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# Sino-American Relations in the Middle East: Towards A Complementary Partnership?

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## ABSTRACT



China pursues geo-economic interests of trade, investment and energy, while the US explores geo-political interests of maintaining regional leadership, launching anti-terrorism campaigns, and defending allies in the Middle East. Notwithstanding all this, the two sides share compatible and complementary interests in the Middle East security governance and conflict de-escalation, which forges structural dynamics for Beijing and Washington to seek common ground while shelving differences. By drawing on detailed analysis of China and the US's interaction in three cases, including coping with the ISIS threat, addressing the Iran nuclear crisis and mediating the Israel-Palestine conflict, this article argues that driven by pragmatism, it is possible for China and the US to build a complementary partnership in the Middle East, especially in dealing with security challenges in conflict zones, to maximise their respective interests and to alleviate the impact of Sino-US geopolitical rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region. The compatible policy orientations, the intensifying Middle East Cold War in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and the interdependent nature of Sino-US interests in the Middle East make it vital for China and the US to build a complementary partnership, although they may face various hurdles in its implementation.

## KEYWORDS

China; the US; the Middle East; complementary partnership; cooperation

## 1. Introduction

Since the 'Belt and Road' Initiative (BRI) was implemented in 2013, the Middle East has loomed much larger on China's foreign policy agenda than ever before.<sup>1</sup> Given its relations with all the Middle Eastern countries are more or less impacted by the US, China has attached great importance to the US factor in the Middle Eastern affairs.<sup>2</sup> Is Sino-American rivalry in the Middle East inevitable? Or is it possible for China and the US

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<sup>1</sup>A. Nordin and M. Weissmann, 'Will Trump make China great again? the Belt and Road Initiative and international order', *International Affairs* 94(2), (2018), p. 231; A. Scobell and A. Nader, 'China in the Middle East: the wary dragon', RAND Corporation, (2016), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>J. Alterman, 'China's soft power in the Middle East', in C. McGiffert, ed., 'Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States', A Report of the CSIS Smart Power Initiative, (2009), p. 63.

to become working partners in the region? China's increasing engagement in the Middle East has made some scholars worry about Sino-American rivalry in the region.<sup>3</sup> They argue that the latest *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, issued in December 2017 deemed China a 'revisionist power' and 'strategic competitor' instead of a strategic partner, that Sino-US geo-strategic rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region will have a spillover effect and escalate their rivalry in the Middle East and that China's emerging economic presence and tangible military buildup will challenge the dominant position in the region of the US.

Concerns about Sino-American rivalry are understandable and not without merits, given the frequent occurrence of conflicts between the rising power and the dominant one in history, the vast divergences of China and the US in terms of political systems, cultural values and policy agendas.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, such aforementioned worries cannot dismiss the ample opportunities of Sino-American cooperation over multiple issues across the Middle East. In recent years, there has been a growing consensus among scholars that interests of China and the US are more aligned in the Middle East, and they should cooperate more closely in the region.<sup>5</sup>

Both Beijing and Washington have endeavored to manage their rivalry and alleviate their strategic distrust. Only through increasing cooperation can their rivalry be deescalated and their strategic distrust be minimized.<sup>6</sup> As Thomas J. Christensen argues, 'one of the best ways to foster Sino-American mutual trust is to find areas for cooperation outside of East Asia, where mutual suspicions between Washington and Beijing should be lower than they are over sensitive territorial issues like Taiwan or the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands.'<sup>7</sup> The Middle East could be an especially fruitful region for Sino-American cooperation.<sup>8</sup>

This article aims to explore whether and to what extent China and the US can cooperate in Middle Eastern affairs. It argues that it is necessary and possible for China and the US to build a complementary partnership in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> In making such an argument, this article draws on a host of official and unofficial sources,

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<sup>3</sup>F. Leverett and J. Bader, 'Managing China-US energy competition in the Middle East', *The Washington Quarterly* 29(1), (2005), pp. 187–201; J. Alterman, 'US-China Relations: Cooperation and Contending over the Middle East', *Centre for Strategic & International Studies*, (17 June 2011), available at: [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/110617\\_Alterman\\_ChinaExecSummary.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110617_Alterman_ChinaExecSummary.pdf); M. Salman, M. Pieper and G. Geeraerts, 'Hedging in the Middle East and China-US competition', *Asian Politics & Policy* 7(4), (2015), pp. 575–596.

<sup>4</sup>The authors' interview with Liu Baolai, former Chinese Ambassador to the UAE and Jordan, Beijing, 16 March 2018.

<sup>5</sup>Y. Shichor, 'Sino-American crosscurrents in the Middle East: perceptions and realities', in N. Horesh, ed., *Toward Well-oiled Relations: China's Presence in the Middle East following the Arab Spring* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 5–18; R. de Leon and J. Yang, 'Exploring Avenues for China-US Cooperation on the Middle East', *Center for American Progress*, (13 July 2015), available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2015/07/13/117226/exploring-avenues-for-china-u-s-cooperation-on-the-middle-east/>; A. Gergi, 'US-China Cooperation in the Middle East', *Arab American Institute*, (18 August 2015), available at: [http://www.aaiusa.org/u\\_s\\_china\\_cooperation\\_in\\_the\\_middle\\_east/](http://www.aaiusa.org/u_s_china_cooperation_in_the_middle_east/); Z. Keck, 'Time for a US-China partnership in the Middle East?', *The National Interest*, (21 September 2014), available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/time-us-china-partnership-the-middle-east-11318>.

<sup>6</sup>K. Lieberthal and J. Wang, 'Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust', *Report of the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings*, (2012), pp. 40–48.

<sup>7</sup>T. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2015), p. 289.

<sup>8</sup>Goldstein, *Meeting China Halfway: How to Defuse the Emerging US-China Rivalry*, p. 163.

<sup>9</sup>J. Dorsey, 'China and the Middle East: venturing into the maelstrom', *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 11(1), (2017), p. 2.

such as official documents of the Chinese government, speeches of top Chinese officials, Chinese newspapers, and Chinese scholarly articles. Some original empirical data was also collected through interviewing Chinese ambassadors to the Middle East and prestigious Chinese scholars on the Middle East. In order to illuminate the necessity and possibility of Sino-American complementary partnership, this article draws on case study methodology to thoroughly explore China and the US's increasing cooperation over the ISIS threat, the Iran nuclear crisis and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

This article is divided into four sections. The first section defines what a 'complementary partnership' is and why it is of importance for China and the US to build such a partnership in the Middle East. The second section makes a detailed analysis of the ever-changing and worsening security situation in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring against the backdrop of a new Cold War in the region, which makes it imperative for China and the US to build a complementary partnership in the Middle East. The third section illuminates the complementary comparative advantages of China and the US in coping with Middle Eastern affairs, which make it possible for them to build a complementary partnership in the region. The fourth section, also the most important section, seeks to explore China and the US's emerging partnership in dealing with the ISIS threat, the Iran nuclear crisis and the Israel-Palestine conflict, demonstrating the areas of Sino-American complementary partnership in the Middle East. The elaborate analysis of the three cases demonstrates the possibilities and challenges for a Sino-American complementary partnership in the Middle East.

## **2. Defining 'Complementary Partnership' and Why It Matters for China and the US**

A 'complementary partnership' is characterized by increased practical cooperation and constructive management of differences.<sup>10</sup> This concept can be applied to countries with complementary capabilities and shared interests, but without common cultural values and political ideologies. Three conditions need to be met to enable the formation of a complementary partnership between countries: first, countries' shared interests outweigh their divergent interests, and neither side's core interests are challenged by the other; second, countries' capabilities are complementary in nature, and each has comparative advantages which the other falls short of. Therefore, they need each other's help to defend or advance their shared interests; third, countries need to shelve their divergences in terms of cultural values and political ideologies, and they endeavour to minimize negative impacts of such divergences on their pragmatic cooperation.

To be sure, 'complementary partnership' is not a concept only limited to China and the US's relations in the Middle East. It would be a desirable aim for China and the US to build a global complementary partnership in general so as to manage the peaceful coexistence of the rising power and the dominant one. But without the establishment of a regional complementary partnership, a global complementary partnership would

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<sup>10</sup>S. Zhao, 'American reflections on the engagement with China and responses to President Xi's new model of major power relations', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(106), (2017), p. 490.

only be a pipe dream at best. It is not without possibility that China and the US can build a regional complementary partnership in the Asia-Pacific region. However, it would be a far more daunting task for China and the US to achieve such a goal, given that there have been too many issues involving conflict of their core interests in the Asia-Pacific region. In contrast, this article argues that it is more achievable for China and the US to build a complementary partnership in the Middle East than in the Asia-Pacific region.

The desirability of a Sino-American complementary partnership is conspicuous in the Middle East, which is driven by three elements at the structural level. The first is the attributes of their policy orientations. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in late 2010, China and the US are both essential stake-holders in the Middle Eastern security governance,<sup>11</sup> and their national interests are compatible with and complementary to each other. The US seeks leadership and predominance in the Middle East by relying on foreign military bases and alliance politics.<sup>12</sup> The US participation in the Middle East security governance is quick and active, mostly in the conflict phase, resembling the 'first half of the soccer match'. China's participation in the Middle East security governance, by contrast, is slow and passive, mostly in the post-war reconstruction phase, resembling the 'second half of the soccer match'.<sup>13</sup> China and the US have made their respective contributions to the Middle East security governance at different stages but for similar goals of conflict de-escalation. In other words, both China and the US have played unique roles to help reduce the target countries' agitation and potential for future aggression or violence through coercive or non-coercive means, such as the restoration of peace in conflict zones of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan and Afghanistan in spite of their essential differences in terms of the nature and patterns of conflicts.

In June 2013, the second round of Sino-US strategic and economic dialogue on the Middle East issues was held in Washington, and the US side committed itself to a cooperative partnership and welcomed China's more active role in Syria, Iran, and the Middle East peace process.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in the first round of Sino-US diplomatic and security dialogue held in June 2017, one of the four dialogue mechanisms firstly agreed by President Xi and President Trump in April 2017, high-level officials of the two countries exchanged their mutual concerns in the Middle East.<sup>15</sup>

Second, a Sino-American complementary partnership would be driven by shared missions to support the same partners that face multi-dimensional challenges. So far, the US seeks alliance politics, while China seeks non-alignment policies in the name of

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<sup>11</sup>Security governance is defined as an endeavour towards political cooperation and coordination among international actors, aimed at negotiating responses to security problems that affect more than one state or region in order to achieve peace, security and conflict resolution.

<sup>12</sup>D. Sun & H. Elmahly, 'NATO vs. SCO: A Comparative Study of Outside Powers' Military Presence in Central Asia and the Gulf', *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 12(4), (2018), pp. 438–440.

<sup>13</sup>The metaphor of 'soccer match' was coined by a Chinese ambassador to the Middle East who requested to be anonymous.

<sup>14</sup>The US State Department, 'US-China Middle East Dialogue', (20 June 2013), available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/06/210957.htm>; The US State Department, 'US-China Middle East Dialogue', 14 August 2012, available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/08/196439.htm>.

<sup>15</sup>Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'First China-US Diplomatic and Security Dialogue Held in Washington D.C. of the US', (22 June 2017), available at: [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1472727.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1472727.shtml).

'partnership' in the Middle East. It is noteworthy that they share a range of working partners in the region: Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and Morocco, for example. These are both key allies of the US, and meanwhile China's essential commercial partners, albeit at different levels. Given the different nature of their partnerships with these Middle Eastern countries, the US would have much less apprehension over China's close relations with these countries, facilitating Sino-American cooperation in the Middle East.

Third, China and the US are both status-quo powers in the Middle East, making it easier for the two sides to compromise. Since Trump took over the presidency, the US has further shifted its strategic focus from the Middle East to Asia and China has fully implemented the BRI. Both require a stable environment, and neither side would like to see a changed Middle East power structure. The Middle East is secondary to both China and the US, making it easier for Beijing and Washington to make concessions.

To build a Sino-American complementary partnership is of significance in the Middle East. By forming a complementary partnership, China and the US are probably more willing to make a division of their leadership in the Middle Eastern affairs, with the former playing the leading role in promoting economic governance and the latter playing the paramount role in providing security umbrella in the region. As a result, the Middle Eastern peace and stability would never be a remote hope.

In addition, to build a regional Sino-American complementary partnership in the Middle East will also benefit Sino-American relations writ large in two major respects. First, the strategic trust between China and the US can be enhanced. By forging a complementary partnership, China and the US can boost their pragmatic and incremental cooperation. Cooperation begets more cooperation, thus resulting in cooperation spirals. In a cooperation spiral, mutual strategic trust between China and the US can be built over time through incremental and reciprocal steps that gradually lead to more cooperation and more significant compromises.<sup>16</sup>

Second, China and the US in a complementary partnership can be more likely to move forward together to avoid falling into the Thucydides Trap.<sup>17</sup> There have been worries that China and the US may fall into the Thucydides Trap in the Asia-Pacific region where recent years have seen their increasing rivalry, as exemplified by their sharp divergences over the US-Taiwan Travel Bill of March 2018, the South China Sea disputes and the US deployment of THAAD in South Korea.<sup>18</sup> If China and the US can engage in more cooperation in the Middle East and realize each other's importance as a working partner in dealing with tough international issues, they are more likely to consciously make efforts to lessen their rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region.

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<sup>16</sup>L. Goldstein, *Meeting China Halfway: How to Defuse the Emerging US-China Rivalry* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2015), p. 12.

<sup>17</sup>E. Araral, 'US-China relations: a game of strategic reassurance', *Foreign Affairs*, (7 August 2017), available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sponsored/us-china-relations-game-strategic-reassurance>.

<sup>18</sup>J. Wang, P. Yuan and M. Zhao, 'Zonglun'['Overview'], in Chaoyue Fenqi, *Zouxiang gongying-zhongmei zhiku yanjiu baogao* (China-US Relations: Exploring a New Pathway to a Win-win Partnership), Y. Fu and J. Wang, eds., (22 May 2017), p. 25; M. Green, R. Bush and M. Rapp-Hopper, 'Asia-Pacific security issues in the US-China relationship', in M. Green and C. Johnson, eds., *Joint US-China Think Tank Project on the Future of US-China Relations: An American Perspective*, (July 2017), p. 21; S. Zhao, 'A new model of big power relations? China-US strategic rivalry and balance of power in the Asia-Pacific', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(93), (2015), pp. 377-378.

### 3. Regional Dynamics for Sino-American Complementary Partnership

A Sino-American complementary partnership would be fostered by regional dynamics as well. A new Cold War is unfolding in the Middle East, with the Saudi-led Sunni bloc and Iran-led Shia bloc competing for influence in both sectarian and geopolitical terms, and between the Saudi-UAE-Bahrain-Egypt coalition and the Qatar-Turkey alliance within the Sunni bloc.

It should be noted that the US and Russia have so far been deeply involved in the Middle East Cold War, making the Sunni bloc-Shia bloc confrontation more complex and more difficult to manage. The US mainly supports Sunni countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, but it nonetheless also provides support to the Shia-dominated Iraq in the face of the alarming threat from ISIS. Apart from its close cooperation with Shia countries, Russia has also sought to develop stronger relations with Egypt, a major Sunni country.<sup>19</sup>

The 'Arab Spring' has exacerbated the Middle East Cold War. Compared with the period before the Arab Spring, there have been more flashpoints for Iran and Saudi Arabia to clash across the Middle East. These two strategic competitors have more or less been involved in conflicts in unstable countries such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Lebanon.<sup>20</sup> Worse still, Saudi Arabia cut its diplomatic relations with Iran in a sharp escalation of tensions following the execution of the Saudi Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016.<sup>21</sup> There have so far been no signs of improvement in Iranian-Saudi relations. On the contrary, the bitter feud between them is likely to escalate in the coming years, raising the possibility of the Cold War turning hot.<sup>22</sup>

The lack of unity within the Sunni bloc plays no small part in contributing to Saudi Arabia's inferiority in its rivalry with Iran. First, the intra-Sunni bloc squabbles have weakened the unity of the Sunni bloc. Members of the Gulf Cooperation Council have long disputed with each other over how best to deal with Iran. The intra-Sunni bloc conflict reached its peak after the Qatar crisis erupted on 5 June 2017 when Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Bahrain cut diplomatic relations with Qatar. Oman and Kuwait, by contrast, have not cut diplomatic relations with Qatar amid the Saudi-led diplomatic blitz.<sup>23</sup>

Second, Turkey has vied with Saudi Arabia for leadership of the Sunni bloc. The root cause of Saudi-Turkish divergences lies in their starkly different blueprints for the development of Islamism in the Middle East, with Turkey favouring a moderate, electoral political Islam and Saudi Arabia fearing a combination of democracy and Islamist politics and preferring traditional Islam.<sup>24</sup> The Saudi-Turkish divergence peaked right

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<sup>19</sup>A. McGregor, 'How does Russia fit into Egypt's strategic plan?', Eurasia Daily Monitor, (14 February 2018), available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-fit-egypts-strategic-plan/>.

<sup>20</sup>M. Fisher, 'How the Iranian-Saudi proxy struggle tore apart the Middle East', The New York Times, (19 November 2016), available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html>.

<sup>21</sup>M. Chulov, 'Saudi Arabia cuts diplomatic ties with Iran after execution of cleric', The Guardian, (4 January 2016), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/03/saudi-arabia-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-iran-after-nimr-execution>.

<sup>22</sup>B. Saab, 'Why an Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict is more likely today than ever before', Newsweek, (18 October 2016), available at: <http://europe.newsweek.com/why-iran-saudi-arabia-conflict-more-likely-today-ever-511317?rm=eu>.

<sup>23</sup>A. Erdemir and M. Tahiroglu, 'Why Turkey chose Qatar', The National Interest, (25 June 2017), available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/pakistans-support-the-haqqani-network-undermining-us-21-300>.

<sup>24</sup>G. Gause III, 'Beyond sectarianism: the New Middle East Cold War', p. 17.



after the military coup against President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in July 2013. Their relations hit bottom again after President Trump took office, as exemplified by their marked divergences over Qatar. While Saudi Arabia has isolated Qatar by persuading other GCC countries to cut diplomatic ties with Qatar along with it, Turkey has sharply criticized Saudi Arabia for the measures against Qatar and in the meantime deployed additional troops to Qatar in a show of support.<sup>25</sup> President Trump's Jerusalem announcement in December 2017 offered Turkey a unique opportunity to gain the upper hand over Saudi Arabia by assertively spearheading the anti-Trump campaign in the regional and international forums. Compared with the Saudi king's mild and restrained criticism of Trump, Turkish president Erdogan has sought to exercise his strong leadership within the Sunni bloc by lambasting Trump without any reservation.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from the disunity of the intra-Sunni bloc complicating the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Israel also plays a unique part in exacerbating the Middle East Cold War as the only non-Muslim country and also the strongest military power in the region. After President Trump took office, Israel and Saudi Arabia have moved further to boost their relations. With tacit support from the Trump administration, the Saudi-led Gulf states have reportedly made overtures to Israel by compiling an unprecedented proposal towards normalization with Israel if the Netanyahu government in turn is willing to make concessions to the Palestinians, such as freezing Jewish settlement construction in parts of the West Bank and easing trade restrictions in the Gaza Strip.<sup>27</sup> In spite of this, Trump's Jerusalem announcement has put Saudi Arabia's enlarging cooperative relations with Israel in an embarrassing situation, making it harder for Saudi Arabia to move closer to Israel at least in the near future.<sup>28</sup>

As the two largest external stakeholders in the Middle East, China and the US's interests are at stake in the face of the ongoing turmoil and violence inflamed by the Middle East Cold War: the US leadership, its allies' security and well-being as well as China's BRI will be endangered. Neither China nor the US is willing to see the escalation of the Middle East Cold War, given that stability serves both sides' interests. China has no intention to fill the power vacuum, or to sabotage the US in the Middle East, thereby enabling increasing Sino-US pragmatic cooperation in the region.<sup>29</sup> It is therefore necessary and imperative for China and the US to build a complementary partnership in addressing the increasingly serious challenges in the region.

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<sup>25</sup>A. Al-Shihri, 'Saudi-Turkish ties strained over differing views on Qatar', *Defence News*, (18 June 2017), available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2017/06/18/saudi-turkish-ties-strained-over-differing-views-on-qatar/>; S. Frantzman, 'Turkey's power-play in Qatar leads to warmer relations with Iran', *The Jerusalem Post*, (1 July 2017), available at: <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Turkeys-power-play-in-Qatar-leads-to-warmer-relations-with-Iran-498468>.

<sup>26</sup>S. Williams and T. Staff, 'Erdogan seeks to lead Islamic response on Jerusalem', *The Times of Israel*, (9 December 2017), available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/turkeys-erdogan-seeks-to-lead-muslim-response-on-jerusalem/>.

<sup>27</sup>B. Ravid, 'Gulf states offer unprecedented steps to normalize Israel ties in exchange for partial settlement freeze', *Haaretz*, (16 May 2017), available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.789477>.

<sup>28</sup>'Saudi King Salman decries Trump's Jerusalem decision', *Al Jazeera*, (14 December 2017), available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/saudi-arabia-king-salman-skips-oic-summit-jerusalem-171213161923915.html>.

<sup>29</sup>The authors' interview with Wu Sike, former Chinese Ambassador to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Beijing, 17 March 2018.



#### 4. Interest Dynamics of Sino-American Complementary Partnership

There is no natural conflict between China and the US in the Middle East.<sup>30</sup> As a matter of fact, these two countries share a relatively high convergence of interests on a variety of Middle Eastern issues.<sup>31</sup> Their major common interests consist of securing access to oil and gas, maintaining the balance of power in the Middle East, ensuring political stability in the Gulf oil-producing countries, helping improve people's livelihood in the unstable countries, and promoting the Middle East peace process. These common interests facilitate the creation of 'a platform for cooperation that can enhance not only security in the Middle East, but also Sino-American relations more generally'.<sup>32</sup>

The overarching common interest of China and the US is to ensure the stable supply of oil from the Middle East. In 2017, China overtook the US to become the world's largest oil importer, and about 56% of its imported oil was from the Middle East; among the top ten oil exporters to China, five are from the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Oman and Kuwait).<sup>33</sup> China will deepen its dependency on Middle Eastern oil given its growing demand to import huge amounts of oil to power its rising economy for decades to come.<sup>34</sup> For China, there remains no near-term substitute for Middle Eastern oil.<sup>35</sup> Even though the shale revolution has eased its dependency on the Middle Eastern oil in recent years,<sup>36</sup> the US will continue to regard access to the oil as one of its vital interests in the Middle East for reasons as follows.

First, notwithstanding the shale revolution, the US will have to continue importing oil for a long time to come, with Persian Gulf oil as an important source; second, the US considers the maintenance of secure access to oil as a hedge against a failure of other resources; third, American allies, especially its major allies from East Asia (Japan, South Korea, Singapore, etc.), will continue to depend heavily on oil from the region; fourth, the US worries about the control of oil reserves by terrorist organizations which use oil as an important source of funding; fifth, the US and its allies will remain vulnerable to increases in energy prices which are influenced in no small degree by the oil producing countries in the Middle East although the oil price will remain low in the foreseeable future.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>J. Alterman, 'The other side of the world: China, the United States, and the struggle for Middle East security', CSIS Report, (2017), p. 8.

<sup>31</sup>Y. Shichor, 'Sino-American crosscurrents in the Middle East: perceptions and realities', in N. Horesh, ed., *Toward Well-Oiled Relations? China's Presence in the Middle East Following the Arab Spring* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 5–15.

<sup>32</sup>J. Alterman and J. Garver, *The Vital Triangle: China, The United States, and the Middle East* (Washington: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>33</sup>The Maritime Executive, 'China Surpasses US as Largest Crude Oil Importer', 3 February 2018, available at: <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/china-surpasses-u-s-as-largest-crude-oil-importer#gs.SphNavs>.

<sup>34</sup>J. Alterman, 'China in the Middle East', Statement before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, (6 June 2013), p. 1, available at: [https://csis.org/files/attachments/ts130606\\_alterman.pdf](https://csis.org/files/attachments/ts130606_alterman.pdf).

<sup>35</sup>S. Yetiv and C. Lu, 'China, global energy, and the Middle East', *The Middle East Journal* 61(2), (2007), p. 199.

<sup>36</sup>As estimated by the American Energy Information Administration, the US will become a net petroleum exporter by 2029. It even exported about 700,000 barrels of light domestic crude oil in December 2017 to the UAE, an oil giant in the Middle East. See S. Tobben and W. Mahdi, 'Oil World Turns Upside Down as US Sells Oil in Middle East', Bloomberg, (7 February 2018), available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-06/u-s-crude-output-to-jump-above-11m-b-d-sooner-than-expected>.

<sup>37</sup>Y. Shichor, 'Sino-American crosscurrents in the Middle East: perceptions and realities', in N. Horesh, ed., *Toward Well-Oiled Relations? China's Presence in the Middle East Following the Arab Spring* (Basingstoke: Palgrave

**Table 1.** China’s Middle East strategy and the US’s Middle East strategy in comparison.

	China	The US
Principal way of engagement in the Middle East	Economic governance	Military and political dominance
General attitude toward internal affairs of the Middle Eastern countries	Selective intervention	Proactive intervention
Preferred means to deal with the Middle Eastern disputes	Political dialogue and diplomatic mediation	Military intervention, economic sanction and support of proxies
Overall stance on the Middle Eastern disputes	Seeking ‘zero-enemy’	Taking sides and curbing threats
Main proposal for stabilizing society of the Middle Eastern countries	Improvement of people’s livelihood	Democracy promotion
The authors		

To be sure, both China’s and the US’s Middle East strategies have advantages and disadvantages. China basically perceives the Middle East as a ‘market’, and its participation in the Middle East security governance is mainly for safeguarding its geo-economic interests, such as energy, investments and trade, and such involvement is the outcome of its development-oriented and geo-economic strategy.<sup>38</sup> What makes fruitful Sino-American cooperation in the Middle East possible is that their respective advantages in dealing with Middle Eastern affairs complement each other to a large degree. The US’s Middle East strategy combines both hard and soft approaches, but leans more towards a harder approach, placing priority on military intervention, economic sanctions, support of regional allies and promoting democracy in addition to its soft power expansion. By contrast, China’s Middle East strategy is more of a softer approach, which attaches importance to economic governance, political dialogue, diplomatic mediation, and improvement of people’s livelihood (*Minsheng*) with limited involvement of its military forces or ideological export (see Table 1).

It is unfair to blame the US for all the Middle Eastern conflicts. Nonetheless, the US’s harder approach has to some extent worsened the Middle East situation since 9/11. By appreciating the merits of China’s softer approach, the US would have a better chance to bring peace and stability to the Middle East. In this regard, China can be a helpful partner for the US in the Middle East. The Middle East is in urgent need of a combination of China’s softer approach and the US’s harder approach.

First, to promote economic development is the key to pacify the Middle East in the long run. One of the root causes for constant conflicts in the Middle East is the existence of ‘strong external powers and weak local powers’.<sup>39</sup> In other words, there is hardly a Middle Eastern country or a group of Middle Eastern countries capable of maintaining peace and order in the Middle East, thereby rendering this region much more susceptible to the intervention of external big powers. Economic

Macmillan, 2016), p. 14; D. Snow, *The Middle East, Oil, and the US National Security Policy: Intractable Conflicts, Impossible Solutions* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 86–87; M. Singh, ‘Chinese policy in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab uprisings’, in N. Horesh, ed., *Toward Well-Oiled Relations? China’s Presence in the Middle East Following the Arab Spring* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 163.

<sup>38</sup>D. Sun and Y. Zoubir, ‘China’s economic diplomacy towards the Arab countries: challenges ahead’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(95), (2015), p. 903.

<sup>39</sup>The authors’ interview with Professor Jin Liangxiang from Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, Shanghai, 9 April 2017.

underdevelopment is one of the fundamental causes of the Middle East upheaval.<sup>40</sup> Only through solid economic development can the Middle Eastern countries be able to stand on their own feet in managing their regional affairs.

Most Middle Eastern countries have been heavily dependent on the export of raw materials and primary products. The low level of industrialization is a common problem in the countries in the Middle East. Given their long dependency on oil and gas exports, many Muslim countries, in particular the Gulf oil producers, are reluctant to promote industrialization in their country. As a result, there exists an alarming gap between the rich and the poor. According to a survey, 80% of wealth is in the hands of 5% of the population in the Arab world.<sup>41</sup> It is not a coincidence that almost all the war-torn and conflict-ridden countries in the Middle East have a low level of industrialization and therefore lack adequate economic development.<sup>42</sup>

To be sure, democracy is a desirable aim for the Middle Eastern people in the long run. What they desire most at current stage, however, is social stability and improvement of their livelihood. Improvement of people's livelihood can lay a solid foundation for enduring peace and stability in the Middle East in the long run.<sup>43</sup> Industrialization is still the most feasible and effective way to improve people's overall livelihood. The Middle East is in urgent need of raising the overall level of economic industrialization. Compared with the liberal economic development model touted by the US, the China model of economic development, albeit under authoritarian rule, can arguably better help the Middle Eastern countries to boost industrialization of their economy despite its drawbacks in one way or another.<sup>44</sup>

Instead of seeking economic benefits at the expense of the Middle East, China has stressed the pursuit of common economic development in its economic cooperation with the Middle Eastern countries.<sup>45</sup> The China model of economic development plus strong government has gained more traction in the Middle East against the backdrop of China's implementation of the BRI, as evidenced by China's enlarging economic cooperation with influential Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey within the framework of the BRI.<sup>46</sup> In its first Arab Policy Paper, China

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<sup>40</sup>The authors' interview with Professor Li Weijian from Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, Shanghai, 12 April 2017.

<sup>41</sup>W. Tian, *Kundun yu tuwei: bianhua zhong de zhongdong zhengzhi* (Stuck with Sally: Politics of Middle East in Changing World) (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2016), p. 73.

<sup>42</sup>W. Li, Q. Ye, L. Jin and X. Liu, 'Zhongguo zhongdong waijiao zhanlue goujian yanjiu' (Research on China's Middle East Strategy Construction), SIIIS Task Force Report, (September 2015), p. 20.

<sup>43</sup>D. Sun, 'Lun xinshiqi zhongguo dui zhongdong guojia de zhengti waijiao' (On China's integrative diplomacy toward the Middle East in the new era), *Global Review* 2, (2017), p. 35; D. Sun, 'Zhongguo canyu zhongdong diqu chongtu zhili de lilun yu shijian' (Theory and practice of China's participation in the Middle East conflict governance), *West Asia and Africa* 4, (2015), p. 91.

<sup>44</sup>S. Zhao, 'Whither the China model: revisiting the debate', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(103), (2017), pp. 11–15; S. Zhao, 'The China model: can it replace the Western model of modernization', *Journal of Contemporary China* 19(65), (2010), pp. 434–435.

<sup>45</sup>B. Wu, 'Dui zhongguo zhongdong zhanlue de chubu sikao' (The elementary thinking on China's Middle Eastern strategy), *Foreign Affairs Review* 2, (2012), p. 44.

<sup>46</sup>H. Fan, 'Zhongguo zai yilang tuijin 'yidai yilu' zhanlue changyi de zhengzhi huanjing yu yinying' (China's 'The Belt and Road' Initiative in Iran: political environment and coping style), *West Asia and Africa* 2, (2016), p. 59; J. Zhao, 'Aiji fazhan zhanlue yu 'yidai yilu' jianshe' (Egypt's development strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative), *Arab World Studies* 3, (2016), p. 75; M. Chen, 'Shate alabo de jingji tiaozheng yu "yidai yilu" de tuijin' (Economic adjustment in Saudi Arabia and the promotion of 'the Belt and Road' Initiative'), *West Asia and Africa* 2, (2016), pp.

outlines the '1+2+3' formula in promoting economic development in the Middle East: energy cooperation is the core; infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation are the two wings; high and new technologies in the fields of nuclear energy, space satellites and new energy as the three breakthroughs.<sup>47</sup>

Second, China is in a better position than the US in playing a role of mediator in the Middle Eastern disputes. In comparison to the US, China's chief advantage in the region is its lack of political baggage.<sup>48</sup> China has been careful not to be seen as meddling in the domestic affairs of the Middle Eastern countries.<sup>49</sup> It has sought to reach out to the Middle Eastern countries of all stripes by means of economic cooperation and political dialogue. By sticking to an omnidirectional friendship policy, China not only seeks to befriend all Middle Eastern countries, but also seeks to be on good terms with all the political factions within a Middle Eastern country.<sup>50</sup> Unlike the US, China has no allies in the Middle East whose interests it must defend on the battlefield or in the international organizations.<sup>51</sup>

China's increasing popularity in the Middle East contrasts starkly with the US's controversial reputation in the region. A large part of China's appeal rests not much on what it is, but what it is not.<sup>52</sup> In the eyes of the Middle Eastern countries, China does not intervene in their domestic affairs, does not promote democracy by coercion, and does not take sides in conflicts. More importantly, unlike the US, China does not take a black and white view of Middle Eastern affairs. The US has long had a strong propensity to take a black and white view of Middle Eastern affairs and perceive the Middle Eastern conflicts in terms of good and evil, with its Iran policy as an exemplar.<sup>53</sup> Given the complex configuration of alliances between varied players in the Middle East, it is hard to distinguish between the good and the evil in the Middle East. Syria is a good example. As former war crimes prosecutor Carla Del Ponte disappointedly pointed out before quitting the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria in August 2017, 'everyone in Syria is on the bad side. The Assad government has perpetrated horrible crimes against humanity and used chemical weapons. And the opposition is now made up of extremists and terrorists'.<sup>54</sup> By taking sides and supporting

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44–47; Y. Wang, U. Ergunsoy and Y. Luo, 'Yidai yilu' changyi xia zhongguo yu tuerqi dezhanlue hezuo' (China-Turkey strategic cooperation through 'the Belt and Road' Initiative), *West Asia and Africa* 6, (2015), pp. 73–75, pp. 80–82.

<sup>47</sup>Full text of China's Arab Policy Paper', *Xinhua*, (13 January 2016), available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-01/13/c\\_135006619.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-01/13/c_135006619.htm).

<sup>48</sup>A. Sager, 'Saudi-Chinese Relations: energy first, but not last', *Arab News*, (23 January 2006), available at: [http://www.arabnews.com/node/279319?quicktabs\\_stat2=0](http://www.arabnews.com/node/279319?quicktabs_stat2=0).

<sup>49</sup>Scobell and Nader, 'China in the Middle East: the Wary Dragon', p. 6.

<sup>50</sup>M. Shareef, 'China's dual diplomacy: Arab Iraq and the Kurdistan region', in N. Horesh, ed., *Toward Well-Oiled Relations? China's Presence in the Middle East Following the Arab Spring* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 69–93.

<sup>51</sup>C. Freeman, 'The Middle East and China', *Middle East Policy Council*, (17 February 2015), available at: <http://www.mepc.org/articles-commentary/speeches/middle-east-and-china>.

<sup>52</sup>Alterman, 'The other side of the world: China, the United States, and the struggle for Middle East security', p. 13.

<sup>53</sup>A. Ehteshami, N. Horesh and R. Xu, 'Chinese-Iranian mutual strategic perceptions', *The China Journal* 79, (2018), pp. 1–20; T. Wittes and I. Goldenberg, 'How Trump's black and white world view met reality in the Middle East', *Foreign Policy*, (14 June 2017), available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/14/how-trumps-black-and-white-world-view-met-reality-in-the-middle-east-saudi-iran-qatar-isis/>.

<sup>54</sup>Carla Del Ponte: war crimes expert quits UN Syria inquiry', *BBC*, (6 August 2017), available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40845771>.

the so-called good against the evil, the US's efforts to exert hegemony over the Middle East have contributed more to instability there than to stability.<sup>55</sup>

Third, the US's coercive instruments remain indispensable to the success of China's softer approach in the Middle East in the short and medium term. To be sure, China's softer approach is not the panacea to all problems in the Middle East. It should avoid overestimating the merits of its Middle East strategy. Promoting economic development cannot resolve the immediate and urgent threats in the short time span. It takes time for economic development to have any effect on peace and stability; dialogue and negotiation fall on the deaf ear of ISIS; Iran would not have agreed to suspend its nuclear programmes if there were no economic sanctions against it. To be sure, the security umbrella provided by the US military will remain crucial in maintaining peace and stability in the Middle East in the foreseeable future. China remains heavily reliant on the US to underwrite security in the Middle East.<sup>56</sup>

In the Middle East, China has become an economic heavyweight, but it remains a diplomatic lightweight and is likely to remain a military featherweight for the coming decades.<sup>57</sup> It has neither intention nor capability to project its military power to challenge American military dominance in the Middle East. China's People's Liberation Army is still incapable of playing a security role commensurate with its economic clout in the Middle East except for its logistical base in Djibouti since 2017. Given its lack of capability to project military power in the Middle East, China will remain to some degree a free-rider on the American-led oil shipping sea lane security for years to come.<sup>58</sup>

## 5. Sino-US Complementary Partnership in the Middle East: Three Cases

China and the US are most likely to build a complementary partnership when the challenges they deal with meet three criteria: first, China and the US's common interests are apparently at stake in the face of such challenges; second, the US and the West writ large cannot resolve this challenge on their own, i.e., the Western way is incapable and ineffective in dealing with such challenges; third, China has advantages or leverages that the US falls short of in dealing with such challenges, and the US takes the first move to enlist China's help.

To be sure, convergence of interests and mutual need of each other do not automatically translate into close and smooth cooperation between China and the US in the Middle East. Beijing and Washington can build a complementary partnership by taking incremental and reciprocal steps to deal with three urgent or long-haul security challenges in the Middle East, including the ISIS threat, the Iran nuclear crisis and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Their core interests to a large extent overlap in dealing with the aforementioned three security challenges, but neither of them is capable of

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<sup>55</sup>F. Leverett and B. Wu, 'The New Silk Road and China's evolving grand strategy', *The China Journal* 77, (2016), p. 129.

<sup>56</sup>D. Schenker, 'China's Middle East footprint', *The Washington Institute*, (26 April 2013), available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/chinas-middle-east-footprint>.

<sup>57</sup>Scobell and Nader, 'China in the Middle East: the wary dragon' p. 76.

<sup>58</sup>J. Anderson, 'China to remain 'free rider' on US-led oil shipping lane security', *Breaking Energy*, (26 April 2013), available at: <http://breakingenergy.com/2013/04/26/china-to-remain-free-rider-on-us-led-oil-shipping-lane-security/>.

tackling such challenges on their own. More importantly, the US needs China's help, and also strives to enlist China's help to better resolve these hot issues in the Middle East. Thus, China and the US's incremental and pragmatic cooperation on dealing with these three tough security challenges can be the first promising and achievable step to enable China and the US to build a complementary partnership in the Middle East.

### **5.1. Case One: Sino-American Cooperation over the ISIS Threat**

China has also been increasingly concerned with the threat of ISIS in the Middle East. ISIS poses a potential threat to China's homeland security, the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in particular. ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi effectively declared war on China by including Xinjiang Autonomous Region as part of its aspirant caliphate in a map published, and also naming China first in a string of 20 countries which have infringed Muslim rights on 4 July 2014.<sup>59</sup> Taking a further step to appeal to Chinese Muslims in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, ISIS released a four-minute chant titled 'We are Mujahid' in Mandarin Chinese on Twitter in August 2015.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, ISIS released a half-hour video featuring militants from China's Uyghur ethnic group on 27 February 2017.<sup>61</sup>

The recent years have seen the growing home-grown radicalization of Uyghurs in Xinjiang Autonomous Region. As revealed by leaked ISIS recruiting documents, there are 114 ISIS fighters originating from Xinjiang Autonomous Region, the fifth highest number of foreign fighters on a provincial basis.<sup>62</sup> It is very likely that radicalized Chinese Muslims travelling abroad to train and fight will return with skills that could bolster terrorist activities in Xinjiang Autonomous Region.<sup>63</sup> Though ISIS's assertion of occupying the Xinjiang Autonomous Region currently seems farfetched, the Chinese government has a legitimate reason to worry about how ISIS's eastward pivot will impact China's own westward march across the Eurasian Silk Road.<sup>64</sup> ISIS potentially threatens the implementation of China's BRI. Insecurity in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, the spread of IS forces in Central Asia and chaos in the Middle East incited by ISIS throw up obstacles for the smooth implementation of the BRI.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, ISIS activities in the Middle East threaten China's energy security. China has been the biggest beneficiary of the post-Saddam oil boom in Iraq. It is not only Iraq's largest oil importer, but also the top investor in Iraq's oil fields.<sup>66</sup> Instability in

<sup>59</sup>C. Lin, 'ISIS threatens to occupy Xinjiang, harm China's energy interests', *The Times of Israel*, (14 October 2014), available at: <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/isis-threatens-to-occupy-xinjiang-harm-chinas-energy-interests/>.

<sup>60</sup>A. Ma, 'ISIS appears to target Chinese Muslims in new recruiting effort', *The Huffington Post*, (12 August 2015), available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/isis-recruiting-chinese-muslims\\_us\\_5666e238e4b079b2818ff5db](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/isis-recruiting-chinese-muslims_us_5666e238e4b079b2818ff5db).

<sup>61</sup>B. Wang, 'China urges joint anti-terror action', *Global Times*, (2 March 2017), available at: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1035560.shtml>.

<sup>62</sup>N. Rosenblatt, 'All Jihad is local: what ISIS's files tell us about its fighters', *New America*, (July 2016), available at: <https://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/ISIS-Files.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup>K. Mizokami, 'China has an ISIS problem', *The Week magazine*, (2 March 2015), available at: <http://theweek.com/articles/541531/china-isis-problem>.

<sup>64</sup>C. Lin, 'ISIS Caliphate meets China's Silk Road Economic Belt', *Rubin Centre*, (22 February 2015), available at: <http://www.rubincenter.org/2015/02/isis-caliphate-meets-chinas-silk-road-economic-belt/>.

<sup>65</sup>C. Zhang, "'Yisi languo" yu zhongguo guojia anquan', *World Religious Culture* 2, (2016), p. 13.

<sup>66</sup>T. Arango and C. Krauss, 'China is reaping biggest benefits of Iraq oil boom', *The New York Times*, (2 June 2013), available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/03/world/middleeast/china-reaps-biggest-benefits-of-iraq-oil-boom.htm>.

Iraq exacerbated by ISIS has serious implication for China's energy security, given that any supply disruptions in Iraq would require China to secure a replacement for more than 10% of total oil imports.<sup>67</sup>

Given its vital interests at stake, China could no longer be a bystander indifferent or passive in response to the ISIS threat. The potential for Sino-American cooperation in dealing with ISIS remains far from achieved. There are, however, growing opportunities for China and the US to foster a more fruitful and intimate working partnership against ISIS. China proposed assisting Iraq with airstrikes against ISIS by sharing intelligence and providing personnel training in December 2014. China reportedly declared war on ISIS after one Chinese national was executed by ISIS in November 2015.<sup>68</sup> To further demonstrate its determination to combat Islamist terrorist groups, China passed its first anti-terrorism law in December 2015 laying the groundwork for the People's Liberation Army to take part in counterterrorism missions against ISIS.<sup>69</sup>

There has been increasing consensus that military means alone cannot defeat ISIS, and more work needs to be done to end the problem of Islamist terrorism even if ISIS is defeated on battlefield. To succeed in defeating ISIS, it is imperative to more effectively integrate military engagement with diplomatic and economic engagement.<sup>70</sup> China has preferred to draw on political and economic approaches to tackle the root causes of Islamist terrorism, and support policies addressing factors that encourage radicalization, such as a lack of economic development and social justice.<sup>71</sup> In this respect, by promoting economic development and improving people's livelihood in the Middle East, China's BRI can help eradicate the root cause of terrorism.<sup>72</sup>

## **5.2 Case Two: Sino-American Cooperation over the Iran Nuclear Crisis**

China has tried to maintain a cautious balance in its Iran policy: broadly respecting the US-led sanctions while capitalizing on the opportunities presented by Iran's isolation in the international community.<sup>73</sup> China cast 'yes' votes on all the UNSC-authorized sanctions on Iran between 2006 and 2012, even if it sided with Russia to water down these UNSC sanctions making them less stringent than the US had proposed.<sup>74</sup> Like the US, China also seeks to make use of the pressure of the UN to push Iran to

<sup>67</sup>M. Meidan, 'Can China engage meaningfully on Iraq', Chatham House, (23 July 2014), available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/15227?gclid=CISChNTkqtECFZcRvQodQPkOog>.

<sup>68</sup>C. Buckle, 'Time to act: China launches WAR on ISIS after terrorists execute Chinese hostage', Express, (23 November 2015), available at: <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/621191/Time-to-ACT-China-launches-WAR-on-ISIS-after-they-claim-to-have-executed-Chinese-hostage>.

<sup>69</sup>M. Chaziza, 'China's Middle East policy: ISIS factor', Middle East Policy 23(1), (2016), p. 26.

<sup>70</sup>C. Freeman, J. Zogby, I. Goldenberg and G. Hyman, 'The Middle East and the next administration: challenges, opportunities and recommendations', Middle East Policy 23 (4), (2016), pp. 5–41.

<sup>71</sup>M. Duchâtel, 'Terror Overseas: Understanding China's Evolving Counter-terror Strategy', European Council on Foreign Relations, (26 October 2016), available at: [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/terror\\_overseas\\_understanding\\_chinas\\_evolution\\_counter\\_terror\\_strategy7160](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/terror_overseas_understanding_chinas_evolution_counter_terror_strategy7160).

<sup>72</sup>W. Da and W. Wang, 'Maixiang genghao dequanqiu zhili' (Towards better global governance), in Y. Fu and J. Wang, eds., Chaoyue fenqi, zouxiang gongying-zhongmei zhiku yanjiu baogao (China-US Relations: Exploring a New Pathway to a Win-win Partnership), (22 May 2017), p. 255.

<sup>73</sup>A. Scobell and A. Nader, 'China in the Middle East: the wary dragon', p. 51.

<sup>74</sup>J. Garver, 'China and Iran: expanding cooperation under conditions of US domination', in N. Horesh, ed., Toward Well-Oiled Relations? China's Presence in the Middle East Following the Arab Spring (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 189–196.



freeze its nuclear programme. What China disagrees with the US is that harsh economic sanctions may frustrate the Iranian effort to develop nuclear weapons temporarily, but cannot force Iran to give up its nuclear programme for good. Economic sanctions can only be an auxiliary means to pressurise Iran to return to the negotiation table. Too harsh economic sanctions may backfire. Military strikes will only worsen the Iran nuclear crisis.<sup>75</sup> The best possible way is to engage with Iran through negotiations backed by appropriate diplomatic and economic pressure. It needs to be stressed that to tackle the Iran nuclear challenge will be a long-term task for the international community.

To be sure, Sino-US cooperation is indispensable to the resolution of the Iran nuclear crisis. The heart of the crisis is the feud between the US and Iran. China can play a useful and constructive part to alleviate US-Iran confrontation. For example, China's active participation was of significance in facilitation of the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and P5 + 1 in July 2015. China is 'the linchpin of the international sanction regime against Iran and, by extension, of the effort to forestall Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability'.<sup>76</sup> Given its intimate relationship with Iran over the past decades, China has more leverage than any other member of P5 + 1 vis-à-vis Iran. As a result, China is in the best position to play a constructive role as a peace broker in the nuclear talks with Iran. As former Chinese Ambassador to Iran Hua Liming maintains, 'When the two parties came across irresolvable problems, they would come to China, which would 'lubricate' the negotiation and put things back on track'.<sup>77</sup> China and the US had close communication and coordination throughout the Iran nuclear talks.<sup>78</sup>

It is noteworthy that China and the US deepened their nuclear energy security cooperation in the Obama era. China and the US started to co-chair the technical working group on Iran's Arak project formed under the Iran nuclear deal in 2015.<sup>79</sup> China and the US also signed an agreement to broaden their cooperation to thwart nuclear smuggling in March 2016. This agreement allowed the US to provide China with training and technology to detect illicit movements, smuggling of nuclear materials and logical sources.<sup>80</sup>

The conclusion of the JCPOA by no means indicates the end of Iran nuclear crisis. Whether the Iran nuclear issue can be resolved in a satisfactory way depends largely on to what extent the US and Iran can adhere to the JCPOA in the coming years. Despite its initial hesitant and ambivalent attitudes towards the JCPOA, the Trump

<sup>75</sup>S. Simon, 'An Israeli Strike on Iran', Contingency Planning Memorandum, Council on Foreign Relations 5, (2009), available at: <http://www.cfr.org/israel/israeli-strike-iran/p20637>.

<sup>76</sup>E. Downs and S. Maloney, 'Getting China to sanction Iran', Foreign Affairs, (March/April 2011), available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67465/erica-downs-and-suzanne-maloney/getting-china-to-sanction-iran>.

<sup>77</sup>P. Ford, 'Iran nuclear talks: can China keep negotiations on track', The Christian Science Monitor, (30 March 2015), available at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2015/0330/Iran-nuclear-talks-Can-China-keep-negotiations-on-track-video>; L. Hua, 'Yilang hewenti yu zhongguo zhongdong waijiao' (The Iran Nuclear Issue and China's Middle East Diplomacy), Arab World Studies 6, (2014), p. 9.

<sup>78</sup>D. Sun and Y. Zhang, 'Zhongguo canyu yilang hewenti zhili de lilun yu shijian' (Theory and practice of China's participation in Iran nuclear issue governance), Arab World Studies 4, (2016), p. 17.

<sup>79</sup>'US, China to chair working group on Iran's Arak nuclear reactor project', Sputnik News, (23 November 2015), available at: <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201511231030611160-us-china-iran-arak/>.

<sup>80</sup>K. McLaughlin, 'US and China cooperate to thwart nuclear smuggling', Science, (17 March 2016), available at: <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/03/us-and-china-cooperate-thwart-nuclear-smuggling>.

administration pledged to enforce the Iran nuclear deal with greater strictness on 7 March 2017.<sup>81</sup> Notwithstanding this, President Trump refused to certify the Iran nuclear deal in October 2017 and instead unilaterally set new conditions for the US to stay in this nuclear deal.<sup>82</sup>

To make matters worse, President Trump announced the US's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA on 8 May 2018, seriously dampening the prospect of peaceful resolution of the Iran nuclear crisis. Trump's unilateral move has nearly killed the incremental momentum of Sino-American cooperation on the Iran nuclear crisis evident during the Obama era. As a staunch supporter of the JCPOA, China has spared no efforts to save the JCPOA by engaging in intimate collaboration and coordination with Iran, Russia and the EU. On the one hand, to placate Iran's mounting economic insecurity in the aftermath of American withdrawal from the JCPOA, China has continued to trade with Iran in spite of American unilateral economic sanctions on Iran and disregarded Washington's request to cut oil imports from Iran.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, China has worked closely with Russia and the EU to sidestep American economic sanctions on Iran. In particular, they agreed to set up a 'special purpose vehicle' (SPV), which is a special payments system to facilitate trade with Iran.<sup>84</sup> Unless the Trump administration changes its course regarding Iran, which seems most unlikely in the short term, it will not be easy for China and the US to resume the momentum of their cooperation in coping with the Iran nuclear crisis.

### **5.3 Case Three: Sino-American Cooperation over Israel-Palestine Conflict**

To be sure, the US is and will remain the most crucial player in helping resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict. Its efforts in dealing with this tough challenge over the past decades, however, have been a stark failure. The US's failure in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is largely due to its unwillingness to be an 'honest broker', especially in the eyes of many Arab countries. Indeed, it is hard to believe that the US can be an honest broker in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, considering its unabated military aid to Israel which has already become the most formidable military power in the Middle East, and its uncritical diplomatic support of Israel in the UN by casting 43 vetoes of UN Resolutions critical to Israel up until now.<sup>85</sup> President Trump's move over

<sup>81</sup>F. Murphy, 'Trump administration pledges 'great strictness' on Iran nuclear deal', Reuters, (7 March 2017), available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-idUSKBN16E2GZ>.

<sup>82</sup>A. Gearan and A. Phillip, 'Trump sets new conditions for US to stay in Iran nuclear deal, tossing issue to Congress', The Washington Post, (13 October 2017), available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-to-set-new-conditions-for-us-to-stay-in-iran-nuclear-deal-tossing-issue-to-congress/2017/10/13/39ac3894-af82-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.fc89a183d35b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-to-set-new-conditions-for-us-to-stay-in-iran-nuclear-deal-tossing-issue-to-congress/2017/10/13/39ac3894-af82-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98_story.html?utm_term=.fc89a183d35b).

<sup>83</sup>R. Adams-Heard and N. Wadhams, 'China Rejects US Request to Cut Iran Oil Imports', Bloomberg, 3 August 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-03/china-is-said-to-reject-u-s-request-to-cut-iran-oil-imports>; D. Esfandiary and A. Tabatabai, 'Will China undermine Trump's Iran strategy?', Foreign Affairs, 20 July 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-07-20/will-china-undermine-trumps-iran-strategy>.

<sup>84</sup>M. Khan and H. Foy, 'EU, Russia and China agree special payments system for Iran', Financial Times, (25 September 2018), <https://www.ft.com/content/4aa03678-c0a7-11e8-8d55-54197280d3f7>; P. Wintour, 'EU, China and Russia in move to sidestep US sanctions on Iran', The Guardian, (26 September 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/26/eu-china-and-russia-in-move-to-sidestep-us-sanctions-on-iran>.

<sup>85</sup>P. Beaumont, 'US outnumbered 14 to 1 as it vetoes UN vote on status of Jerusalem', The Guardian, (19 December 2017), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/18/us-outnumbered-14-to-1-as-it-vetoes-un-vote-on-status-of-jerusalem>.

Jerusalem in December 2017 made the US even more unacceptable as the mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.<sup>86</sup> Without the adjustment of the US's partial treatment of Israel, it is almost impossible for the US and the international community writ large to succeed in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

China can play a constructive role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. It has shown increasingly more willingness to play a larger and more proactive role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in recent years.<sup>87</sup> In August 2017, China's ambassador to the United Nations Liu Jieyi urged the international community to support President Xi Jinping's four-point plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and he also revealed that China has proposed the creation of a China-Palestine-Israel tripartite dialogue mechanism so as to coordinate the implementation of major assistance programs in Palestine. In December 2017, China hosted the Palestine-Israel peace symposium in Beijing, vowing to play an increased role in settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Nabil Shaath, Foreign Affairs adviser to the Palestinian President, and Hilik Bar, Deputy Speaker of the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, headed delegations to the symposium.<sup>88</sup>

China, in comparison to the US, has more leverage vis-à-vis Palestine. China was the first non-Arab country to recognize the Palestinian Liberation Organization. President Xi Jinping has recently reiterated China's unequivocal support of the two-state solution and full Palestinian sovereignty with East Jerusalem as its capital, making a marked contrast with President Trump's ambiguous attitude towards the two-state solution, particularly the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital.<sup>89</sup> Hence, for Palestine and other Arab countries, which have resented the US's pro-Israel position for a long time, China can be a more trustful peace broker than the US.

To facilitate a diplomatic solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, China has refused to label Hamas as a terrorist organization, and instead has attempted to increase Hamas's international legitimacy as a political actor.<sup>90</sup> In the eyes of China, without recognizing Hamas's legitimacy as a political actor representing a substantial portion of the Palestinian people, it would be hard for the US to make progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in any meaningful way.<sup>91</sup> China can serve as a bridge

<sup>86</sup>T. Staff, 'Abbas: we won't accept any American peace plan, US no longer a mediator', *The Times of Israel*, (22 December 2017), available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/abbas-we-wont-accept-any-us-plan-us-no-longer-a-mediator/>.

<sup>87</sup>S. Wu, 'Leave room for China in the Middle East peace process', *China and US Focus*, (14 May 2013), available at: <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/leave-room-for-china-in-the-middle-east-peace-process/>.

<sup>88</sup>C. Gao, 'China vows to play an active role in settling the Palestine-Israel issue', *The Diplomat*, (28 December 2017), available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/china-vows-to-play-an-active-role-in-settling-the-palestine-israel-issue/>.

<sup>89</sup>China supports two-state solution on Palestinian issue: President Xi', *Xinhua*, (18 July 2017), available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/18/c\\_136453856\\_2.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/18/c_136453856_2.htm); Middle East Eye, 'US Says It Supports Two-State Solution after Trump Throws Policy into Chaos', (16 February 2017), available at: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/us-says-it-supports-two-state-solution-after-trump-throws-policy-chaos-1653838478>.

<sup>90</sup>S. Ramani, 'Why Palestine supports China on the South China Sea', *The Diplomat*, (26 July 2016), available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/why-palestine-supports-china-on-the-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>91</sup>Jimmy Carter calls on US, EU to recognize Hamas', *Ynetnews*, (6 August 2014), available at: <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4555502,00.html>.

between the US and Hamas by reaching out to Hamas, thereby helping to push Israel and Palestine back on the track of peace talks.

## 6. Conclusion

In the Asia-Pacific region, China and the US are trapped in structural contradictions due to their disagreements over the North Korean nuclear issue, the deployment of THAAD in South Korea, the Sino-Japanese dispute over Diaoyu island, the Taiwan issue and the South China Sea disputes. With the Trump administration's push for the Indo-Pacific strategy and the emerging US-Japan-Australia-India quasi-alliance, the Sino-US geopolitical rivalry is increasingly grave in the Asia Pacific region.

However, in the Middle East, China and the US have found more arenas for tactical and strategic cooperation, which is conducive to rebuilding mutual trust. With its expanding engagement in the Middle East, China will have to assign more weight to the US factor in its Middle East policy, due to the high likelihood that the US will continue to dominate the Middle Eastern affairs in the foreseeable future. It is an inevitable trend that China finds itself constantly in interaction with the US throughout the Middle East. China, however, will have neither capability nor intention to displace the US primacy in the Middle Eastern affairs in the near and medium term.

Both China and the US have respective comparative and complementary advantages in their Middle East policies. The Middle Eastern turmoil over the past decades proves that only a combination of a soft approach and hard approach can bring real peace and stability to the Middle East. Thus, there is great potential for China and the US to build a complementary partnership in the Middle East. The worsening situation in the Middle East and the strategic complementarity make it necessary for China and the US to work together in the Middle East as responsible powers. There remains no better place than the Middle East to test whether China and the US can be truly responsible big powers in the international community. It is also possible for China and the US to build a complementary partnership in the Middle East due to congruence of their interests on a host of Middle Eastern issues.

In spite of this, common interests do not automatically translate into fruitful cooperation. Conflicts in the Asia-Pacific region, such as the ones related to the Taiwan Question, to the Diaoyu Island, to the South China Sea and to the Korean Peninsula would automatically see a ramping up of US control over oil exports from the Middle East to China, and this would also generate a Chinese response, a domino effect. To build a complementary partnership in the Middle East is by no means an easy task for China and the US, given the remaining high degree of mutual strategic distrust between them. The best possible and achievable way for Beijing and Washington to build a complementary partnership is to increase their reciprocal cooperation incrementally in areas where their interests are increasingly aligned, and in the meantime to make compromise with more willingness and courage in areas where they are at odds with each other. Otherwise, the Sino-US complementary partnership will doom to be a wishful thinking.

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