizamın formalaşmasına töhfə verir.

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ГЕОЭКОНОМИЧЕСКАЯ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННАЯ СТРАТЕГИЯ КИТАЯ НА БЛИЖНЕМ ВОСТОКЕ: РОЛЬ ИНИЦИАТИВЫ «ОДИН ПОЯС — ОДИН ПУТЬ» В ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЙ ДИНАМИКИ СИЛЫ



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Ключевые слова:

Инициатива «Один пояс
— один путь»,
Геоэкономическая
государственная
стратегия,
Ближний Восток,
Структурная сила,
Десекуритизация,
Стратегическое
хеджирование,
Китай

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье анализируется, каким образом инициатива Китая «Один пояс — один путь» (ОПОП) трансформирует динамику силы на Ближнем Востоке не за счёт военного доминирования, а посредством геоэкономической государственной стратегии. Утверждается, что влияние Китая основывается на структурной силе, заложенной в экономических сетях, включая энергетическое сотрудничество, развитие инфраструктуры и цифровую связанность. На основе примеров Саудовской Аравии, Объединённых Арабских Эмиратов и Ирана показано, что участие в рамках ОПОП формирует устойчивые экономические взаимозависимости без принятия прямых обязательств в сфере безопасности. Государства Ближнего Востока активно используют сотрудничество с Китаем в качестве инструмента стратегического хеджирования, диверсифицируя внешние партнёрства без отказа от существующих связей в сфере безопасности с США. В результате ОПОП способствует формированию более гибкого и многополярного регионального порядка, трансформируя механизмы влияния, а не заменяя существующую архитектуру безопасности.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, China has significantly expanded its economic engagement in the Middle East, emerging as a major trading partner and investor in energy, infrastructure, and logistics. This growing presence has developed alongside, rather than in opposition to, the long-standing U.S.-led regional security architecture. Despite expectations that increased economic influence would translate into military competition or hegemonic rivalry, China has largely avoided direct security commitments in the region. This divergence raises an important question: how does China reshape the region? This article adopts a geoeconomic statecraft approach to analyze China's expanding role in the Middle East. Geoeconomic statecraft refers to the strategic use of economic instruments—such as trade, investment, finance, and infrastructure—to advance national interests and shape the external environment. Unlike traditional power projection based on military capabilities or formal alliances, geoeconomic influence operates through markets, networks, and long-term economic relationships that are less visible but often more enduring.

The analysis is further informed by Susan Strange's concept of structural power, defined as the ability to shape the frameworks within which states operate by influencing access to capital, technology, markets, and infrastructure [Evron, 2019]. In the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's investments in energy supply chains, transport corridors, ports, and digital systems generate path-dependent interdependencies that constrain alternative choices over time. These structures do not rely on coercion but create durable positional advantages for China within regional economic systems.

Importantly, this framework emphasizes state agency rather than passive dependency. Middle Eastern states engage with the BRI selectively, incorporating Chinese economic cooperation into broader hedging strategies that preserve existing security alignments—particularly with the United States—while expanding economic options. By combining geoeconomic statecraft with structural power, the article explains how China reshapes regional power dynamics without challenging the prevailing security order [Kamel, 2018].

Regional power dynamics without assuming traditional security responsibilities? Existing literature often interprets China's role through the lens of great power competition, assuming a linear transition from economic engagement to strategic or military dominance. Such approaches, however, underestimate the autonomy of economic statecraft and overlook the agency of Middle Eastern states [Ketchley, 2025]. This article argues that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a distinct form of geoeconomic statecraft that transforms the mechanisms of influence rather than the hierarchy of military power. By prioritizing infrastructure connectivity, energy interdependence, and economic network-building, China embeds itself within the structural foundations of the regional economy.

Adopting a geoeconomic and structural power framework, the article examines how the BRI enables China to expand influence through de-securitized engagement while allowing regional actors to pursue strategic hedging and greater autonomy. In doing so, it reframes power competition in the Middle East as a process of structural transformation rather than hegemonic displacement.

2. Case Study 1: Saudi Arabia – Energy Interdependence and Developmental Alignment.

Saudi Arabia represents a key case for examining China's geoeconomic statecraft in the Middle East. As China's largest crude oil supplier, the kingdom plays a central role in Beijing's external energy security while remaining firmly embedded in the U.S.-led regional security architecture. This dual positioning makes Saudi Arabia an illustrative example of how economic engagement reshapes power dynamics without altering security alignments.

Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Sino–Saudi cooperation has focused primarily on long-term oil supply agreements, joint refinery projects, and downstream petrochemical investments. These arrangements embed Chinese capital and firms within Saudi energy value chains, creating durable interdependencies that enhance China's structural power while supporting Saudi Arabia's economic stability [Amineh, 2025]. Importantly, this cooperation is framed in technocratic and commercial terms, reducing political sensitivity and insulating economic ties from regional security tensions.

Beyond energy, BRI engagement aligns closely with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 development strategy. Chinese investments in infrastructure, industrial zones, renewable energy, and digital technologies contribute to economic diversification while positioning China as a developmental partner rather than a security actor. This economic focus contrasts with U.S. engagement, which remains heavily centered on arms sales and defense cooperation [Chen et al., 2023].

Saudi Arabia's engagement with China reflects a strategic hedging approach rather than geopolitical realignment. By expanding economic ties with China while maintaining security dependence on the United States, Riyadh enhances its bargaining power and strategic autonomy. In this way, the BRI reshapes regional power relations by altering the structural context of partnership rather than displacing existing security hierarchies.

3. Case Study 2: United Arab Emirates – Connectivity, Logistics, and Network Power

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) illustrates how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reshapes regional power dynamics through connectivity rather than security alignment. As a major commercial and logistics hub linking Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, the UAE occupies a strategic position within global trade networks while maintaining close security ties with the United States.

China's engagement in the UAE under the BRI has concentrated on ports, logistics infrastructure, industrial zones, and digital systems [Cai, 2017]. Investments in container terminals, port operations, and free trade zones strengthen the UAE's role as a regional transshipment hub and integrate it more deeply into China-centered supply chains. Through this network-based integration, China gains structural power by influencing the flow of goods and capital across key nodes of regional connectivity.

Cooperation in digital sectors further reinforces these interdependencies. Chinese firms contribute to telecommunications infrastructure, smart port technologies, e-commerce platforms, and digital payment systems, supporting the UAE's ambitions in digital governance and logistics modernization. These initiatives are presented as technocratic and efficiency-driven, reinforcing the de-securitized character of China's economic presence [Huang, 2016].

Despite expanding economic cooperation with China, the UAE continues to rely on U.S. security guarantees and defense partnerships. This clear separation between economic and security domains enables a sophisticated hedging strategy that diversifies external partnerships while preserving existing security arrangements [Qian, 2016]. Consequently, the BRI enhances the UAE's network centrality without challenging the prevailing regional security order.

China's engagement in the United Arab Emirates further demonstrates how the Belt and Road Initiative operates through economic connectivity rather than security realignment. As a regional hub for trade, finance, and logistics, the UAE occupies a central position in transregional supply chains linking Asia, Africa, and Europe. Chinese investments in ports, logistics corridors, and industrial zones reinforce this position by integrating Emirati infrastructure into broader China-centered economic networks [Mashwani, 2024]. Through

these linkages, China enhances its structural power by shaping patterns of trade and capital flows without assuming formal security responsibilities.

In addition to physical infrastructure, cooperation in digital sectors deepens network-based interdependence. Chinese firms are increasingly involved in telecommunications, smart logistics systems, e-commerce platforms, and digital payment technologies. These initiatives support the UAE's development agenda while embedding Chinese technological standards within critical commercial systems. Framed as efficiency-oriented and technocratic solutions, such cooperation minimizes political sensitivity and limits securitized responses from external actors [Flavius-Ieronim, 2020].

Despite deepening economic ties with China, the UAE continues to anchor its security policy in long-standing partnerships with the United States. This deliberate separation of economic and security domains allows Emirati policymakers to pursue a hedging strategy that diversifies partnerships and enhances strategic flexibility. As a result, China's growing presence reshapes the structural environment of regional economic relations without directly challenging the existing security architecture.

China's engagement with Iran illustrates both the adaptability and the constraints of geoeconomic statecraft under conditions of heightened political risk [Evron, 2019]. Unlike its partnerships with Gulf states, China's economic involvement in Iran has been shaped by extensive U.S.-led sanctions that restrict access to global finance, markets, and technology. Within this constrained environment, cooperation has focused primarily on energy trade, selective infrastructure projects, and long-term investment frameworks designed to mitigate sanction-related exposure.

Energy cooperation remains central to Sino-Iranian relations, with oil exports structured through indirect channels, barter arrangements, and non-dollar settlement mechanisms. These practices allow Iran to sustain limited export revenues while providing China with discounted energy supplies, albeit at the cost of higher transactional and reputational risks. Infrastructure projects linked to regional connectivity have proceeded unevenly, reflecting regulatory uncertainty, geopolitical pressure, and risk-averse Chinese investment behavior [Qian, 2016].

Rather than deeply embedding itself in Iran's domestic economy, China contributes to the maintenance of alternative economic networks that partially reduce Iran's dependence on Western-dominated systems. This engagement does not offset the full impact of sanctions nor constitute a direct challenge to U.S. coercive power. Instead, it reflects a pragmatic strategy of risk management that preserves limited economic interaction while avoiding overt political or security entanglement.

4. Conclusion

Overall, this article demonstrates that China's Belt and Road Initiative reshapes power dynamics in the Middle East through geoeconomic mechanisms rather than military competition. By prioritizing infrastructure connectivity, energy interdependence, and economic networks, China exercises structural power without challenging the existing U.S.-led security architecture. The analysis shows that Middle Eastern states are not passive recipients of Chinese influence but active agents that use engagement with China as a strategic hedging tool to diversify partnerships and enhance autonomy. While de-securitized economic engagement reduces political resistance, its effectiveness remains constrained by sanctions, regulatory uncertainty, and geopolitical risk, as illustrated by the Iranian case. Consequently, the BRI does not replace existing power hierarchies but transforms the mechanisms through which influence is exercised. This process contributes to the emergence of a more flexible and multipolar regional order shaped by economic connectivity rather than hegemonic transition.

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