



RESEARCH PAPER

China's Interests in the Middle East: Challenges And Opportunities for Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to draw attention toward emerging challenges for Pakistan in the Middle East by increasing interests of international actors. The study focuses on the China's rising interests in the Middle East, China's rapidly proceeding demand for energy and access to international resources has increased prospects for competition in the Middle East. China aims to form a stable trade relation with the Middle East by finalizing a FTA with the GCC economies, for the purpose President Xi's 21st century 'Silk Road' vision expects Chinese companies to invest in Middle Eastern markets, including the upstream oil sector. The study conclude that China's goal is to hunt energy resources and create investment opportunities for Chinese companies in the Middle East. Pakistan should focus on finding points of convergence, not divergence, it must consider the geopolitical, political, and economic dynamics of the region before formulating any policy.

Keywords: Challenges for Pakistan, Energy Deal, Investment Opportunities, Oil Demand

Introduction

Today Middle East has become the center of global political and economic conflicts as well as the hub of energy competition. It has become the arena of unending wars. It seems this is the region where realist school of thought of international relations sees the main features of state system including insecurity, instability, and anarchy, where realist paradigm retains its greatest relevance. Now a days, China has also become a crucial game player of broader Middle East along with Russia and the United States. They are the leading states behind great power rivalry in the region.

China's rapidly proceeding demand for energy and access to international resources has increased prospects for competition between China and US. In early 2015, China National Offshore Oil Corporation's bid to acquire Unocal, had aroused a hostile reaction from congress. Henry Kissinger argued that in the coming years, competitions over hydrocarbon resources will gigantic cause of international conflicts. China's oil hunt has clearly influenced its neighbouring countries like Central Asian States, Japan, Russia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Being an emerging superpower China is using its influence to get access to global energy resources. Chinese policies towards Middle East have been increasing since late 1990s, which are closely linked to three Chinese companies objectives including CNOOC, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), and the China National Petrochemical Corporation (Sinipec), to get access oil and gas reserves in the Middle East on exclusive basis. Chinese activities in the region has been increased strategically, politically, and economically for last several years. Since 2002, China has focused on hydrocarbon rich territory of Middle East to meet its energy needs instead of international markets to import. It is expected that China will intensify its relations in the region with oil exporting countries to ensure its energy security strategy. China's increasing influence in the Middle East has made it a major competitor to the Unites States (Meidan & Campbell, 2015).

Turning point in Chinese Foreign Policy

Present emphasis of China in the Middle East is quite different from that of history. Chinese foreign policy has been reflected several goals towards Middle East until 1990s. During 1960-1970 China just support Palestine cause in the Middle East, like China support global national liberation movements. In the early 1990s China initiated domestic reforms, and change its thoughts towards West, and Middle East. During 1990s, China engaged deeply to the Middle East. By modernizing its military China has also been focused its cash economic development, for the purpose China sold military weapons during Iran-Iraq war 1980-1988 to both sides. Beijing supplied CSS-2 intermediate range ballistic missiles to Saudi Arabia in 1988. With the cooperation of Israel China develop F-10 fighter aircraft in the 1980s. China remained in liaison with Syria and Libya for selling M-9 ballistic missiles. For that Washington pressurised Beijing to halt such endeavors (Calabrese, 2005).

China's Rising Oil Demand

Rising living style of Chinese, burgeoning commercial enterprises, industrial development, and market-oriented economic reforms has fuelled energy demand in China. East and South China Sea, and Xinjiang province failed to meet expectations in anticipated petroleum reserves, reserves of Daqing field ran down that affected pace of China's energy production, and domestic oil production. Growing Chinese demand of crude oil has mounting impact on global energy market. The increasing hydrocarbon demand in China can be estimated since 1980 to 2023 that increased drastically. As China's Oil reserves, production and consumption can be seen in the graph.

Table 1
China's Oil reserves, production and consumption 1980-2023

Year	China Oil Reserves (barrels/day)	China Oil Production (barrels/day)	China Oil Consumption (barrels/day)
1980	20,000,000,000	2,114, 000	1,940,000
1981	21,000,000,000	2,012, 000	1,857, 000
1982	20,000,000,000	2,045, 000	1,837, 000
1983	19,000,000,000	2,120, 000	1,874, 000
1984	19,000,000,000	2,296, 000	1,911, 000
1985	19,000,000,000	2,505, 000	2,024, 000
1986	18,000,000,000	2,588, 000	2,057, 000
1987	18,000,000,000	2,680, 000	2,162, 000
1988	18,000,000,000	2,722, 000	2,315, 000
1989	24,000,000,000	2,749, 000	2,416, 000
1990	24,000,000,000	2,768, 000	2,327, 000
1991	24,000,000,000	2,836, 000	2,431, 000
1992	24,000,000,000	2,852, 000	2,694, 000
1993	24,000,000,000	2,903,000	2,993, 000
1994	24,000,000,000	2,957,288	3,193, 000
1995	24,000,000,000	3,060,049	3,394, 000
1996	24,000,000,000	3,211,339	3,797, 000
1997	24,000,000,000	3,284,342	3,636,500
1998	24,000,000,000	3,302,178	4,118, 000
1999	24,000,000,000	3,316,995	4,359, 000
2000	24,000,000,000	3,388,527	4,668,535
2001	24,000,000,000	3,444,635	4,814,297
2002	24,000,000,000	3,549,862	5,211,508
2003	18,250,000,000	3,602,906	5,786,183
2004	18,250,000,000	3,722,752	6,802,690

2005	18,250,000,000	3,871,016	6,970,258
2006	18,250,000,000	3,980,215	7,493,351
2007	16,000,000,000	4,079,011	7,923,259
2008	16,000,000,000	4,166,932	8,041,343
2009	16,000,000,000	4,218,449	8,497,269
2010	20,350,000,000	4,575,155	9,339,164
2011	20,350,000,000	4,660,014	10,053,344
2012	20,350,000,000	4,773,203	10,549,502
2013	23,716,800,000	4,911,731	11,084,100
2014	24,375,600,000	5,045,263	11,637,281
2015	24,648,842,000	4,905,071	12,791,553
2016	25,132,122,000	3,986,145	12,791,553
2017	000,000,000	3,821,485	13,003,000
2018	000,000,000	3,787,005	13,643,000
2019	000,000,000	3,825,016	14,322,000
2020	000,000,000	3,888,989	14,408,000
2021	000,000,000	4,341,000	14,893,000
2022	000,000,000	4,093,860	16,000,000
2023	4,210,000,000	4,125.41 August 2023	16,935,26

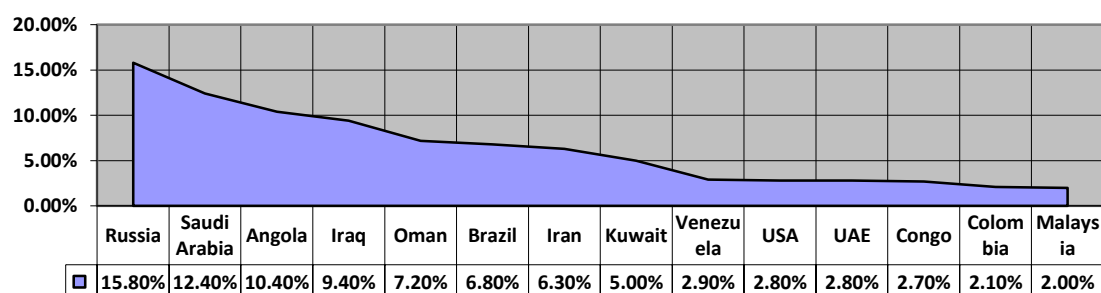
(Kemp, 2022), (Real & Others, 2020), (Zaccara & Haghirian, 2023)

So, rising energy demand shows that the number of oil and gas-fired plants will be increased in China's near future, while coal will remain the dominant fuel source for power. The fastest growing demand in China for energy is transportation driven by the automobile market and transportation is one of the basic development sectors. This tendency inevitably will swiftly raise the percentage of the energy demand. For that increasing energy demand can be met by hydrocarbon fuel. Currently, 23million cars are available in China, and by 2030 it will be 130 million according to Sinopec executive. China is the third largest country after America and Japan imports three million barrels of crude oil per day. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), China's demand for oil will exacerbate 10 million barrels per day by 2030, and imports will reach 80 percent (Kuangyi, 2014).

China's Energy Deals in the Middle East

Rising energy demand to import led China to engage with energy producing states of Middle East. Chinese energy companies have signed agreements on each continent and pursuing deals. But no region could compete Gulf States and broader Middle East in energy producing. So Persian Gulf remains as priority for Chinese energy planners. Chinese leaders show hope to turn towards geographically close energy resources like Russia and Central Asia to meet rising energy demand. Beijing has supported Chinese energy companies to get energy deals in the Gulf region with high level official visits.

China Oil Imports from following top 14 countries and Middle East is dominated, according to 2018.

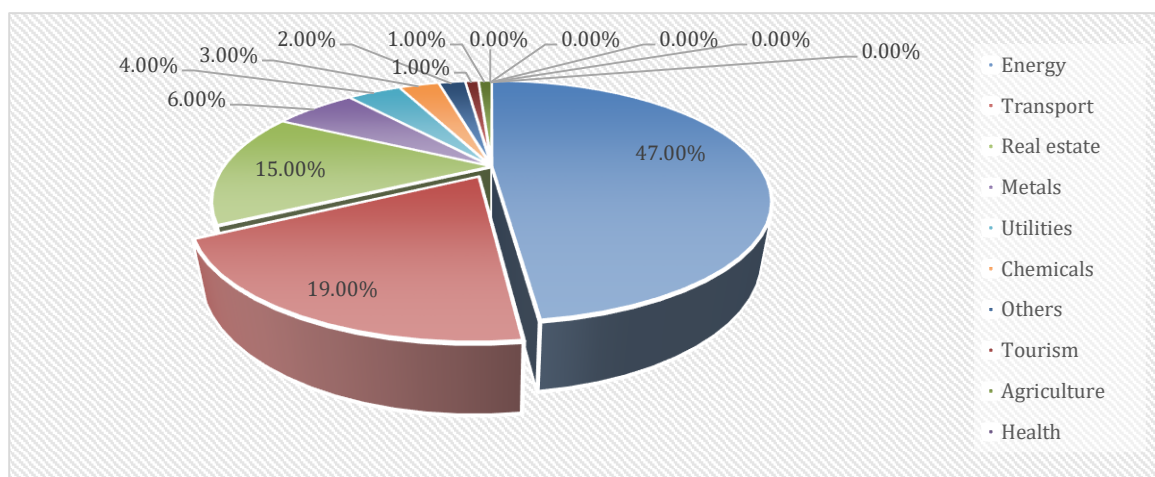


(Gnana, 2023), (Real & Others, 2020), (Zaccara & Haghirian, 2023)

China has also been following up on its spreading network of energy deals in the Gulf by becoming an important exporter of manufactured goods and capital to the region. For instance in Iran, NORINCO has helped to expand the Tehran subway systems, Chinese automobile and television manufacturers have opened factories, a Chinese fiber optic manufacturer helped in building a broadband network.

China has also focused in extending its export and investment ties to Saudi Arabia. During last ten years, Saudi imports from China has risen annually, over the last decade it increased roughly about 600%. Chinese officials well know that by establishing cordial relations with US ally in the Gulf region will oblige US to take China seriously as global competitor. During the last decade China has also built relations with other smaller oil producer Middle East states such as Sudan, Libya, Egypt, Algeria, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait (Herberg, 2012).

China's Investment in the Middle East during 2005-2018



([Calabrese](#), 2023), (Real & Others, 2020), (Zaccara & Haghirian, 2023)

Subsiding Oil Prices: A Stroke of Luck for China

Arab uprising in Libya in 2011 and continuous civil war played a vital role in declining oil prices in the summer of 2014. The Civil War disturbed operations at oil fields and installations. In spite of uncertain circumstances in Iraq, and US sanctions on Iran.....Iraq continued its oil production and offered discount barrels to Asia. Likewise, despite the sanctions regime, Iran continued targeting Asian markets and supplying them with cheap oil (Meidan & Campbell, 2015). By taking advantage of this situation, China not only supported the global supply of oil but also successfully fulfilled its energy security priorities (Al-Tamimi, 2019). The downfall of oil prices allowed China to increase its strategic petroleum reserves as an astounding. The import of crude oil reached 7.4 million b/d, when China's oil demand and economic growth were getting slow in April 2015, then increased to 8.6 percent due to robust stockpiling. Chinese imports increased, as the global oil supply markets got worsened. It estimated China had stockpiled about 100 million barrels in 2014 and now in 2023 China has become more self-sufficient in energy supplies.

With the growing energy demand day by day, China has increased its sources of import, and this change is gradually underway, with this sense that crude oil imports from US are set to fewer. In fact, Saudi Arabia which had been the first largest exporter of China since 2012, couldn't expand its market share while China has increased its imports to 700,000 b/d. In this comparison, China has increased its oil imports from Iraq by 70% meanwhile the same period. Latin America has also increased its oil exports to China (Daojiong & Weixing, 2007).

The oil and gas deals that Iran concluded with China have a vividly strategic quality to them, they seem to boost growing political relationships. Saudi Arabia has been the long-lasting ally of US in contrast to Iran, this is why, US nurturing complications between Saudi Arabia and China relations. However Saudi leadership was upset after 9/11 incident when American Congress and public began to criticise Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah was also dismayed by the Bush administration's policies in the Middle East after 9/11, from their perspective, there were serious deficiencies in his policies in the contrary of first term (McGregor & Crooks, 2013).

So by following these concerns, Saudi Arabia moved towards China for robust strategic relations, similar to United States. Saudi Arabia also pays to encourage this relationship as Iran. Additionally, to serve as a strategic hedge for Saudi, China also provides a haven for Riyadh's oil wealth. Saudi officials were impressed by China's deter after 1997 Asian financial crisis. In a nutshell, it is significant for China that the international finance and shipping networks that enable trade between the Chinese and the Middle Eastern markets are sustained (Al-Tamimi, 2019).

Oil Diplomacy of China and Geoeconomics

There is no any consent between experts regarding the concept of geoeconomics, even some researchers are unable to understand distinction between geopolitics and geoeconomics. To some extent, geopolitics has been used for strategic and analytical review of foreign policy, while geoeconomics has explained how governments apply economics to advance its foreign policy. In this context, geoeconomics provide an analytical review of international politics, along with military base power politics.

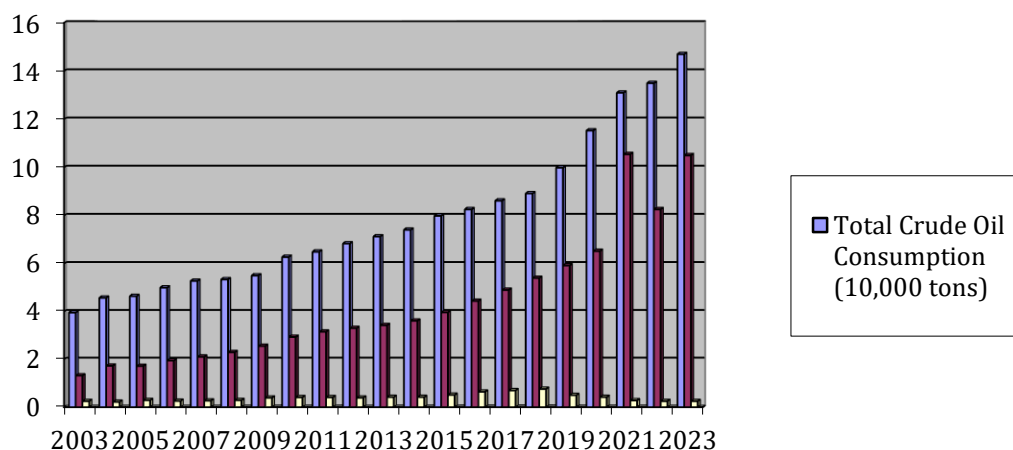
Chinese oil diplomacy has been following geographical perspectives, as China getting oil from Africa, increasing relations with Central Asian States, oil exploration in North and Latin America. China's oil diplomacy affects various countries in three distinct ways.

Firstly, China can compete with the heavily oil imported countries like Japan whose economic development is inevitably linked to energy consumption.

Secondly, China can compete and cooperate with countries like Southeast Asian nations, India and US who are dependent on imported crude oil.

Thirdly, China is increasing its robust relations with oil exporting and producing countries (Blackwill & Harris, 2017).

China's oil consumption, imports, and exports (10,000 tonnes)



(Koga, 2023), (Kemp, 2022), (Real & Others, 2020), (Zaccara & Haghirian, 2023)

Opportunities for China in The Middle East

In the last decade, Middle Eastern leaders paid visits to Beijing, as King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in September 2013, Saudi Crown Prince in March 2014, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in May 2014, and in the same year, Kuwait's Prime Minister made an official trip to China (Daojiong & Meidan, 2015). In January 2022, a delegation consisting of Foreign ministers from the Gulf region including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman, along with the Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Nayef bin Falah al-Hajrah, arrived in Beijing for a five-day visit, during visit they engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activities and met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (Al-Jazeera, 2022). China aims to form a stable trade relation with the Middle East by finalizing a FTA with the GCC economies. President Xi's 21st century 'Silk Road' vision expects Chinese companies to invest in Middle Eastern markets, including the upstream oil sector. In April 2014, CNPC gained its first upstream stake in the UAE through a deal with the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company. (ADNOC) (Kuangyi, 2014).

China's ties with Turkey have deteriorated over Turkey's criticism of China's violent clashes in Xinjiang in 2009. On the other hand, China and Israel have formed a partnership to collaborate on counterterrorism, which could deepen China's ties with the Middle East. While China's non-interventionist foreign policy remains unchanged, there is potential for China to engage with Middle Eastern governments in new ways (Leverett & Bader, 2010).

Opportunities for China in the Middle East (An Overview)

China has been actively seeking economic, political, and strategic opportunities in the Middle East. Here are some key areas where China has been seeking opportunities in the region:

- **Energy Cooperation:** The Middle East is home to abundant reserves of oil and natural gas. As the world's largest energy consumer, China has a vital interest in ensuring a consistent and dependable energy supply. To achieve this, China has been making significant investments in oil and gas fields, infrastructure, and pipelines in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These investments help sustain the energy resources required for China's rapidly growing economy and decrease its reliance on conventional sources.
- **Trade and Investment:** China has been expanding its trade ties and investments in the Middle East, focusing on sectors such as construction, telecommunications, manufacturing, and technology. Free trade agreements and economic zones have helped increase economic cooperation between China and the region.
- **Military Cooperation:** China is expanding military connections with select Middle Eastern countries via joint exercises, equipment sales, and technology transfer. This helps China improve its defense capabilities, secure access to regional military markets, and potentially establish military bases in the future, all in line with its strategic objectives.
- **Political Engagement and Diplomacy:** China is expanding its influence in the Middle East by building alliances, supporting initiatives, and mediating conflicts. This allows China to safeguard its interests and enhance its global standing.
- **Technology and Innovation:** China is advancing its technology and innovation collaboration with Middle Eastern countries. Chinese tech companies have invested in research, telecommunication, and smart city projects in the region. This collaboration offers opportunities for knowledge transfer, technological advancement, and economic growth for both China and the Middle East.

- **Cultural and Educational Exchanges:** China promotes cultural and educational exchanges with the Middle East, including scholarships, events, and language programs. These deepen mutual understanding and enhance soft power projection, with potential long-term economic and political benefits.

China's involvement in the Middle East is complex due to political dynamics, conflicts, and competing geopolitical interests. Its growing influence has raised concerns among major powers, which may impact regional relationships.

China's Diplomatic Agenda for Energy Escalation

Sino-Saudi relations has been strengthened after 2001, and China's energy relations with Kuwait, Iran, and Iraq emerged on the base of labour and services. The tension between US-Saudi relations began after 9/11 incident, US criticism prompted Riyadh to join global alliances. In the late 2001 when China joined World Trade Organization, China became the largest oil importer globally and Saudi Arabia was the most important oil exporter market, that enhance energy and trade cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia. Trade and cooperation relations rapidly increased between the two countries even in two way trade increased tenfold from 2002 to 2012, that was \$74 billion. Instability in Pakistan and Afghanistan also provide scope for Sino-Saudi cooperation. Mutual interests gave rise to political support and bilateral relationship (Daojiong & Weixing, 2007).

Iraqi oil minister, Hussain al-Shahristani, went on an Asia-Pacific tour in October 2006 to discuss the possibility of restoring the Ahdab oilfield deal with Chinese energy officials and companies. Later in 2007, Iraq's then president Jalal Talabani visited Beijing to discuss new forms of cooperation. Chinese diplomats were keen on re-establishing a presence in Iraq by joining the International Compact with Iraq (ICI) when it launched in July 2006. Despite initial reluctance to invest heavily in Iraq, China's national oil companies, under the encouragement of the government, quickly established themselves in the country after the war (Herberg, 2012). In 2008, CNPC renegotiated a production sharing contract with the Iraqi government to develop the al-Ahdab oilfield, in which it had entered into during the Saddam Hussein era. The new technical service agreement granted CNPC development rights for 23 years. In 2009, CNPC joined forces with BP from the UK in a consortium that won the rights to develop the Rumaila field and to increase its output from 985,000 b/d to 2.85 million b/d. Furthermore, CNPC formed an association with France's Total and Malaysia's state-owned oil and gas company, Petronas, and successfully bid for the Halfaya field. (McGregor & Crooks, 2013). Over a decade after the second Iraq war, Chinese companies have made significant investments in the Iraqi upstream sector, with interests in around 20% of Iraqi oilfield projects. (Daojiong & Meidan, 2015).

Key Aspects of China's energy diplomacy in the Middle East: China's energy diplomacy in the Middle East is essential for its energy security, diversification of sources, and regional influence. Some key aspects include:

- **Oil Imports:** China, the world's largest oil importer, has established long-term energy partnerships with major oil-producing countries in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and the UAE. These partnerships involve oil purchase agreements, infrastructure investments, and joint ventures in the energy sector. is the world's largest oil importer, and the Middle East is a crucial source of its oil supply.
- **Infrastructure Investment:** China heavily invested in Middle Eastern energy infrastructure, building oil refineries, pipelines, storage, and port facilities. These projects ensure China's energy security and drive economic development in host countries.

- **Natural Gas Cooperation:** While the Middle East is primarily known for its oil resources, China is also interested in developing natural gas cooperation in the region. China has signed agreements with countries like Qatar, the world's largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) exporter, to secure long-term natural gas supplies. China is also involved in discussions for pipeline projects that would bring natural gas from Iran and Turkmenistan to its market.
- **Nuclear Energy Cooperation:** China is building nuclear power plants in the Middle East, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The agreements also involve training, technology transfer, and long-term fuel supply arrangements. This helps diversify China's energy mix and supports the region's low-carbon energy infrastructure development.
- **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):** China's BRI aims to enhance connectivity and economic cooperation between Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. The Middle East plays a crucial role in this initiative, with many energy-focused infrastructure projects such as pipelines, ports, and power plants. These projects deepen China's energy ties with the region and support its broader strategic goals.

China seeks to secure energy resources, expand its economic influence, and strengthen diplomatic ties in the Middle East. However, this is influenced by complex geopolitical dynamics, including regional conflicts, international relations, and economic considerations ([Calabrese, 2023](#)).

Opportunities and Challenges for Pakistan

China is seeking to challenge long standing geopolitics of the Middle East. China has created a major challenge to US influence in the region by its mega project of BRI. CPEC is the pilot project of BRI and China has promised to invest \$63 billion for the development of CPEC. As part of BRI, CPEC has served as trigger to develop peace, stability, and economic interdependence between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle Eastern region (Ramzan, 2021). These developments are clear signals of shifting geopolitical architecture of Asian region, where China has the ability to challenge US unilateralism. China's rise and threat for US influence has played a key role in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy. China has managed relations with Pakistan across the series of shared objectives (Weinbaum & Khurram, 2014). For example, one of these objectives is inclusion of Iran in the framework of the emerging energy region. China has also remained a crucial supporter of Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. Iran is also an important part of China's mega project "Belt and Road Initiative". China has played a significant role in reducing tensions between Pakistan and Iran, created by close ties with Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan shares borders with Persian Gulf countries such as Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, making its location significant. Historically, Pakistan's closest partner in the Middle East has been Saudi Arabia, while China plays a significant role in Asia. And due to burgeoning influence of China in the Middle East, Pakistan has an opportunity to maintain a balanced relationship with both Iran and Saudi Arabia while adopting a cautious foreign policy towards the Middle East due to its economic ventures like CPEC. Pakistan aims to play a neutral role in global engagements while maintaining good relations with Turkey. Pakistan has close relations with both Saudi Arabia and China. China has become a more important partner to Pakistan in recent years, providing technical support and access to nuclear energy (Minghao, 2016).

China's influence in Pakistan could define the region's future. The security situation in Pakistan is an important issue that the government is addressing. China's investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provides a geo-economic gain for China and an opportunity for easy access to Persian Gulf states.

If Iran and the US improve their relations, it may pose challenges for the Pakistani-Saudi relationship. Saudi Arabia is against Iran's nuclear program and fears a US-Iran alliance would recognize Iran as a threshold nuclear state. In such a situation, Saudi Arabia may use Pakistan's nuclear umbrella to dissuade or induce Iran to buy nuclear weapons from Pakistan. Pakistan's response would be consequential for its relationships with China and Saudi Arabia (Shad, 2015). Pakistan is significant for China as it provides access to the Middle Eastern energy markets. Pakistan is being pulled towards both Saudi Arabia and China due to economic, historical and cultural factors. However, Pakistan's military will not have to take action in the Middle East as it has close economic and security cooperation with China (Moonakal, 2022)

China has recently increased its economic and strategic engagement with the Middle East, primarily through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other investment projects. The relationship between China and Middle East has its potential impact on Pakistan in terms of China's investment in the Middle East. China's investments in the Middle East can bring economic benefits but also have strategic implications. China's deepening ties with Middle Eastern countries, particularly those with competing interests with Pakistan, may impact regional dynamics. Therefore, Pakistan needs to navigate its relationships with both China and Middle Eastern countries carefully. Striking a balance between its traditional alliances in the Middle East and its close ties with China can be challenging (Karim, 2023). As The Middle East is a key region for Pakistan's economic and energy interests. Increased Chinese investments may lead to competition for resources and influence in the region. Additionally, security concerns may arise as China deepens its engagement in the Middle East. This could potentially affect regional stability and have indirect implications for Pakistan's security environment.

In navigating these challenges, Pakistan could benefit from strategic diplomacy, clear economic policies, and a careful assessment of its national interests. By fostering open communication with both China and Middle Eastern countries, Pakistan can work to ensure that its relationships contribute positively to regional stability and economic development (Ehteshami & Horesh, 2017).

Conclusion

The study analyzes the burgeoning role of China in the Middle East. China seeks to expand its energy interests in the region and establish stronger commercial ties by promoting its "One Belt One Road" agenda. The goal is to create investment opportunities for Chinese companies in the Middle East. During the June 2014 summit, Beijing announced its plans to increase its investment in the Arab states from \$10 billion to \$60 billion in the next decade. However, it is uncertain if China wants the US to partially withdraw from the Middle East. When compared to past involvement, it seems unlikely for China to challenge America in the Middle East. China's relations in the Middle East have deepened again due to changes in the global oil market and Xi Jinping's rise to power. China has also attempted to promote a free trade deal with the GCC. Nevertheless, military strategy in the region is not a priority for China.

Pakistan should focus on finding points of convergence, not divergence, in the Middle East crisis. It must consider the geopolitical, political, and economic dynamics of the region before formulating any policy. Once Pakistan is strong enough, it can play a role in the Middle East. In the meantime, Pakistan should not fight others' wars but can engage in the economic fronts of the Middle East. The Middle Eastern crisis has a two-fold impact on Pakistan's economy, posing a threat to remittance and security. Therefore, Pakistan should work towards its own national narrative and the economic betterment of the region. Pakistan needs to consider the political dynamics in the Middle East, which can be complex and multifaceted. Managing diplomatic relationships amid geopolitical tensions is crucial.

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