

# China and the Persian Gulf Policy: Growing Ties

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## Abstract

Since China started its economic reforms in 1978, it has achieved remarkable economic growth and development, presenting itself as a rising economic power in the international system. The rapid economic growth has increased China's energy consumption especially that of crude oil. Before economic reform, China relied on domestic oil resources. However, the trend of ever-increasing oil consumption turned China into a net importer of crude oil to meet the petroleum needs of its industry sector since 1993. As a result, Beijing has established closer ties with the major oil-exporting countries. The main objective of this paper is to analyze the relative position of the (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its vast oil resources in China's Middle East policy. The author examines China's foreign policy goals, China's foreign policy toward the Middle East and the status of GCC members in this policy.

**Key words:** China, (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council, Energy, Crude Oil, Economic Reforms, Economic Growth, Net Importer, Foreign Policy, Middle East Policy

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## **Introduction**

Since the beginning of economic reforms in China in 1978, the economy of this country gradually moved from a communist to a capitalist economy based on open-door policies and attracting foreign capitals. Since then, China's foreign policy served to sustain economic growth and development. Industrial development caused a remarkable increase in energy consumption the past three decades; this increased China's attention to regions that possesses large energy reserves, especially crude oil.

In this context, China's policy of establishing relations with Middle Eastern countries was completely different before and after the initiation of economic reforms. Before the economic reforms, China's aims in the Middle East were mainly political and ideological; but after that, ideology and politics both were to serve Chinese economy. Regarding this fact, the Persian Gulf region, which includes six members of the Persian Gulf cooperation council, with their oil and gas reserves, has become the focus of China's policy in the Middle East. The main questions of this study are: 1) what is the main goal of China's increasing relations with the member states of the Persian Gulf cooperation council? 2) Does the type of the economy of the members of this council caused mutual desire to increase economic relations between China and them? The main hypothesis of the paper is that, while China needs energy to ensure continued economic growth and development, the GCC members economical needs necessitates the continued flow of the revenues selling natural resources, especially crude oil. Thus the economic ties between the

two sides will be strengthened in the coming years. In the present paper, first of all, China's foreign policy goals after the beginning of economic reforms will be explained. Second China's foreign policy towards the Middle East will be analyzed. Then, the economies of the GCC members will be discussed; and finally, the place of the council in China's Middle East policy will be determined.

### **I. China's Foreign Policy Goals**

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's Reform, took power, and started economic reforms in China. Since then, there have been three rounds of debates among Chinese politicians about the true path to development. The first round of these debates took place in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, as Deng tried to completely emancipate China from the dominance of the communist ideology and its principles. The second debate started in the late 1980s, mainly over the issue of the direction of Chinese economic evolution. In other words, the question was whether the nature of this development is capitalistic or socialistic. It should be noted that at the time the notion of a capitalist economy was widely contended. At this juncture, during his South China Tour in 1992 Deng delivered an important speech in which he asserted that an economic system based on free market was vital for economic development of the country. Finally, during the third round of debates in 2005, the Chinese leadership reached the consensus that there was no alternative for China but to take steps towards the path of reforms, and that the continuity of the open door policy and the expansion of relations with world's economic market would be the only way for this country to become successful in the process of economic development (Liqun, 2010: 16).

Since the commencement of the economic reforms in 1978, China has experienced accelerated economic growth and attracted considerable amounts of foreign investment. China has also been very successful in technology transfer that was unprecedented in any

country (Shenkar, 2005: 43). After pursuing reforms over the past three decades, this country could achieve an annual growth rate of 9 percent- a figure which was unprecedented worldwide- and shifted from lacking capital to a surplus (Ziliang and Yongnian, 2008: 17). During this era, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the production of manufactured goods, the volume of foreign trade, and China's per capita income rose by 16, 27, 124, and 12 percent respectively (Golley and Ligang, 2010: 1). It seems that ensuring the continuity of these economic indicators are China's main goals in foreign policy arena.

China's significant economic growth has convinced the world to look at it as very powerful economic actor, and also a remarkable energy consumer. In 1971, China consumed only 5 percent of the world's energy, while this figure reached 11 percent in 1995 (Ziegler, 2006: 4). This trend has shown itself in particular in China's crude oil consumption, turning it into a net importer of crude oil since 1993. As of 2005, China's crude oil import dependency has increased to 45 percent of its domestic consumption (Berrah et al, 2007: 1-3). If this increasing demand for energy especially crude oil continues, China will import more than 5 million barrels of crude oil per day in 2015 (Naughton, 2007: 339-340). China is trying to expand its influence in different regions of the world, particularly those regions that include countries with extensive energy resources, especially crude oil. Taking these facts into consideration, China's foreign policy towards the Middle East will be examined in the next section.

## II. China and the Middle East

Since the beginning for reform its economy, China's foreign policy in the Middle East has changed dramatically. Formerly, Beijing's policy in the Middle East was motivated by political goals. Between 1949 and 1978, China used trade as a tool to advance its political objectives and prioritized political objectives over its economic interests (Yufeng, 2007: 115). The Bandung Conference in 1955 was a milestone in the development of relations between China and the

Arab World. Since then, the Arab countries have shown a strong desire to establish diplomatic relations with China. China was at that time a source of political support for the liberation movements in the Middle East countries. China gave its military and political support to the Palestinians and Algerians during their liberation struggles, and also supported Egypt during the Suez Canal Crisis in 1956. In addition, China supported many communist parties in the Arab World, including the Iraqi Communist Party. Furthermore, a number of the Arab countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Mauritania, Somalia, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen have received economic aids from China. China took these policies in order to compete with the West' (and earlier also the Soviet's) influence in these countries (Bin Huwaidin, 2008: 68).

During this Period, China's guiding principles in its relations with the Arab countries were supporting their struggle against colonialism to gain national independence, pursuing a peaceful and neutral policy during the Cold War, backing the Arab people to achieve unity and integrity in a way they have chosen, supporting peaceful methods of conflict resolution and the national sovereignty in the Arab World, and opposition to foreign intervention in the internal affairs of these countries (Zhenqiang, 2010: 78-82). During these years, China with the emphasis on its anti-imperialist attitude, was trying to establish closer ties with the Arab countries. China's primary impetus in the Middle East was to encourage people of these countries to resist both western and eastern versions of imperialism. It aimed to support the national movements in the Middle East to introduce itself as the leader of the third world countries; the economic considerations played a marginal role in this context. Therefore, China's main goals had political and ideological nature in contrast to the period of the late 1970s when economic interests became the main priority of China in its relations with the Middle East countries (Shichor, 1979: 203).

Since Deng took the power in 1978, China's main priority in its

relations with the Middle Eastern countries has been creating economic interdependency with oil-rich Arab countries to ensure smooth flow of oil imports in order to meet its growing domestic demand for oil for a sustained economic growth. In order to secure this goal China started to normalize its relations with all the Middle Eastern countries (Ghafouri, 2009: 83). Since the late 1970s, trade and economic relations between China and these countries have increased rapidly. The trade volume between China and Arab countries has also augmented and reached \$124.9 billion in 2007 from \$1.84 billion in 1978 (Yuan, 2010: 24). This figure reached to \$177 billion in 2013, up 14 percent on a year-on-year basis (Nan, December 30, 2014).

Sino-Arab relations in the 1980s reduced as a result of the China's close relations with the great powers, especially the United States. To achieve economic development due to the dramatic increase in China's need for energy resources in the early 1990s, the relations once again extended. Since 1993, China turned into a net importer of crude oil and in 2003 it became the second largest oil consumer in the world after the United States. The country's dependence on imported oil reached 49/8 percent of its total consumption in 2008, and according to estimates from the *International Energy Agency*<sup>1</sup> this rate will increase to 76/9 and 82 percent in 2020, and 2030 respectively. The Persian Gulf region, having the world's largest oil reserves and the advantage of easy transportation of energy has become the main source of China's crude oil imports (Yuan, 2010: 23-24). China alone is responsible for 38 percent of the total growing universal demand for oil, and in light of the vast oil reserves of the Middle East, China's increasing dependence on oil from this region in the coming years is inevitable

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1. IEA

(Bin Huwaidin, 2008: 71).

If China only needed 2 to 3 million oil barrels per day, it would be possible for it to purchase this from its neighbors, such as Russia and Kazakhstan, as well as Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. With the purchase of oil from small producers in the Middle East and some African countries, China's need for oil would be compensated (Ghafouri, 2009: 82-83). Meanwhile the IEA has predicted that China's oil imports will reach from less than 2 million barrels per day in 2002 to 11 million barrels per day in 2030. So, China has to import around 80 percent of its total consumption of crude oil from outside, and more than half of it will be imported from the Persian Gulf in the Middle East (Ghafouri, 2009: 82). Therefore, according to this agency's estimations, at least one-third of China's oil will be imported from the Middle East in 2030 (Kenp, 2010: 66-67). One should also remember that some of the most important members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries<sup>1</sup> are from this region.

In addition, the Middle East is also a significant market for China's products and services. The Arab markets have considerable potentials for growing and expansion and China is trying to gain a greater market share in these countries for its goods and services. In this context, China's exports to the Middle East have increased rapidly and Chinese products have gained a growing market share in these countries over the last decade. For instance, Chinese products held 37 percent of market share in the United Arab Emirates in 2004. In the Middle East, China has the strongest economic and trade relations with the Persian Gulf countries. In 2005, the commercial volume among China, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United

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1. OPEC

Arab Emirates, Oman, and Iran reached to \$ 32 billion, which was almost 70 percent of the total \$ 46 billion of China's trade relations with the Middle East (Yufeng, 2007: 117-118). By 2020, China will be the biggest export market for the GCC, with a marked increase in Saudi Arabia (The Economist Intelligence Unit, December 16, 2014). Therefore, as these countries are among the most important markets for Chinese goods and services, a part of revenues from oil sales will come back to China, which means double economic benefits for China.

One advantage of China in its relations with other countries is that it does not have any precondition for establishing economic and commercial relations and does not put up any predictions regarding the establishment of a democratic government or a commitment to human rights for aid and investment in these countries. China firmly accepted the principle of "non-interference in internal affairs of other countries" and just thinks about its own economic interests (Kenp, 2010: 66-67). Moreover, since stepping into the path of the economic reforms in 1978, China has acted skillfully in terms of using its soft power in the Middle East. Today, the Middle Eastern countries have a positive perception of China similar to their perception of the United States in the last century. At that time, the United States was perceived as their savior from the European colonialism and nowadays, public opinion hold a similar favorable view about China and are willing to expand ties with it in order to get away from the United States' dominance. China manages this condition carefully; it does not force other countries to choose between the United States and China; at the same time it encourages the countries by granting them economic incentives. Since China put no precondition on other countries, often other countries are eager to deepen their relations with it.

There are some obstacles in expansion of relations between China and the Middle Eastern countries. First, since the primary drive for China's foreign policy is economic rather than political and

ideological, China has to be selective in choosing its allies in the Middle East; accordingly it has given priority to the petroleum exporting countries. Hence, the political and security issues in the region, including the Arab- Israel conflict and the role of the United States in the region, have become less important to China's foreign policy towards the Middle East. This has caused discontent in many countries of the Middle East that demands China to take a hostile stance against Israel and to have a more prominent role in security issues related to the Middle East. Second, in the energy field, the technical problems have prevented development of the Sino-Arab relations, particularly, the cooperation in oil-related fields. The Chinese oil refineries are old and China needs to modernize them in order to use the heavy crude oil produced in the Middle Eastern countries. Meanwhile Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have already invested large sums to modernize refineries in China. The third obstacle is China's inability to compete with the United States and the European countries in certain areas such as education, health, and sanitation (Bin Huwaidin, 2008: 74-75).

There are also some obstacles that have roots in the Arab countries. First, the attitude towards foreign powers such as China. Despite the existence of the Arab League, the Arab countries have contradictions as they are mainly focused on their own national interests rather than a commitment to long-term collective interests. A common foreign policy towards China has been also hindered by their focus on their own national interests. Second, the Arab countries still perceive China in a Cold War context and expect that it would form a united front of the developing countries against the United States and the West. They have not fully recognized that the structure of the international system and the challenges it poses are very different from those of the Cold War era. Likewise, they do not realize that in the post-Cold War era, China's main concern is its own economic interests and it would not negatively affect China's economic interests if it adopts an anti-Western foreign policy.

Another obstacle is the strong presence of the United States in the Middle East. Many Middle Eastern countries have security agreements with the United States as well as very close military ties. Maintaining the current alliance is a prerequisite for sustained economic and military relations with the United States for the Arab countries. Therefore, many Middle Eastern countries have to act with caution in expanding their relations with China so as not to damage their relations with the United States. Finally, security concerns and instability in many Arab countries prevent the establishment of true strategic relations between China and these countries (Bin Huwaidin, 2008:73-74). Despite all difficulties, evidence suggests that the relations between China and the Middle Eastern countries have improved in many areas. Especially economic relations with focus on cooperation in the field of energy have enhanced in the last decades. Due to large oil reserves in the Middle East and the increasing trend of China's oil imports to sustain its the economic growth and development, as well as China's desire to increase its market share of Chinese goods and services in the Arab countries, cooperation especially in economic field will be increase most likely in the coming years. The next section will examine the relations between China and the (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and attempt to define the significance of tGCC countries in China's Middle East Policy.

### III. The Economic Dimension

The (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council was founded on May 26, 1981. The six members of the GCC are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Members of the Council are located in the southwestern of the Asian continent. The GCC total area is 2.285.844 km<sup>2</sup> and the Council has a population of about 36 million. The Council's current Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is approximately \$536 billion and the average of its per capita income is slightly less than \$15000 (Ibrahim, 2007: 1). The Council was initially established in response to the regional turmoil caused by

the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and then, the Iran-Iraq war. At that time, the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf perceived the Iranian Islamic Revolution as a serious threat to the survival of their monarchies. In addition, the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war disturbed the security situation of the region. Formation of the Council was therefore for pursuing political and security objectives. After the Iran-Iraq war and as the construction became the first priority of Iranian authorities in 1990s, the economic goals became gradually more important for the members of the GCC.

In terms of population, with over 28 million inhabitants Saudi Arabia accounts for 60 percent of the Council's population also about half of the Council's GDP. After Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates with a total population of almost 9.3 million is the second largest country in the Council, having one fifth of the Council's GDP. The per capita income of the member states varies, although all of the six members are classified as wealthy countries. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates with the per capita income of \$30700 and \$20030 respectively are the wealthiest countries in this Council, followed by Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. All these countries have a per capita income of more than \$9600. The Council can be considered as a wealthy regional council (Sturm, and Siegfried, 2005: 11-12).

It should be mentioned that the GCC states are oil and gas producing countries; they possess 42 percent of the world's proven oil reserved and 23.6 percent of the world's proven natural gas reserved (Reiche, 2010: 2395). Economic growth and development are based on oil and gas revenues in all these countries. Revenues from oil constitute more than 40 percent of their GDP (except Bahrain). The oil accounts for 70 percent of their export and is the main source of income for the governments of these countries (Ibrahim, 2007: 1). Due to excessive reliance on revenue from oil sales, the single-product economies of these countries are very vulnerable to oil market volatility. All these countries are therefore

willing to find reliable markets for their oil to guarantee the continuity of their oil revenues. The GCC states are trying also to develop non-oil sectors to diversify their economies, hoping to ensure economic growth and development for their countries (Kinninmont, 2010: 2). However, it seems that at least in the next decade, these states will continue to be dependent on oil revenues. Therefore, the GCC members need to foster close relations with long-term purchasers of their oil. The next section will explore the importance of the GCC in China's Middle East Policies.

#### **IV. G.CC and China**

Trade relations between China and the six members of the GCC have broadened dramatically since 1990s. As mentioned, in the first decade of its formation, the Council's main objective was security-related. However, gradually since the 1990s economic goals have become more important and the GCC states have been looking for reliable business partners. For the Chinese, the importance of cooperation with this Council has been due to China's ever-increasing demand for oil in order to ensure the continuation of its economic growth. During the past two decades, China and the GCC signed many cooperation agreements on economic, trade, investment, and technical issues. In addition, China has signed bilateral agreements with each of the GCC members. The council's exports to China have increased from \$665 million in 1993 to \$6.4 billion in 2000 with oil being the main export of these countries to China. Among the GCC states, the United Arab Emirates was the main market for consumption of Chinese products. UAE has increased its imports of Chinese goods and services from \$2.1 billion in 2000 to \$24 billion in 2008 (Mei, 2009: 6-7). This trend has continued in 2014; for example, the deal between Kuwait Petroleum Corps (KPC) and China's Sinopec in mid-August was doubled in the amount of daily oil exports. In addition, Saudi Arabia is already the leading source of oil for China, exporting 1.2 million barrels per day, or about 20 percent

of the Chinese imports of oil. (Arab News, September 1, 2014). Beijing has adopted a business-oriented attitude towards the Persian Gulf region; cooperation in energy filed is focal point of its relations with this region.

It has been estimated that China's oil consumption will increase from 5 million barrels per day in 2001 to 12.8 million barrels per day in 2025. It has also been predicted that during the same period the Persian Gulf's oil production capacity will increase from 22.4 million barrels per day to 45 million barrels per day. These figures indicate that China's dependence on the oil imports from this region will in all likelihood increase (Bahgat, 2005: 124-125). It is therefore not surprising that among the states of the GCC, China has the closest ties with Saudi Arabia that is the biggest oil producer among these countries. Due to increased trade between the two countries in recent years, Saudi Arabia has emerged as one of the main investors in the energy sector in China. The Saudi Aramco Oil Company purchased a 25 percent share in a \$3.5 billion project to expand a petrochemical complex in the South East of the Fujian province. In addition, according to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, the trade volume between China and Saudi Arabia has grown by an average 41 percent since 1996 and has exceeded \$15 billion in 2005 (Ghafouri, 2009: 87). Investment is the area in which Saudi-Sino ties could be deepen and stronger. Data from the UN Conference on Trade and Development in 2014 shows that China is the largest Asian source of Saudi Arabia's inward foreign direct investment. Beyond the energy sector, Chinese companies have been busy investing in multi-billion-dollar infrastructure and industry projects in this country (Pardo, March, 2014). This indicates that even among the members of this Council, China gives priority to those members that have larger oil reserves and have also the ability to invest in its energy sector.

Furthermore, in July 2004, China and the GCC announced the launch of China-GCC Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations. In 2014 president Xi Jinping called for the early signing of a free trade

agreement between China and the GCC, which in 2013 accounted for 70 percent of the trade volume between China and the Arab League. This agreement can have benefits for both sides as it could expand the energy cooperation between the two sides greatly. It also can help China purchase energy products at lower prices and pave the way for Chinese companies to explore the Council's markets (Xiaokun and Fan, January 18, 2014). In light of the decline in oil production in other producing areas in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the considerable increase in the share of the Persian Gulf in the world oil production in the next two decades, which is expecting to reach 60 percent of the total world oil exports in 2030 (Thrope and Mitra, 2008: 110-112) signing this agreement can facilitate the expansion of economic relation between the two sides and remove barriers that impede the development of relations. It can help China to diversify its oil suppliers to ensure a steady flow of oil to meet its ever-increasing oil consumption. The GCC states can reduce their dependence on the western countries' markets, especially the United States, to ensure the continuity of oil revenues by securing the Chinese market for their oil exports. Hence, there is little doubt that China's economic relations with the Council will expand further

### **Conclusion**

Over three decades of economic growth and development in China have led to a dramatic increase in energy consumption in this country and it seems that China's dependence on imported oil will continue its upward climb. The IEA has estimated that China will need to import 70 percent of its total oil consumption by 2015 and 80 percent by 2030. Statistics indicate that China would be inevitably forced to import more than half of its oil demand from the GCC. China needs secure access to oil to ensure the continuation of the positive trend in its economic indicators such as GDP and foreign trade volume.

Hence, huge oil reserves of the GCC states and their strong dependence on oil revenues to achieve their economic goals that

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seem to persist in the next decades on the one hand, and China's increasing need to import oil from the GCC on the other hand, lead to the conclusion that the Council will occupy a very important place in China's Middle East policy in the future. Both sides will endeavor to maintain and expand their economic ties, especially in energy sector.

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