

East of Suez

China's Role in the Middle East

(2003-2013)

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For my beloved wife Su Junxia

Who travelled this road with me,
endured my “hardships”,
and waited for me – all those years.

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Notes on Transliteration and Translation

One of the major challenges of this book has been the fact that the sources are in three major languages, English, Chinese and Arabic. For Chinese transliterations, I have used Pinyin except where personal or historical names are in different use. As many of the Chinese and Arabic sources used in this book are available in English, I have used the translation by the publishers, instead of translating myself, wherever possible. Otherwise, translations are my own if not stated otherwise. I am grateful to Su Junxia for her help with translating some of the Chinese sources and to Jürgen Rogalski of the German Institute for Security and International Affairs (SWP) for his assistance in researching Arabic sources.

List of Abbreviations

ASEAN+3	Association of South East Asian Nations + China, Japan, South Korea
Bpd	Barrels per Day
CASCF	China Arab States Cooperation Forum
CENTO	Central Treaty Organisation/Baghdad Pact
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
ECBC	Egyptian Chinese Business Council
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FOCAC	Forum on China Africa Cooperation
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IR	International Relations (academic)
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
ME	Middle East
MENA	Middle East News Agency
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MITI	Ministry of Industry and Trade (Japan)
Mofcom	Ministry of Commerce (PRC)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NRC	National Role Conception
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
PRC	People's Republic of China
RIMS	Royal Indian Marine Ship (British India)
RMB	Renminbi
RSC	Regional Security Complex
Saudi ARAMCO	Saudi Arabian Oil Company (formerly Arabian-American Oil Company)
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
TEDA	Tianjin Economic Development Agency
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States (of America)
USD	US Dollar
USSR	Union of Socialist Soviet Republics
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Prologue

The Kurdish town of Qamishli was a typical Syrian backwater in the summer of 2004, very far from the big city feel of Aleppo and Damascus, not even to mention the cosmopolitan flair of Beirut. The bus station's newsstand offered the normal pictures of the Assad family, Christian patriarchs, Shia martyrs and Lebanese pop idols; more unexpected was an Arab version of the "Beijing Review" that lingered among the other publications. It was covered in dust and did not look like any prospective buyer had ever touched it. When I bought it, the seller looked at me as if to ask if I was really serious about this. It was as boring as can be expected of Chinese international propaganda, but it still filled me with the anxiety of someone who had just found another piece of evidence that China's rise was unstoppable and even apparent in far out Syrian Kurdistan. Over the following months, I would collect more pieces like this, from the newest edition of the Beijing-Tel Aviv News, to pictures of Hui merchants posing as Islamic students in Damascus and Cairo, the China-Yemen Friendship Bridge in Aden and the China Shoe City in Dubai.

Three years later, I would hand in my master thesis on China's strategy in the Middle East, 'proving' that the strategy of China derived from its global grand strategy; clear-cut and neat, as can be expected from a piece of work that simply focusses on testing some hypothesis build on some grand theory. But while I finished it, my doubts grew about the validity of my claims. Did China have a strategy for the region, or had I just invented one, because International Relations theory told me what it must be like? So over the next years I continuously returned to my little archaeological collection of "China in the Middle East" souvenirs, pondering what it "really" meant.

Years passed, in which I returned to China and witnessed its economic and social transformation and took part in the chit-chat about 'China's rise'. In Beijing everything seemed to be about this rise and everybody seemed to be intoxicated by it. But whenever I travelled to countries a little further from East Asia, China suddenly seemed far away and unimportant, even if Chinese products were everywhere. There was a strange gap between the Western fascination with China and its claims of a 'New Silk Road' and local disinterest in or even disgust for China. So I got more and more interested in differing perceptions about China, not only among Westerners and Chinese, but also with other people, especially all those 'Third World

brothers' that Chinese counterparts told me 'loved China' and 'hated American hegemony'. To return to the Middle East was an obvious choice.

By the time I started to present my first ideas on this book at the University of Bonn in December 2010 a young Tunisian vendor had just set himself on fire in protest against official injustice; I did not comment on this, as this incident obviously had no connection to my own topic. Within weeks this had changed, and I sat in an Egyptian restaurant in the Chinese City of Yiwu, watching on Al-Jazeera together with Arab traders as Egyptians flooded Tahrir square, while the country around us pretended that this was not happening; and if it could not be ignored, then was at least a 'conspiracy of the West'.

A few months later I touched down in Cairo and Dubai and started to get serious about my research. Many times, my questions about China, provoked utter disbelief in the eyes of the people I talked to. Many Arabs just didn't understand how somebody could be more interested in such a far away land, than in the historic events around us. Sometimes I was annoyed by this unwillingness to focus on the importance of my ground-breaking research, more often I was embarrassed by the irrelevance of what I was doing while Benghazi or Aleppo got bombed and students were protesting just a few hundred meters away. It became more and more obvious, that one of the biggest tasks when talking about 'China's Rise' was to find out, if the Western fascination with China and the resulting projection of this on other parts of the world was simply a symbol of 'Eurocentrism' and a disregard for non-Western perspectives, or if it was a sign how badly informed the Middle Eastern region was about the momentous geopolitical changes going on in the east of the Asian continent.

Then again, sometimes I simply wondered if this was all really important and if the life of a single Chinese trader living in the Middle East would really get better, only because his country was declared a 'superpower'. In the middle of this book, I stopped because I thought there is a much more interesting story to tell. The story of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese who came to the Middle East and Africa with an enterprising spirit. As a book on International Relations, this research does not do justice to their hard work and the amazing transformation that both regions are undergoing partly because of the wish of all those Chinese expats, to give their own families a better live. Chinese traders and private investors are often overlooked or even looked down upon, but for me they became the real heroes of globalisation. Over the

last years, many of them had to run for their lives as the Arab Spring was crushed in mayhem. Unfortunately, the rise of China's relative capacities did not protect the Chinese traders of Mosul against the 'Islamic State'.

However, this book is not about them. Instead, it tries to understand how concepts about oneself and others are influencing global politics. This is obviously a highly subjective topic for research, demanding first hand accounts and extensive travels. I am therefore full of gratitude to all those who made this book possible. They are too many to name and many have chosen to remain anonymous for political reasons. My first words of gratitude must go to Professor Gu Xuewu at Bonn University who patiently waited for years for me to produce anything substantial on the topic, but also to my second supervisor Professor Kauz. I also have to thank the Friedrich Ebert-Foundation, which graciously financed this project for three years. The school of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the China Foreign Affairs University, allowed me to teach their students for two years and gave me access not only to China's academic and diplomatic world, but also to some of the most interesting aspects of live in Beijing. The German Institute on International and Security Affairs (SWP) hosted me in Berlin for two years as a visiting fellow. Mao Yiming and Liu Haozhi gave guidance on the Chinese community and more importantly delightful company during my time in Dubai and Cairo. Government officials in sleek skyscrapers and traders in concrete stalls have invited me for Chinese tea and Arabic coffee hundreds of times over the course of this book, told me their stories, and shared their perspectives. Most of their stories remain untold. In the end, Professor Hanns Maull, Ulrich von Schwerin, Maximilian Mayer, John Fay, Chad Futrell, Ethan Cramer-Flood and Nate Murray were so kind to read chapters of this book and offered advice on theory and methodology, asked the right questions and most importantly helped to improve my English. To all of them goes my gratitude, but all the mistakes are my own.

Daniel Krahl

Berlin, 01. September 2015

1. Introduction

“China’s political role in the Middle East will only be enhanced, not diminished. [...] China’s all-around role will gradually and more visibly be felt by Arab Countries and get their understanding and support.”¹

Wang Yi, Chinese Foreign Minister, 08.02.2014

When British Prime Minister Harold Wilson declared in 1968 that the United Kingdom was withdrawing all its forces from ‘East of Suez’, it was obvious that Britain had finally given up on playing its roles of ‘security provider’ and ‘hegemon’ in the Middle East; roles that it had played over the last one and a half centuries. After two World Wars and global resistance to its Empire, best symbolised by the disaster of the Suez Crisis twelve years earlier, Britain had simply lost the capability to fulfil these roles. The US had to take over those parts of Britain’s roles that were still deemed necessary during the Cold War, and that fitted to the US’s increasing global role of ‘leader of the free world’. Today, many see China on the rise and it is tempting to assume that we will see another handover of roles, globally and regionally, from a ‘declining power’ to a ‘rising power’.

The focus of this study is to understand the process of regional role formation and if and how China’s regional economic presence and its global ‘rise’ are transmitted into a regional political role. The widespread assumption among academics and the media holds that China’s economic growth will automatically translate into greater political involvement in different parts of the world. This has been accompanied by the narrative of a simultaneous ‘decline of

1 Foreign Ministry of the PRC: Wang Yi Gave an Interview to Al Jazeera, 08.02.2014
http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461_663310/t1116509.shtml

the US' and the 'rise of China', in which China will take over the dominating global role that the old superpower has played since 1945. The reasons for this process seem convincing at first; the relative share of the US in the world economy is decreasing steadily, while China's is rising. China's military might is growing and its traders and businessmen have become a ubiquitous sight in every region of the globe. Additionally, US foreign policies after 11 September have created distrust and even enmity in many regions of the world which might serve as a major catalyst for this transition of the role of 'superpower' from the US to China.

However, the pivotal functions that the US play for the international system are significant, with its material capabilities, its economy and military remaining supreme for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, America's role in the world has always been more than simply a reflection of these material capabilities.² While the connection between power and economic growth seems to be implicitly accepted by most observers, it should not be taken for granted. The simple growth of economic capabilities does not mean that a country will also be a political power in a region. Neither post-war Germany nor Japan, although both heavily involved in the economies of the region, ever took on the role of 'security provider' in the Middle East.³ Having learned from their disastrous experiences in 'rising', they had to accept a very different role in a US dominated world after WW II.

Today, China is becoming more economically involved in nearly all regions of the world and this often leads observers to conclude that China is becoming a 'global power' or a 'superpower'. What this assumption often overlooks, is how this new presence of China is perceived by regional states, and if and how this regional perception feeds back into China's thinking about its own role. If the economic capabilities are not the only decisive factor in attributing or choosing foreign policy roles, then the puzzle should be why certain states chose certain roles, or are attributed certain roles, even if their capabilities would allow them

2 see Maull, Hanns (2011): Hegemony reconstructed? In: Harnisch, Sebastian, Cornelia Frank und Hanns W. Maull (2011): Role Theory in International Relations- Approaches and Analysis, Routledge, Abingdon; Ikenberry, John (2012): Liberal Leviathan - The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order, Princeton University Press, Princeton

3 see Vogel, Ezra (1980): Japan as Number One, Harper Collins College Division, Glenview, Interestingly, Japan which is a much bigger economic player in the Middle East than Germany, mostly due to its oil dependency on the region, plays much less of a political role in the region than Germany. For the Discussion on Japan's security identity see: Katzenstein, Peter J. (1996): Cultural norms and national security: Police and military in post-war Japan: Cambridge University Press; Harnisch, Sebastian & Hanns Maull (2001): Germany as a civilian power? The foreign policy of the Berlin Republic, Manchester University Press, Manchester

alternative ones. Two theoretical concepts will be used in this study to help us understand how China is evolving as an international actor. First, the concept of 'role' as described in constructivist role theory, as a pattern of behaviour that limits and enables the behaviour of international actors, and second, the 'region', in a constructivist sense as a Regional Security Complex (RSC), as the constitutive arena in which roles of actors are formed in a discursive process.

1.1. Why China's Role in the Middle East matters

Understanding the evolution of China's role in the Middle East can tell us more about the effects of the development of its global role and about how China will affect the regional order and the interests of other international players. It is therefore important to have a closer look at how this role, that China is supposed to take, is established and played out in the Middle East, a region that has been a major focus of US foreign policy for most of the last 25 years.⁴

One of the most prominent and seemingly paradox phenomena of the process of increasing globalisation since the end of the Cold War, is the return of the 'region' as a level of political debate; and accordingly 'regions' take on an increasingly prominent place in political science research. Regional systems increasingly develop their own political mechanisms and are not just a mirror of global politics, as they were often depicted during the Cold War era.⁵ During that period, the focus was solely on the global level superpower contention. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver declare that it "was a bias of this type favouring the global over the regional that led to many of the disasters of Cold War policy. [...] Since regions matter more in the current era, the costs of underrating them could be even higher."⁶

This traditional bias towards the global level analysis is not only a phenomenon in general International Relations (IR) literature, but especially in the debate on the 'rise of China'. It has often led to the assumption that future global politics will basically again be a story of two

4 As Mahbubani writes, the Middle East has been in the focus of US foreign policy like no region except Latin America, see Mahbubani, Kishore (2009): *The New Asian Hemisphere: The irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*, Public Affairs, New York, p.108

5 For a more in-depth discussion of the Region vs international system debate see: Lake, David and Patrick Morgan (1997): *Regional Orders – Building Security in a New World*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park

6 Buzan, Barry & Ole Wæver (2003): *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.41; also Buzan, Barry; Wæver, Ole; Wilde, Jaap de (1998): *Security: a new framework for analysis*: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder

superpowers, the US and China, which could manage the world together.⁷ Such a global perspective simply underestimates the difference in political environments that China's growing capabilities are faced with in different regions and simply projects a Western, especially American perspective, which sees all regions just from a global vantage point. However, a change away from the purely global vantage point in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and IR discussions towards the regional level is slowly happening; even-though the hypothesis that global level misconceptions can be very costly, had already been substantiated by Stephen Walt in 1985 with his analysis of the narrow Cold War lens of US foreign policy on the states of the Middle East.⁸

To look at the Middle East in this regard is important not only because of the symbolic value of the Middle Eastern region, which has tempted the fantasies of Western empire builders from Alexander the Great to US-President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Beyond those romantic visions, hardnosed adherents of Realpolitik would state geopolitical 'facts', which make this region the most strategically important on the globe: It has most of the global oil and gas resources, it sits in the middle of major transportation routes between three continents and its politics have tremendous impact on the feelings of Muslims around the world.⁹ International politics intertwines heavily with regional politics and any state that wants to be counted among the Great Powers seems likely to get involved politically in the region at a certain point. It is tempting therefore to assume that at some point in its 'rise', China would also have to become involved in the region in a political role.

For the last two hundred years, the West has played the leading roles and counter-roles in nearly all Middle Eastern developments. Questions of cultural identity have mostly been discussed around the two positions of adherence and resistance to Western models of 'modernisation'. Repeatedly have these questions led to bloodshed inside the region, as well as with outsiders. However, roles are not static and since the Iraq war in 2003, the Arab Gulf

7 One of these global level ideas was the G2 concept, under which the US and China would take leading roles in global affairs though informal coordination. For one of these proposals see Zoellick, Robert and Justin Yifu Lin (2009): Recovery - A Job for China and the US, in: Washington Post, 6 March 2009 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/05/AR2009030502887.html>

8 Walt, Stephen (1985): Alliance formation and the Balance of World Power, In: International Security, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring, 1985), pp. 3-43

9 For a more in-depth discussion of the strategic features of the region see Kamrava, Mehran (2011): The changing international relations of the Persian Gulf, in: Kamrava, Mehran (ed., 2011): International politics of the Persian Gulf, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, p.3

states and Iran are playing roles that are more active in regional politics.¹⁰ At the same time, US policy after 11 September 2001 has raised questions even among traditional regional US allies about alternatives to US dominance and the liberal development project.¹¹ Additionally, after the disaster of its war in Iraq, the US seems to be increasingly reluctant to shoulder the burden of playing the role of regional 'security provider'.¹² Lastly, after 2011 the Arab Spring has once again shaken the regional order to its core, bringing up questions about the role of outsiders as supporters of both regime stability and change.

1.2. State of the Art

Compared to its neighbouring European region, the Middle East has received considerably less theoretical attention by political scientists. It was often seen as an appropriate place for policy studies, rather than for approaches that are more systematic.¹³ However, this is starting to change and the new focus on regional perspectives in the IR discipline, discussed in chapters 1.3 and 1.4, has given new impetus to more theory informed approaches.¹⁴

However, research on China's relationship with the Middle East is not only still limited, but so far mostly undertaken as policy studies with very little focus on developing a theory-based research design for systematic hypothesis developing and testing, let alone a systematic inquiry into the role that China plays in the region. Many texts talk about the relationship by simply assigning China a certain regional role without explicitly referring to this role-formation process, be it as part of 'The Vital Triangle'¹⁵ or the 'New Patron of Instability'¹⁶. These titles already name the role that the authors hope, or fear, China would play in the region. Only a

10 For the debate on increased regional activism of regional actors as a result of US problems in Iraq see Wehrey, Frederic, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Jessica Watkins, Jeffrey Martini, Robert A. Guffey (2010): *The Iraq Effect – The Middle East after the Iraq War*, Rand Cooperation, Santa Monica

11 Simpfendorfer, Ben (2009): *The New Silk Road - How a Rising Arab World is Turning Away from the West and Rediscovering China*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York

12 For the US debate about continuing the self-role conception of leadership after the Iraq war 2003 and the financial crisis 2008 see Niblett, Robin (ed., 2010): *America and a Changed World – A Question of Leadership*, Wiley Blackwell, Chichester

13 Teti, Andrea (2007): Bridging the gap: IR, Middle East studies and the disciplinary politics of the area studies controversy, In: *European Journal of International Relations* 13 (1), p. 117–145.

14 See for example: Hinnebusch, Raymond and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds., 2002): *The foreign Policy of Middle Eastern States*, Lynne Renner Publishers, Boulder; Nonnemann, Gerd (ed., 2005): *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*, Routledge, 2005; Hubel, Helmut, Markus Kaim & Oliver Lembke (2000): *Pax Americana im Nahen Osten – Eine Studie zur Transformation regionaler Ordnungen*, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden

15 Alterman, Jon and John Garver (2008): *The Vital Triangle: China, the United States, and the Middle East*, Center for Strategic and International Studies

16 Blumenthal, Dan (2005): Providing Arms, in: *The Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2005

few books, namely Lilian Craig Harris' so far unsurpassed 1993 work "China Considers the Middle East" on China's regional role search, try to get a better understanding of the role formation processes in China itself, even if not referring to it in this terminology.¹⁷

From a Western perspective, and in a typically rationalist and functionalist approach, David Altermann and John Garver¹⁸ argue that China's role, and the attitude towards it by the US and the regional states, should be aligned towards each other through overlapping interests like anti-terrorism and energy supply security. This view of China's presence in the region as part of a triangle is widened by Christopher Davidson¹⁹ to a comparison of China's, Japan's, Korea's and India's relations with the Gulf, which broke new ground by including multiple Asian states in the analysis and showed the necessity to see China's role formation in the Middle East as a social process within a web of international players. Leaving behind these materialist and rationalist assumptions, one of the few attempts so far to look critically into the perception of China in the Arab world, was undertaken by Chris Zambelis and Brandon Gentry in 2008.²⁰ Different to most other analysis, they look at the political dimension and especially the importance, which the comparison to the US plays in the regional perception. While the findings of Davidson, and those after him, about the importance to use a multiplayer approach is appreciated, this research will expand on Zambelis' and Gentry's work, comparing the perspectives of Arabs and Chinese on each other and including the influence that Western observers like Altermann and Garver themselves have on this process with their publications. This last point is necessary as very little on China is produced in the Middle Eastern region itself. Most books on China available in Arabic are translations of Western authors or historical accounts.²¹ Those few scholars that do produce research on China-Middle East relations are normally Western trained and write in English. Mohammed bin Huwaidin has been the trailblazer with the first regional comprehensive overview over the relations between China

17 Craig Harris, Lilian (1993): *China Considers the Middle East*, I.B. Tauris, London

18 Altermann & Garver (2008)

19 Davidson, Christopher (2010): *The Persian Gulf and Pacific Asia: From Indifference to Interdependence*, Columbia University Press, New York. More inter- and transasian discussion on the subject has already led to a widening of the perspective in the form of collaborative edited works like Niblock, Tim & Yang Guang (2014): *Security Dynamics of East Asia in the Gulf Region*, Gerlach Press, Berlin

20 Zambelis, Chris and Brandon Gentry (2008): *China through Arab Eyes - American Influence in the Middle East*, in: *Parameters*, Spring 2008, pp. 60—72

21 al-Naqr, Ali Said (2009): *al-Siyasa al-charidschia al-sin wa aliqatiha bil-wilayat al-mutahida al-amrikiya*, Egyptian General Book Authority, Cairo; Abdelrahman, Zainab Aisa (2011): *al-Aliqat al-masria al-sinia 1957-1970(Sino-Egyptian Relations 1957-1970)*, Egyptian General Book Authority, Cairo

and the Gulf in 2002. He follows Western authors in their assumption on the direct link between economic and security policies.²² In 2008, he was the first to specifically analyse the difference in role expectations between Arabs and Chinese and to consider the political implications of this difference.²³ Another case in point here would be the Gulf Research Centre's Abdul-Aziz Sager, who challenges China on its lack of political commitment to the region.²⁴ A younger generation of Arab researchers like Mohammed Olimat and Nasser al-Tamimi²⁵ are much more optimistic on China's rise, but at the same time follow their predecessors in showing open disappointment about China not growing into a security oriented role. Mohammed Turki al-Sudairi stands out with his analysis of China's image in the Saudi media. He highlights the need to focus more on perspective than material structure, and thereby tries to explain the disappointment on the Saudi side about China's behaviour during the Arab Spring through what he calls the "knowledge gap" between Chinese and Arab expectations.²⁶ This study will use a similar approach but on a regional level and from a role theoretical perspective.

China itself now produces a vast amount of literature on China-Middle East relations. These texts are invaluable for this research as they, often implicitly, discuss Chinese role expectations and role conceptions. These academic texts are also much more accessible than opinions of Chinese officials, who offered similar perspectives as those given in the academic texts, which is not surprising given the close interconnection of academic and bureaucratic players in China, but who refused to be cited even in an anonymised way. Among Chinese authors, the research focus mostly follows official historical narratives and assessments of the regional situation and Western policies in it. There is very little critical assessment of China's role in the region and most is oriented towards policy studies or historical overviews.²⁷ Only after the outbreak of

22 bin-Huwaitin, Mohamed (2002): China's relations with Arabia and the Gulf (1949-1999), Routledge, London

23 bin-Huwaitin, Mohamed (2008): China in the Middle East - Perspectives from the Arab World, in: *Arab Insight*, Washington DC, p.67

24 Sager, Abdul-Aziz (2006): China's Growing Role in the Middle East: Implications for the Region and Beyond, The Nixon Center, Washington

25 Olimat, Mohammed (2013): China and the Middle East: From Silk Road to Arab Spring, Routledge, Abingdon; al-Tamimi, Naser (2012): China-Saudi Arabia Relations (1990-2012) – Economic partnership or Strategic Alliance?, al-Sabah Publication Series, Durham, Nr.2, June 2012; a more detailed analysis was published by the same author one year later (2013): China-Saudi Arabia Relations (1990-2012) - Marriage of Convenience or Strategic Alliance? Routledge, Abingdon

26 al-Sudairi, Mohammed Turki (2013): China in the Eyes of the Saudi Media, GRC Gulf Papers

27 Wang, Jinglie (2010): Review and Thoughts over the Relationship between China and the Middle East, in: *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (In Asia)* 4.1, p.16-39

the Arab Spring did some authors write more critical assessments of China's role in the region, often culminating in the call for a more active role for China in the Middle East.²⁸

Pervasive through all these three sets of literature is the implicit use of the role-concept, but also the lack of any systematic attempt to connect China's role formation with the context of regional order. It is therefore the aim of this dissertation to contribute to the overall body of research by looking into the interconnection between regional processes and role formation from a more systematic and theory-informed standpoint. By comparing the different perspectives on China's role, a set of hypotheses about these interconnections will be formed, which could be tested on different case studies in future research.

1.3. Theory: Role Formation and Regional Order

Broadly speaking, the theoretical frameworks that have been used to analyse Middle Eastern politics can be divided into four different schools. Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism and Dependency Theory/Marxism.²⁹ The concept of roles appears in all four theories and realists like Waltz have found role theory an interesting addition to Neo-Realism.³⁰ Stephen Walker already tried to develop a theory of foreign policy by merging Waltzian structural realism with role theory in the 1980s.³¹ However as Marijke Breuning argues, most role theory can now be safely counted under the large umbrella of (moderate) constructivist theory "that relies on systematic empirical investigation, hypothesis testing and falsification."³² While role theory developed out of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), it was taken up from the early 1990s onwards by IR constructivists like Alexander Wendt and Michael Barnett. It was further developed by

28 Yang, Guang: *Zhongguo yu Zhong dong guo jia zheng zhi jing ji guan xi fa zhan*. (Development of the political and economic relations between China and middle eastern countries) *Di yi ban* (Zhong Dong huang pi shu Yellow book of the Middle East, no. 15 (2012/2013); Liu, Zhongmin & Zhu, Weilie (2013): *Zhong dong di qu fa zhan bao gao*, Report on developments in the Middle East region, *Di 1 ban*. Beijing: Shi shi chu ban she

29 For an overview over the theoretical frameworks used in Middle Eastern regional analyses see Wright, Steven (2011): *Foreign Policy in the GCC States*; pp.73-76 in: Kamrava, Mehran (ed., 2011): *International politics of the Persian Gulf*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse or Gerd Nonnemann (2005): *Analysing the Foreign Policies of the Middle East and North Africa: A conceptual framework*, Routledge, London, p.14-15

30 Thies, Cameron G. (2010): *State Socialization and Structural Realism*, In: *Security Studies* 19 (4), p. 689–717; Walker, Stephen (ed., 1987): *Role Theory and foreign policy analysis*, Duke University Press, Durham.

31 Walker, Stephen (1987): *Role Theory and the International System - A postscript to Waltz's Theory of International Politics?*, in: Walker (ed., 1987) p.66-79

32 Breuning, Marijke (2011): *Role Theory Research in International Relations*, In: Harnisch et al (ed., 2011), p.16

Hans Maull and Sebastian Harnisch to the point where it is now seen by some scholars as a connecting element between FPA and IR theorising.³³

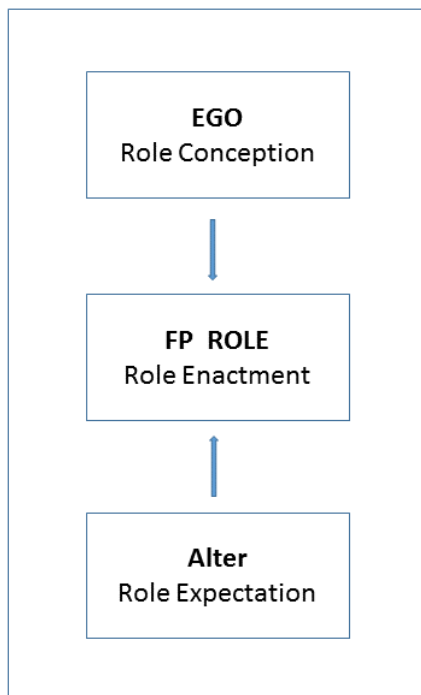


Figure 1 Holsti's Alter & Ego Model

Role theory was first used as a research tool for international politics in 1970 with Kalevi Holsti's trailblazing research into the different roles that states took on during the Cold War.³⁴ Holsti pointed out that most accounts of foreign policy ascribed a certain set of standardised behaviour to states, like non-aligned, bloc-leader, balancer, etc., which he subsumed under the idea of role.³⁵ For him roles are social constructs that emanate from social processes between an actor and other actors. Holsti defined this by the ego-conception and the alter-expectation of a certain role. Therefore, roles can be defined as "repertoires of behaviour inferred from others' expectations and one's own conceptions."³⁶ Roles are inherently social "can be understood as how the

individual (or state) participates in society according to a particular identity and comes to modify its behaviour accordingly."³⁷

The grand theories of IR offer different explanations for the origin of roles: realists assume that roles are mere reflections of capabilities of a state relative to others. If a state is a 'leader' or 'follower' is defined by its material power. Accordingly, realists' roles are mostly inferred from the international structure.³⁸ Liberalists on the other hand emphasise the choices inferred from domestic politics and interests.³⁹ Holsti himself strongly emphasised this domestic

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- 33 For an overview over the debate on bringing together IR and FPA through Role Theory see Breuning and Thies (2012) Integrating Foreign Policy Analysis and International Relations through Role Theory, in: Foreign Policy Analysis Volume 8, Issue 1, 2012
- 34 Holsti, Kalevi (1970): National Role conceptions in the study of foreign policy. In: International Studies Quarterly, pp. 233–309
- 35 Holsti (1970) p. 233
- 36 Thies, Cameron (2010a): Role Theory and foreign policy, In: The international studies encyclopaedia 10, pp. 6–335, p.4
- 37 Barnett (1995, p.12) makes a distinction between "position roles and preference roles ; the former generally are associated with formal institutions and have well-defined and detailed guides to action, while the latter are linked more closely to informal institutions and carry fewer constraints on behaviour"
- 38 See Thies (2010b)
- 39 Wolf, Raimund (2011): Terrorized America? 9/11 and its Impact on US Foreign Policy (2011), in: Harnisch et al (2011)

influence on how states chose their roles.⁴⁰ He sees them as determined by a state leader's perception of regime security, the challenges and opportunities presented by both their domestic and international environments, and, to varying extents, of their own identities. Building on Holsti, constructivists insist that both domestic and international levels cannot be separated and are both important sources of roles:

“To take seriously, first, that states are embedded in domestic and international environments and, second, that roles do not determine but shape behaviour, requires incorporating both how actors interpret their roles and how international and domestic politics affect those roles.”⁴¹

In this regard, constructivism adds to role theory also the element of perception. The role taking actor, be it a state or another institution, decides which role it takes, and the audience decides which role it attributes. These two processes however are not objective, but subjective, meaning that roles are decided by the perception of the role taker and/or the audience. Constructivist role theory emphasizes this idea of bounded rationality. Rationality in human decision-making is framed by the actor's perspective on his own identity and the identity of the other.⁴² This decision frame is important if we want to understand how actors conceive of their own and others' roles. Historical experience gives the actor a frame to situate a relevant problem or to conceptualize his role in it. Actors normally consider their own framing of the situation as objective: “[T]his conceptual lens through which foreign policy-makers perceive international relations tends to set the norm for what is considered by themselves as rational foreign policy-making.”⁴³

This emphasis on diverging rationalities however should not be misunderstood as negating the importance of material factors in role taking and attribution. It simply argues that the importance of those material factors is measured by perceptions and discourses. If China has an aircraft carrier that can operate in the Persian Gulf obviously matters for its possible role in

40 Holsti (1970) p. 243

41 Barnett (1995) p.12

42 Breuning (2013) p.27 The idea of perception in IR studies is nothing new, see Jervis, Robert (1976): *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton; For an in-depth discussion on perspectives in international politics see Turner, Oliver (2014): *American Images of China – Identity, Power, Politics*, Routledge, Milton Park; for East Asian perspectives see Rozman, Gilbert (2013): *National Identities & Bilateral Relations – Widening Gaps in East Asia and Chinese demonization of the United States*, Stanford University Press, Stanford

43 “Role conceptions suggest how norms and values become operationalised in terms of verbal statements about expected foreign policy behaviour. Role provides an essential link between agent and structure, as it incorporates how foreign policy behaviour is both purposeful and shaped by the institutional context.” Aggestam, Lisbeth (1999): *Role Conceptions and the Politics of Identity in Foreign Policy*, Arena Working Papers, WP 99/8

the region. How much it matters, and how this impacts China's role, depends on how it is perceived in the regional security discourse and in China's own discourse on its role in the region; or to paraphrase Alexander Wendt: capabilities are what states make of them.⁴⁴ For Breuning this importance of perception comes all the way from the top of the foreign policy process because:

"[...] decision makers form their conceptions of their state's role on the basis of both their understanding of the state's identity and cultural heritage, and their perception of their state's place and possibilities within the international system. [...] Hence, the national role conception brings together both agency and international structure to explain foreign policy behaviour."⁴⁵

One should be careful, not to confuse roles with identities, though there is a close inter-connection. "A regime's role perceptions, are often in part build on domestic political culture, can over time become in turn a more pervasive part of the political culture of a nation, more likely to set limits on perceived or political feasible policy alternatives."⁴⁶ Roles can become identities over time, if they are enacted long enough, but are not the same as identity. A state has only one identity, as contested as that might be internally, but can play many different roles in different regions and at different times.

When we speak of a role, we normally refer to role enactment. In role theoretical research, role conceptions by the actor and the role expectations of its audience are often used as independent variables and role enactment as the dependent variable. If the role conceptions of an actor, built upon his own perception of its capabilities and identity, and the expectations of the audience are different, than his enactment will lead to a role conflict with the audiences. Charles Doran argues that in newly emerging powers, capabilities and roles are often out of sync, because new actors don't want to invest resources into the roles expected of them by other actors.⁴⁷ This conflict persists until the new entrant adjusts its own role conception or manages to change the regional expectations so that both match. In this interactionist model⁴⁸

44 See Wendt, Alexander (1992): Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics. In: *International Organization* 46 (02), pp. 391–425

45 Breuning (2013) p. 26.

46 Holsti, Kalevi (1987): National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy, In: Stephen Walker (ed.), *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis*, Durham, Duke University Press, pp. 38-39

47 Doran, Charles(2003): Economics, Philosophy of History, and the "Single Dynamic" of Power Cycle Theory: Expectations, Competition, and Statecraft, In: *International Political Science Review* Vol. 24, No. 1, *Power Cycle Theory and Global Politics*, Sage Publications pp. 13-49

48 Harnisch (2012) p.60-61

conflict does not necessarily mean the collapse of relations between two states, but rather emphasises a process of learning by exchanging or levelling ego and alter conceptions of roles.

One of the main questions here would of course be, how many different roles are available for a state, or if a state can actually choose whatever role it wants. Obviously, the roles available depend on a state's place in the regional structure, and its own identity. Derrick Frazier and David Stewart-Ingersoll suggest linking the constructivist ideas of role and identity with Regional Security Complexes (RSC), as the social structure, not the material one, is the "context in which states' identities and roles are constructed."⁴⁹ Role determination does not happen through the structure alone. More important than the actual structural power constellation might be the historical experience as it influences how a state's capabilities and their proper use are judged both by himself and the system. The successful enactment of these roles obviously relates to some historical reference point. As this takes place in front of and is judged by an audience of other states, failure to perform is possible, especially in the case of an outsider, who might simply not know the regional historical reference points and thereby easily misjudge them. Therefore, to understand the process of role taking and attribution inside a regional order, we have to understand how regional mechanisms enable or constrain the roles available to states participating in a regional system.⁵⁰

Following Buzan and Wæver's definition, regions are understood as RSCs, which are a "distinct middle level between state and the global system" [and] "subsystems, in which most of the security interaction is internal."⁵¹ Definitions about what 'security' is, and which roles are necessary for this security, are decided in discourses on the regional level, albeit with impacts from the domestic and international levels. Accordingly, roles differ among regions and in every region some roles are more important than others. States value roles not only of themselves but also of others more, if there is the feeling that these roles will affect their security. How much they do so depends on the nature of the regional security discourse, or

49 Dannreuther, Roland (2010): Energy Security, in Peter Burgess (ed.), Handbook of New Security Studies, Routledge, London, p.741

50 Barnett (1995) p.18

51 Buzan and Wæver (2003) p.43; For a more in-depth discussion of roles in regions, not solely from a role theoretical approach, see Flermes, Daniel (ed., 2010): Regional Leadership in the Global System – Ideas, Interests and Strategies of Regional Powers, Ashgate, Farnham

regional security culture as Alexander Wendt⁵² would call it. If the states perceive themselves in a Lockean or Kantian culture, as most European states are supposed to do, they prioritise non-security roles, at least compared to states in a Hobbesian culture like the Middle East, where security roles are prioritised.⁵³

This practice of hierarchisation is more pervasive, the stronger the regional discourses are reproducing the narrative of insecurity. This process is called 'securitisation', the framing of issues and actors in a security-related meaning to prioritise them or make resources available to deal with the issue. In a region that perceives itself threatened by insecurity as the Middle East, the most important role for external actors is the role of 'security provider' or in the negative view, of an 'invader'. China, as the new entrant would be automatically judged according to its perceived ability or willingness to take over at least some of these roles too, as the demands of the region are securitised by framing even non-security aspects, like the economy, in security terms.⁵⁴ The most prominent regional example for this is the 'oil for security' bargain between the US and Saudi Arabia and connected debates about 'energy security'.⁵⁵ The securitisation process engulfs all aspects of international affairs in the Middle East by connecting even the most mundane diplomatic and economic dealings to the frame of 'regime survival'.⁵⁶

Securitised roles also help stabilising hierarchies in the region.⁵⁷ For example, US military presence in the region is accepted as a 'security provider' against Iran and earlier Iraq and this in turn stabilises the power relationship between the US and regional states. This often ensures the US preferential treatment by regional states, which countries like China wouldn't get, which for example had to pay the 'Asian premium' on its oil imports until 2009, as it does not provide security to regional states.

52 Wendt, Alexander (1999): *Social theory of international politics*: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.246-313

53 Insecurity has often been perceived as the main driver of the modern Middle East, see for example Wright (2011) p.78

54 Dunn, Myriam & Mauer, Victor (2006): *Diskursanalyse: Die Entstehung der Nationalen Sicherheitsstrategie der USA*, in: Alexander Siedschlag (ed., 2006): *Methoden der sicherheitspolitischen Analyse*, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden, p.205

55 Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010)

56 Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier (2011): *Regional Powers and Security Orders: A Theoretical Framework* Routledge, London

57 Lake, David A. (2010): *Rightful rules: authority, order, and the foundations of global governance*. In: *International Studies Quarterly* 54 (3), p. 587–613

Concluding, we can say that states take on certain roles in social interaction, which means that there is no predefined outcome of this process. Having a growing economy, or other increased capabilities, does not mean that a state has to take on exactly the same role as another state in a similar situation, because of the differing hierarchisation of roles in discourses. If China's role conception, formed by its own perceived identity and capabilities, mismatches with the regional states' hierarchized expectations, its role enactment will lead to role conflict with the regional states. This conflict persists until China adjusts its own role conception, or manages to change the regional expectations, or until both match. As this process of socialisation⁵⁸ into a role forms the central assumption of this research, it will be discussed in more detail in the second Chapter.

1.4. Analytical Framework

This interactionist model leads to a multi-level, discourse-oriented, qualitative approach. While our level of analysis is the regional level, all levels, domestic, regional and global are connected in a continuous social process of discursive establishment of roles and thereby have to be analysed. This concurs with Gerd Nonnemann's framework of FPA for the Middle East, giving three levels: domestic, regional and global.⁵⁹ For Nonnemann, foreign policy is continuous omni-balancing between these levels, making it mandatory to include all three levels into a FPA.⁶⁰ One of the advantages of constructivist role theory is that it allows us to account for all of them theoretically.⁶¹

As roles emanate from historical contexts, as mentioned before, one first has to ask what roles the regional order and its history produced, to see which roles are available to outsiders in the regional order. Afterwards, the discourses on the different levels can be analysed to

58 While this study focusses on the connection between regional securitisation studies and role theory and therefore uses a simplified idea of 'socialisation', a more socialisation theory-oriented approach as undertaken in Rachel Folz's excellent study on the changing role conceptions in German and Swedish foreign policy would be a sensible addition for follow up research. The hypotheses created in this approach could be tested with a 'socialisation' theory approach to get a better understanding of mid- and long term effects of regional interaction with new entrants to an RSC on role conceptions and expectations, especially as she focusses more on the concept of the 'significant other', which is not the focus of this study. See Folz, Rachel (2013): *Deutschland, Schweden und der Wandel der Sicherheitspolitik in Europa von 1945 bis 2010 – Eine vergleichende rollentheoretische Untersuchung von Ego und (signifikantem) Alter*, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden; similar Clausen, Lena (2013): *Demokratien und Krieg – Die Rollen der Skandinavischen Staaten im Irak-Krieg*, Verlag Dr. Kovac, Hamburg

59 Nonnemann (2005) p. 6

60 Nonnemann (2005) p.3

61 Thies (2009) p.13

understand which of these roles China is attributed or chooses. For this it is important to look at the discourse from the different perspectives of the participating actors. Hubel, Kaim and Lembke⁶² suggest, that roles in an RSC should be analysed on four different levels:

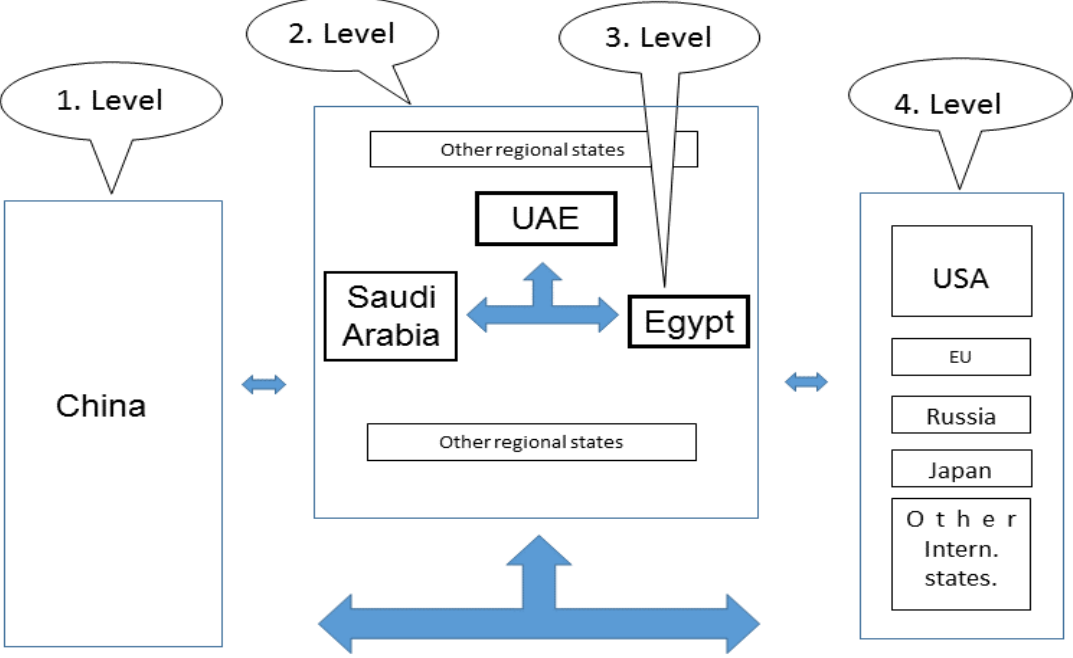


Figure 2: The Four Levels of Analysis

Level 1: The perspective of the external actor:

The domestic level of the external actor includes his identity, historical heritage, political and economic order, foreign policy orientation, the nature and interests of its regime, its military, political, technological capabilities, etc. All these aspects are viewed through the decision makers’ perceptions and self-role conception. The core interest of every regime is regime survival, with perceived domestic and international threats dominating its foreign policy decisions.⁶³

62 Hubel et al (2000), also Kaim, Markus (ed.,2008): Great Powers and Regional Orders – The United States and the Persian Golf, Ashgate, Aldershot
 63 Nonnemann (2005) p.10

Level 2: The perspective of the region:

The regional level includes not only the power structure among the regional states, but also transnational ideological issues. In the case of the Middle East, these are Islamism and Arabism, which can be both enablers and constrainters on foreign policy roles.⁶⁴ While Islamism has been a growing political force in the region over the last four decades, Arabism remains important at least as a frame for in-group perceptions and is therefore an important context in which China and its role in the region are debated on the regional level.

Level 3: The perspective of regional actors:

Regional actors must be analysed in the same categories as the external actor. To operationalise this vast field of research, three cases have been chosen for the analysis: Egypt is an important regional player, and its big population and youth unemployment mean that traditional style industrialisation through export substitution is a major debate, and that China could serve both as a competitor as well as an economic model, much more than it could for an oil producing economy. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Saudi Arabia dominates regional security debates as the most important energy exporter and as the traditional protector of the Sunni states against Iran. Finally, the UAE were chosen because they are the most important trade centre for China towards the Middle East and Africa, and they have the biggest Chinese community in the region, and sometimes pursue a different foreign policy agenda than the Saudi Kingdom.

Level 4: The perspective of other external actors:

The international level contains a range of different players from international institutions to globally and transregionally active states, including great powers, especially the US, on which the discussion of the international level will focus. While regional states might be the most powerful player in their own regional system, they have limited control over the international system, compared to the Great Powers. While Korea, Japan and to some extent India might not strictly be Great Powers, they still have transregional influence and are debated as part of the international level.

64 Nonnemann (2005) p.10-11

1.5. Methodology & Data Collection

Stephen Walker once described role theory as “conceptionally rich but methodologically poor.”⁶⁵ The traditional approach to analysing roles has been the quantitative analysis of role related references in speeches of national leaders, like US presidents. However, the increasing use of qualitative methods like discourse analysis has also affected the field of role theory. As there is a growing consensus about the discursive origin of role conceptions, discourse analysis seems to be the most appropriate analytical tool.⁶⁶

Discourse analysis in its different variants has had increasing influence in political science and international relations research over the last three decades.⁶⁷ While there are differences between critical and moderate methods of discourse analysis, the latter of which is used here, including debates about the classification of discourse analysis as purely a method or a theory in itself, all try to uncover the constitutive power of discourses through their contextuality. Therefore Reiner Keller⁶⁸ argues that any discourse analysis should include three steps:

1. Establishing a Text-Corpus:

To understand what China’s role is and thereby how roles are assigned in the relevant texts, these texts first must be identified. The term text is used in the wider sense and includes interviews as well as opinion polls. As Canter and Kaarbo criticise, role theoretical research often only focuses on elite role conceptions.⁶⁹ Another issue is that foreign policy elites are often black boxed. However, role conceptions face both vertical and horizontal challenges, meaning both on the elite-popular level as well as on the intra-elite level. Glenn Chafetz therefore was among the first to suggest the inclusion of opinion polls in the research on role conceptions to test elite opinions for their representativeness.⁷⁰ Public opinion should matter at least to the point where it restrains the government’s freedom in choosing its role. So far,

65 Walker (1987) p.2

66 Nabers, Dirk (2011): Identity and Role Change in International Politics, In: Harnisch et al (2011), p.81

67 Dunn & Mauer (2006)

68 Keller, Reiner (2004): Ansätze der Diskursforschung in: Keller, Reiner (ed., 2004) Diskursforschung – Eine Einführung für SozialwissenschaftlerInnen, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden, p.79-113; For the debate on cultural based discourse studies, namely Chinese influenced see Shi Xu (2014): Chinese Discourse Studies, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke

69 Cantir, Cristian & Kaarbo, Juliet (2012): Contested Roles and Domestic Politics: Reflections on Role Theory in Foreign Policy Analysis and IR Theory, p. 6. In: Foreign policy analysis 8 (1), p. 5–24.

70 Chafetz, Glenn, Hilel Abrahamson & Suzette Grillot (1996): Role Theory and Foreign Policy – Belorussian and Ukrainian Compliance with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Regime, in: Political Psychology 17(4): 727-757

few analytical attempts have been made in this direction, especially when it comes to include discursive variations in time.⁷¹

The chosen materials for the text corpus in this case are academic texts from China, the Middle East and the West regarding China's role in the region. The texts were chosen according to their representativeness and influence as established through the interviews. In the Chinese case they were three compendia about Arab politics and the Arab Spring published by leading research institutions as well as a number of supplementary texts that were not used in the main analysis but as references to give context. While these only existed in Chinese, a number of English translations from China's leading research journal on the Middle East, the "Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)", were used.

Nearly all Western texts used, came from academic books or scientific journals. In the Arab context, the literature on the subject was so limited, although some very insightful analysis namely by Mohammed bin Huwaidin, Nasser Tamimi, Mohammed Olimat, Abdul-Aziz Sager and Mohammed Turki al-Sudairi exists, that a stronger reliance on interviews was necessary. Additionally, a small-scale questionnaire among Emirati and Egyptian Students and an anecdotal qualitative analysis of the Saudi owned Arab daily al-Hayat and the Egyptian daily al-Masri al-Yaum in the period of 2010-2013 were undertaken. Finally, speeches from the Annual Conference of China's Association for Political Science on 9 July 2011 in Beijing and the China Arab States Cooperation Forum, 4th Arab-China Business Conference, in Sharjah on 18 January 2012 were analysed. Stakeholder interviews and opinion polls were carried out in China, the UAE, Egypt and Qatar as well as London, Berlin, New York, Washington and Istanbul, between 2011 and 2013.

2. Data Analysis:

In the analysis of the data, this research follows the suggested division into four different layers as an ordering principle in the analytical process as mentioned above.⁷² More important however was the structure given to what we can call the identification process, which broadly

71 Cantir & Kaarbo (2012) p.7-11

72 Kaim (2008) p.12

followed the structure of 'me-what-you'.⁷³ This means that the discursive act first establishes the identity of the speaker, the ego, himself. From this follows the identification of the needs of the speaker towards the person spoken about, or the alter, and finally the expectation about what the other person can do in relation to these needs. It thereby assigns both ego and the alter a role that it can play. By the time we can measure these processes, normally after the enactment of a role or the failure to do so, this statement often already includes a judgement about the alter fulfilling this role or not.

This analytical procedure is always interpretative,⁷⁴ which is why it is important that this interpretation takes place within "perspective contextuality".⁷⁵ Therefore the Arab perception of China has to be interpreted in the context of Middle Eastern politics⁷⁶. For the analysis of the different levels, interviews and media texts were analysed using Michelle Pace's assumption about the hierarchisation of relevance and stabilisation of discursive frames, and in this case role conceptions and expectations, according to the intervals of repetition in the texts.⁷⁷ Very often, China is not explicitly assigned a role, making the interpretative process more difficult as one has to identify roles through the framing elements used by authors to define a certain situation or action. Most of these texts follow the outline of first stating what the ego is and what it wants or does not want from the alter. This is normally followed by a conclusion about how the other has or has not fulfilled these demands or fears, meaning how its role enactment is perceived.

3. Reconstruction of the overall discourse:

In a last step the different perspectives in the discourses are brought together to recreate the overall discourse. To express the predominant perspective on China's role on one level, Keller's minimal contrasting method was used.⁷⁸ Material that is as similar as possible is used to argue the mainstream position on China's role in the region. Outlying opinions are also given if they

73 For a similar approach to discursive identity formation in the Mediterranean region see Pace, Michelle (2005): *The Politics of Regional Identity - Meddling with the Mediterranean*, Routledge, Abingdon

74 Keller (2004) p.72

75 Dunn (2006) p.196

76 Thereby eliminating the frequent criticism towards speech act centred approaches that they pay too little attention towards contextuality and audience, see especially Balzacq, Thierry (2010): *Constructivism and Securitization studies*, In: Dunn-Cavelty, Myriam & Victor Mauer (eds., 2010): *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*, Routledge, London; also Stritzel, Holger (2007): *Towards a theory of Securitisation – Copenhagen and beyond*, in: *European Journal of International Relations*, 2007 13:357

77 Pace (2005) p.16

78 Keller, Reiner (2004): *Ansätze der Diskursforschung*, in Keller (ed.2004), p.110; see also Dunn (2005) p.197

were interpreted as important, but marked as exceptions. Finally, the discontents of the different perspectives were shown and explained were they led to role conflict, role adaptation or learning.

The interviews were semi-structured to ensure comparability as well as to not limit the expression of perception by the interviewee. The focus of the research was on the institutions that take part in the role establishing discourses. These included political, diplomatic, academic, economic and media institutions.⁷⁹ Over 200 Interviews of varying length and insight were undertaken. Of these, only 34 interviews with Middle Eastern, 12 with Chinese and 8 with international stakeholders were used in mostly anonymised citation. The term stakeholder is used due to the globalised nature of the Gulf region. While many interviewees were foreign nationals, they were still part of the Gulf discourse on China, as government advisors, or economists. In the Gulf, it was not easy to clearly assign an interviewee to a particular discourse and the borders between the discourses were often blurred.

The lower number of interviews with international and Chinese stakeholders is due to the greater reluctance of the latter to be cited, but also due to the higher availability of published sources in both areas. Both in China and the Middle East, many interviewees wanted to remain anonymous or even uncited. Nearly all interviews in this research are therefore anonymous, to ensure source protection. Those anonymous interviews, were used to categorise the text corpus by choosing texts which most closely resembled the given opinion. This kind of non-cited interviews made up 14 of the interviews but they were among the most valuable information for this research due to their candid nature.

Interviewees were asked about their general impressions of the 'alter' according to topics relevant for the person. These ranged from energy to trade to ideational concepts like the 'New Silk Road' and political cooperation on Iran and the Arab Spring. In addition to the

79 In China scholars at the central policy think tanks are less separated institutionally from policy makers than in the West. According to Bonnie Glaser the three most important think-tanks are CICIR, CIIS and CASS of which the first two focus on foreign policy advice, while CASS is more oriented towards general research. Foreign policy research institutes of the first and second tier have greater influence than universities, but there are no truly independent think tanks in China. US- academics' ideas are often picked up by Chinese scholars and "become the focus of research and debate among Chinese analysts and, after a period of discussion, are adopted as policy". Glaser, Bonnie (2012): Chinese foreign Policy Research Institutes and the Practice of Influence, p. 91-95, p.101 in: Rozman, Gilbert (ed. 2012): China's Foreign Policy – Who Makes it, and How is it Made, Palgrave Macmillan, New York

interviews, three separate but similar questionnaires were handed out to students in Beijing, Cairo and the UAE, to establish their views on the 'alter' or 'other'.

1.6. Chapter Plan

The second chapter deals with the theoretical discussions about role and regional system. It discusses how the regional discourses influence role conceptions and expectations and how role change and adaptation can be explained. Furthermore, it will discuss how discursive practices in RSCs create roles and how they hierarchize them through securitisation processes. The third chapter will look at how the Middle Eastern RSC and the roles it incorporates, were created under the influence of British and later American hegemony. It will trace the interconnection between historical experience and the development of regional role expectations towards external powers. In a similar way, chapter four will look at how China's global role conception is influenced by its own historical experience.

Chapter five to eight then look at what kind of roles China was assigned or took on in the Middle East and how this was perceived by other actors. This analytical part will follow the four-level analytical concept outlined earlier, with every chapter being dedicated to one of these levels of perspective: Chapter five will look at China's domestic conception of its role in the region. It is important to understand how China interprets the regional system of the Middle East and what it sees as its interests in the region. This question will also have to be answered by looking at China's debates on the wars in Iraq and Syria, and the debates about Iran's nuclear programme. Chapter six explores the RSC level debates, as security issues and the adjacent roles are defined in regional discourses. To understand how the regional interactions determine China's role in the region, we have to look at how China is framed in these discussions. Chapter seven deals with the domestic debates about China in three Arab states: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. Lastly, chapter eight will look at how the international environment shapes the role China can play in the region, how its role in the region is perceived and influenced by the US, and if other Asian players like India, Korea and Japan take part in shaping China's regional role.

Following these four chapters of analysis, the concluding chapter will outline how these discourses on different levels have shaped China's role in the region and what this means for the future. We will then have to ask, what all this tells us about the question of China's possible

rise and the usefulness of role theory for developing hypotheses for future research on China's role in the Middle East.

2. Roles and Regions

“The relationship will become political, when China wants to play a political role in the region, but so far it doesn’t.”

John Sfakianakis, Economist Banque Fransi, Riyadh⁸⁰

Can a state decide by itself which role it wants to play in a certain region? Can the other regional states simply attribute a certain role to China, like ‘responsible stakeholder’; and when does a role become an identity? This chapter deals with the theoretical process of how an external state’s role in a region is formed. Regional Security Complexes (RSC) frame a regional security order and decide the roles available to its members. Role theory has subdivided the concept of role into different variables like role enactment, role expectation and role making, among others.⁸¹ As the research design looks at China’s role from multiple perspectives, it is important to first talk about the position of these variables inside the process of regional role making. Finally this chapter will talk about how to combine this framework with the methodology of discourse analysis to explore the representation of China’s role on the different levels.

2.1. Roles as Social Construct

In foreign policy, roles are a rather complex idea involving multiple processes of role creation, conception, expectation, etc. This chapter starts off with defining the term role by separating it from the related but different concept of identity. It is important to clarify the differences

80 al-Sudairi, Mohammed Turki (2012): Sino-Saudi Relations: An Economic History, GRC Gulf Papers

81 See also Thies (2010), Harnisch (2013) and Breuning (2013)

between different actors' conceptions, expectations and enactments of roles. This is followed by the question of stability of roles and what happens in the case of role conflicts and the possibility of role change. Lastly, the regional mechanisms that produce these processes will be explored.

2.1.1. Role and Identity

The term role comes as an analogy from the theatre "in which an actor is expected to behave in predictable ways according to a script."⁸² The importance of roles lies in the fact that they allow and constrain behaviour according to what is accepted for a certain role. As mentioned before, the role concept used here is moderate constructivist. Roles are not mere reflections of a state's relative power, but a state's self-assumption about it, and they thereby determine how a state uses these capabilities.

Holsti described roles as relatively stable results of socialization processes.⁸³ As a social concept they only exist in the social interaction of foreign policy actors. These processes are influenced by history, culture, and society. Within this context, actors learn certain patterns of behaviour, or roles, through experience based on social interaction.⁸⁴ This social interaction explains why role conceptions can change overtime according to their social context.⁸⁵

One of the main interests of constructivist literature is the question of a state's identity, which is often juxtaposed as the independent variable to the material capabilities highlighted in realist and liberalist literature. Roles and identity are closely interconnected, but not the same. Roles are templates, consisting of externally predefined dimensions, whereas national identities are more amorphous and deeply psychological.⁸⁶ However, identity as the self-perception of a state, influences the role it takes.

Identity formation is based on the same ego and alter dimensions as role formation: how the state views itself and how other states view it. Identity explains "why some states conform to the roles proposed by realist scholars and why other states 'break the mould,' performing

82 Aggestam (1999) p.10

83 Holsti (1970)

84 Nabers (2013) p.74

85 Aggestam, Lisbeth (2006): Role theory and European foreign policy p.22, in: The European Union's Roles in International Politics - Concepts and Analysis, p.11–29, Wolf (2011) p.195

86 Breuning (2013) p.21, see also Wendt (1999)

other roles or multiple roles simultaneously.”⁸⁷ For example, the former European great power France often describes its own foreign policy norms with terms such as greatness, rank, and glory, as well as pride, prestige, and dignity.⁸⁸ The US define themselves largely through their revolutionary heritage and view themselves as the state responsible for supporting the spread of democracy and national self-determination globally.⁸⁹

Both identities and roles are established through discourses, and while roles can be one of the sources of identities, they are “at the same time filled with meaning through identity, or identification.”⁹⁰ Neither identity nor role can be specified in a detailed enough way to predict behaviour. Actors, however, normally act out their roles in accordance with their identities, thereby also reinforcing them, while at the same time “an identity provides an actor with a standpoint or frame of reference for interpretation of the social position the role supplies the actor with.”⁹¹ This focus on identity does not mean that actors behave irrational, but that the identity of an actor defines what are perceived as legitimate interests and instruments of foreign policy.⁹²

2.1.2. Role Conceptions and Expectations

Accordingly, as identities differ, so do role conceptions. A role conception, sometimes referred to as self-role conception, is the self-understanding of an actor about his own role informed by his identity. Role expectations are what the audience, the other international actors,

87 Frazier, Derrick and David Stewart-Ingersoll (2010): Regional Powers and Security: A Framework for Understanding Order within Regional Security Complexes, in: *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 04, December 2010, p.740

88 According to Ulrich Krotz for example Germany espouses the role of a civilian power “due to its history”, while France sees itself as Residual World Power framing itself in terms of grandeur and gloire, see Krotz, Ulrich (2002): *National Role Conceptions and Foreign Policies: France and Germany Compared*, CES Germany & Europe Working Paper no. 02.4, 2002

89 After WW II the US role conception as anti-imperialist frequently clashed with French and British role conceptions of colonial power. While both states saw themselves as antagonistic to the Eastern bloc, France under de Gaulle saw itself more realpolitik oriented fighting for its own ‘gloire’, opposite to the US as ‘leader of the free world’. France staked a claim to the leadership of an emancipated Europe operating as a third force in international politics, while the United States similarly claimed an uncontested leadership role for itself in a hierarchical, two-pillared Atlantic community dedicated to the policy of containment Those same role conceptions however, implied divergent milieu goals in North Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Ulrich Krotz and James Sperling: “Discord and collaboration in Franco-American relations” (2011), in: Harnisch et al (eds., 2011) p. 215.

90 Nabers (2013) p.83

91 Nabers (2013) pp.82-3

92 Aggestam (1999) p.10-11

expects this actor to do in his role. The actual foreign policy behaviour of an actor is called role enactment (or performance) and will be discussed in the next sub-chapter.⁹³

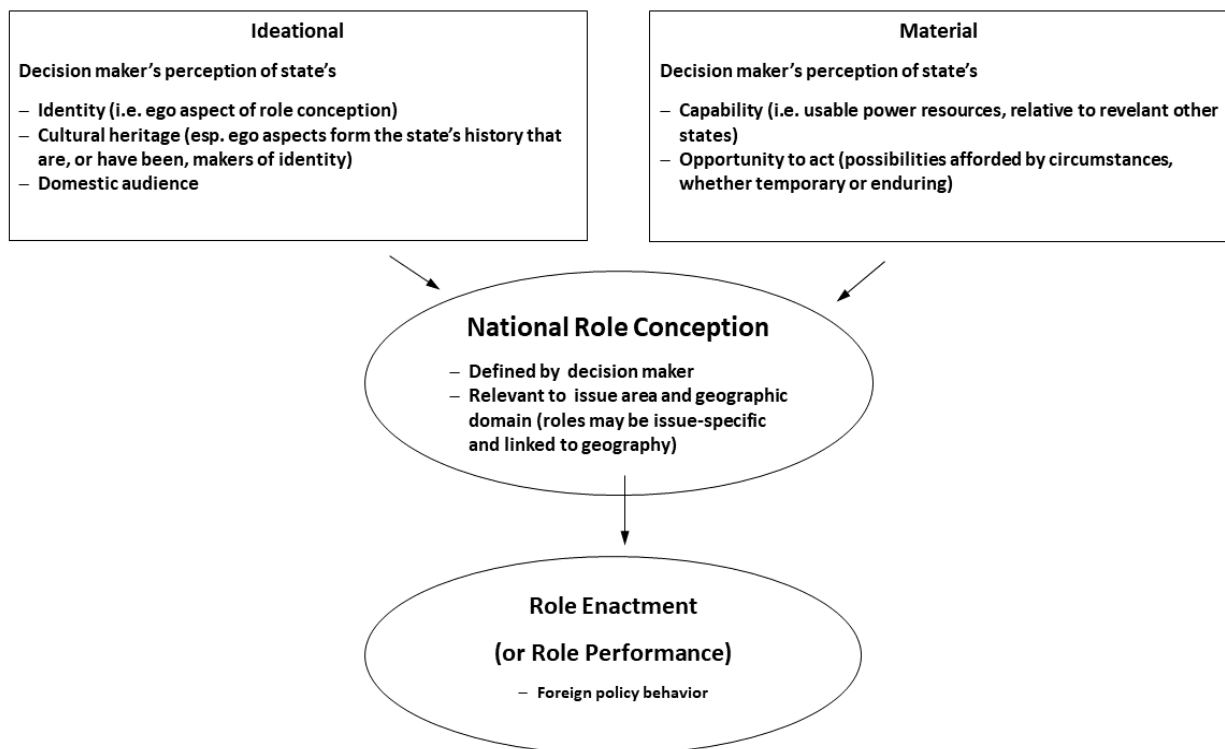


Figure 3 Role Conception and Role Enactment, after Breuning (2013)⁹⁴

Role conceptions are signalled and reinforced through language and actions. Therefore, “role conceptions are inherently contested, because roles and their enactment are closely related to the roles of other actors (counter and complimentary roles).”⁹⁵ Role theory in its constructivist version assumes that role conceptions are mostly contingent upon the ideational baggage of the decision maker and role taker and only indirectly influenced by the material structure.⁹⁶

93 Nabers (2013) p.78

94 Breuning (2013) p. 25

95 Harnisch, Sebastian; Hellmann, Gunther; Wolf, Klaus Dieter; Zürn, Michael (2003): Theoriegeleitete Außenpolitikforschung in einer Ära des Wandels, In: Die neuen Internationalen Beziehungen - Forschungsstand und Perspektiven der Internationalen Beziehungen in Deutschland, Baden-Baden, pp. 313–360. p.8; see also Stryker, Sheldon & Kevin Vryan: The symbolic interactionist Frame, in: John Delamater (ed.,2006): Handbook of Social Psychology, Springer, New York, p.227

96 Breuning (2013) p.28; similarly Maull (2013) p. 169-170: “Foreign policy role conceptions. First, they have to be specified by those in charge of foreign policy makings. Foreign policy decision makers will have to interpret the international environment and the opportunities and challenges it holds for them, and spell out second-order objectives, strategies, and instruments. Second, role conceptions are complex with regard to different social contexts

Historical analogies are extremely powerful in role conceptions. Even if they are inaccurate from a historian's point of view, political decision makers often reference them. New situations often pose difficult problems for politicians, and they try to find solutions by referring to historical precedent, or at least they try to justify their solutions by declaring them 'normal'.⁹⁷ One result of this referencing of a state's own historical identity is what we call 'bounded rationality'. The historical frames of an actor's perspective decide if he judges an action rational or irrational. If an actor considers another state's action as irrational, it simply means that he cannot understand them. They might be completely rational in the other actor's rationality. Because of bounded rationality, actors often disagree on rationalities and thereby easily misunderstand the other actor's logic and intention, for example in the classical 'Security Dilemma' concept.⁹⁸

This does not mean that states have to continuously refer to the old ways and cannot invent new roles, but it often simply costs less to justify a policy in referring to it as appropriate to the norm because of precedence from the ancestors. In addition, as Wendt has shown, states learn from their experiences.⁹⁹ In his classical text on the influence of experience on the perception of international anarchy, he argues that states that have been victimized by predator states are more likely to err on the side of caution and to interpret other states as aggressive. As described later, the actions of the imperialist powers conditioned the way Arab states interpret the international system. The historical frame of 'national humiliation' also still colours the way China interprets its international environment and the role the Chinese state plays in overcoming its colonial heritage.¹⁰⁰

Role expectations by the audience also consist of norms, beliefs and preferences concerning the performance of any individual in a social position relative to individuals occupying other positions. An individual's role behaviour must take into account the role behaviours of the

in which the U.S. government enacts its role, each with its specific patterns of interaction. Thus, there are expectations formulated both by the United States itself and by respective 'others' in relationships with allies."

97 Dunn & Mauer (2014) p. 193–221; see also Chilton, Paul (1996): *Security Metaphors*. In: *Cold War Discourse from Containment to Common House*, P. Lang, New York

98 For the Thucydides trap or the security dilemma see: Baev, Pavel *Thucydides and Security Dilemmas of Post-Soviet Conflicts: From Corcyra to Chechnya*, Paper for the Thucydides workshop, Columbia University, NY, 25-26 February 2004

99 See Wendt (1992)

100 Wang, Zheng (2012): *Never forget national humiliation: Historical memory in Chinese politics and foreign relations*, Columbia University Press, New York

occupants of other positions. Furthermore, the concept of a role is essentially inter-behavioural. It is useless to talk about a role without reference to an implicit or explicit counter-role involved in the ongoing interaction. Role expectations thus provide the conceptual bridge between the individual and the social structure.¹⁰¹ However, role expectations vary on several other dimensions and if role expectations are unclear or ambiguous behaviour is less predictable, and the likelihood of conflict rises. Therefore, role expectations often bring with them both intra-role conflicts (e.g. conflicts between ego and alter expectations), but also inter-role conflicts (e.g. conflicting roles for the same actor).¹⁰²

2.1.3. Role Location, Role Demands and Role Enactment

Role location is the first, and role enactment is the last stage of the foreign policy process. Role location refers to the interactional process whereby an individual locates himself within the social structure. The state must select a role that is appropriate to its situation. This is accomplished by locating both the position of the self/ego and other/alter. If the state makes a mistake in recognising the status of the ego or the alter, the role enactment will be inappropriate. This dimension of status refers to a position in a social structure and its associated duties, rights and legitimate power or authority. Position, or status, implicates a number of normative expectations concerning the proper role, and the enactment of that role, by the occupant: "Roles determine the difference between leaders and followers and those that provide security from those that are dependent upon others for it."¹⁰³ Locating oneself in the role system is therefore a cognitive process, as new members of the international system learn their appropriate roles in response to cues and demands from the audience of RSC

101 Thies (2009) p.9

102 For Example: Their degree of generality or specificity, their scope or extensiveness, their clarity or uncertainty, the degree of consensus among other individuals, and whether the positions are formal or not. Harnisch (2013) p.8, also Holsti (1970)

103 Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010) p.740

member states.¹⁰⁴ Role location is therefore pivotal in the socialisation process of states into a new regional system.¹⁰⁵

In this process of role location Sebastian Harnisch emphasizes the differences between 'significant' and 'generalized others'. The 'generalised other' is an abstract starting point for the actor like the so-called 'international community' or the 'nation state'. The roles that are connected to this help the new entrant to define itself and its roles by recognizing itself as "belonging to a special type (identity) or social category" (like nation state).¹⁰⁶ The 'significant other' is a real actor that influences the learning processes and role conceptions of the ego actor. This process however, should not be misunderstood as idyllic or power-free. If the alter actor is significant or not is decided by the material and social structure, by power and dependency.¹⁰⁷ For the search of China's role in a new region, this is a pivotal process, as it decides if China can find or make its own role in the Middle East in the face of the regional order defined by the other regional actors and powerful international players like the United States. In this regard, the constructivist model of the RSC, with its acceptance of both discursive variables as well as material capabilities, fully accepts the brute force of the material structure and the difference in capabilities.

How important these external structures are, depends on the domestic position of the relevant actors in a national discourse on foreign policy roles. States might sometimes be able to act towards the outside as a monolithic actor, but their internal structure obviously influences its perception of the external, in the process of role location. This limits the ability of the external context to simply assign roles to another state. "The state's survival is rarely at stake but the government's domestic standing frequently is, so it is possible that domestic-generated roles

104 There are several functions of the audience in role-enactment processes: "First, they establish the consensual reality for the role. If the audience accepts the role enactment as appropriate then they serve as confirmation of the reality of the role. Second, the audience provides cues to guide the performer's role enactment. Third, the audience engages in social reinforcement through the positive and negative sanctions associated with the role enactment. Fourth, the audience contributes to the maintenance of the role behaviour over time. The enactment of a role without major deviation through time is likely due to the fact that the audience continually observes the enactment. There are no explicit analysis of the audience in foreign policy analysis, though cues from the audience are often considered as additional information." Thies (2009) p.13

105 Thies describes this as a "socialisation game", see Thies (2012) p.21

106 Harnisch (2013) p.11

107 See Wendt (1999) p.327, also Harnisch (2011) p.11

will have greater force than roles dictated by power considerations.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, role demands place constraints on the choice of role in a particular situation. They call for a specific role enactment in a specific situation. As Thies argues, Ukraine’s choice to give up nuclear weapons after the Cold War stemmed in part from role demands associated with the great power role, which Ukraine did not believe it could enact at the end of the Cold War, thereby making nuclear weapons an unnecessary and expensive extravagance.¹⁰⁹

Connected to the concept of status is the concept of foreign policy orientation. It is an important part of a state’s identity and often has a strong influence on role location. It is commonly expressed in three different ways, but the first and often most prominent one is the question if a state is revisionist or status quo oriented. It will locate its role according to whether it accepts or rejects a particular regional or global order. Another form of orientation is the question if a state chooses to use unilateralist or multilateralist ways in dealing with foreign policy challenges. Multilateralist states often view issues in the RSC as questions of collective security and try to strengthen norms and institutions, and often pursue absolute gains. Unilateralist states on the other hand tend to opt for individualist approaches and favour relative gains. Lastly, orientation means whether states view their roles as proactive or reactive. Foreign policy orientations are often seen as stemming from the domestic political system of a state.¹¹⁰ While role enactment is always a reaction to something, some states take a proactive approach to regional order, meaning they become leaders, institution builders, etc., while others simply react to a specific and immediate crisis.¹¹¹

There are three key dimensions of role enactment: the number of roles, the effort expended upon a particular role, and the time spent in one role in comparison to other possible roles. Thies emphasises the importance of the time spent in a role, because this decides if a role is only attributed by other players, or if it is a role really lived by the actor. While all states can have multiple roles, new entrants to a certain system will “have more ascribed roles than achieved roles in their initial stages of development. [...] Since member states largely define

108 Michael Barnett (1993): “Institutions, Roles , and Disorder: The Case of the Arab States System” in: *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37 No.3 p.278

109 Thies (2009) p.13

110 See for example Wish, Naomi (1987): *National Attributes as Sources of National Role Conceptions : A capability Motivation Model*, in: Walker (1987)

111 Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010) p.746

social reality, they are able to choose roles for themselves and engage in ‘altercasting’ to impose roles on novice states. [...] A method of socialisation, in which novices are brought into an existing social system.”¹¹² As we are talking about China as a relative newcomer to the system, this will be an important focus in this research. “The enactment of a role, then, is shaped by how each actor interprets that role, not unlike how different actors will bring different interpretations to the same role in a play.”¹¹³

2.1.4. Multiple Roles, Role Conflict and Role Change

Roles ‘exist’ when they are broadly recognized and deemed essential by those who take part in the discourse. Roles change, when the performance of a role does not fit to the identity of the performer.¹¹⁴ ‘Leaders’ and ‘followers’ can change their roles according to their perception of the current hierarchy between them. As actors learn roles in certain situations, they can take on different roles at different times and places.¹¹⁵ States that are active in different regions and different situations become role-takers that are more skilled and have more roles available. They are thereby quicker in adjusting to new situations that demand a role change.¹¹⁶ While having multiple roles in different situations poses no principal problem, a state that finds itself concurrently in two or more positions requiring contradictory role enactments may get into an inter-role conflict.

“The recognition that states are embedded in myriad institutions that distribute different roles and behavioural expectations, suggests that the state might occasionally be called upon to enact contradictory roles. Specifically, it is possible that the state’s actions that are consistent with the role requirements of and are stabilizing in one institution, might be inconsistent with and destabilizing in those of another.”¹¹⁷

So far, there is little account for role change in the literature.¹¹⁸ Barnett illustrates that conflict in the Middle Eastern subsystem prior to 1967 was often due to the incompatibility of the two dominant roles (sovereign state and pan-Arabism) put upon those states. He argues that over time states like Egypt were able to reinterpret the meaning of the role derived from pan-

112 Thies (2009) p.8

113 Barnett (1995) p.12

114 Nabers (2011) p.84

115 Nabers (2011) p.88

116 “A skilled role-taker with multiple roles in her role-set has a better chance than the novice role-taker with few roles in its role-set in enduring the effects of novel and critical situations.” Thies (2009) p.4

117 Barnett (1995) p.12

118 Canter & Kaarbo (2012) p.11

Arabism from interstate cooperation (under King Faisal) to political unification (under Nasser) to realpolitik oriented national interest (under Sadat).¹¹⁹

A similar process takes place when a new state enters a region with its own role conception, derived from its identity, and is confronted with the regional role expectations for it, which derive from the regional discourses. The more globally a state acts, the more RSCs it is active in, the more complicated becomes the balancing of role conceptions and different regional expectations. Role location in this regard is easiest for regional states and more difficult for external states, but obviously becomes easier with the transregional experience these states gain. In this regard, Michael Barnett argues that the expectations of the regional audience can still be both a strong limitation on the choice of an actor and a frequent source of conflict:

“Role conflict exists when there are contradictory expectations that attach to some position in a social relationship. Such expectations may call for incompatible performances; they may require that one hold two norms or values which logically call for opposing behaviours; or they may demand that one role necessitates the expenditure of time and energy such that it is difficult or impossible to carry out the obligations of another role. [...] Role conflict may be produced whenever the actor exists in two different institutions that simultaneously demand that it express contradictory behaviour.”¹²⁰

The result of such a role conflict can often be role change, which can happen either through adaptation or learning and applies both to the expectation, conception and enactment of roles. Adaptation is a simple change in the use of strategies and instruments in performing a role. The role itself remains fixed but it is simply enacted or defined in a slightly different way. Role making as foreign policy-learning¹²¹ however means a change in identity of the role actor through a change in beliefs or preferences.¹²²

As mentioned before, role conceptions develop under multiple influences, with the domestic audience and the international community being the two primary ones. If role conceptions are to change, they have to resonate with these different levels. The Chinese government cannot just change the idea of the Chinese state in the international system but will have to make it

119 Barnett (1993) p. 289

120 Barnett (1993) p.276

121 Harnisch (2012) p.49

122 Harnisch (2011) p.10-11

acceptable to both the Chinese domestic audience and the international community.¹²³ Therefore, role change is very complex and costly for decision makers. If they undertake it, they will need good reasons. Breuning names three main reasons for change, namely a change of strategic leadership on the domestic level, a national or international crisis and a strong shift in the external structural environment. Only these conditions pose strong enough incentives to overcome the costs of inventing new roles or adapting existing ones.¹²⁴ Of course, this change can vary from a minor adjustment in foreign policy to an overall change in the orientation of the state's foreign policy. However, even a full-scale change in the orientation of a state's foreign policy does not automatically indicate or cause a role change, as it could also merely be a change in the international structure that has caused this change of orientation.^{But} if roles are patterns of behaviour built on discourses, where do these discourses take place, who are the actors and how can we identify them?

2.2. Regions as Security Complexes

The RSC as an analytical framework shows how certain members influence the security debates and thereby the role taking of other members.

“This high level of interdependence, the shared process of constructing security concerns and methods for dealing with them amongst member states, points towards a functioning system that can be systematically identified. The lack of such a reasonable claim about most states at the global level points toward the relevance of RSCs as a proper level of focus.”¹²⁵

According to Buzan and Wæver an RSC is “a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, de-securitisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot possibly be analysed or resolved apart from one another.”¹²⁶ Identities inside this RSC are stabilised by long term factors such as long standing friendships, enmities or ideas of a civilisational community. The Middle East, for example, is deeply affected by conflicts induced by identity like the Shia-Sunni divide or the rivalry between Arabs, Turks, Kurds and Persians. At the same time Islamic religion and the heritage of the ‘golden age’ of Islamic culture in the

123 The reluctance to change Germany's rather pacifist domestic role conception in accordance with international demands of stronger security responsibilities, meaning a stronger military role, which is advocated especially by European and American partners, is a case in point here, see Harnisch & Maull (2001)

124 Breuning (2013) p.30.

125 Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010) p.733

126 Buzan and Wæver (2003) p.201

8th and 9th century as well as the experience of colonialism form a strong element in how the region thinks about itself and outsiders:

“The RSC constitutes a social reality, which is more than the sum of its parts, and thus it is able to intervene between intentions and outcomes. Although the RSC does not exist independently of the states and their vulnerabilities, the outcome of their interactions would be different if it were not for the existence of the RSC. It is not a root cause in itself but a structure that modifies and mediates the action and interaction of units.”¹²⁷

RSCs are durable because as informal institutions they “generate their stabilising properties once actors consistently adopt a particular role conception and modify their behaviour according to each other’s roles, behaviours, and expectations.” Thereby RSCs also act as incubators for new roles as according to Barnett, “roles are never created in a vacuum but are formed in relation to others, it is in the process of interacting and participating within an institutional context that the actor comes to occupy a role.”¹²⁸ RSCs create order and the possibility of cooperation among their members “by encouraging them to adopt a particular role conception and to modify their behaviour according to each other’s roles, behaviours, and expectations.” This can have lasting effects, as once “state actors adopt a particular role they limit their behaviour in a continuous and predictable manner that harmonizes mutual expectations and increases system stability.”¹²⁹

2.2.1. Regions as Distinct Entities in Globalisation

Regions, as a sub-system of the global system, only developed with the beginning of modern globalisation. Therefore, the idea of the region is closely connected to the colonial project from the early 16th century onwards. Before the region, different worlds, like the ‘Chinese world’ (Tianxia or All under Heaven) and the ‘Muslim world’ (Dar as-Salam or House of Peace) existed, which had their own rules and roles and varying degrees of interconnectivity with their neighbours.¹³⁰ In the 16th century a new period of globalisation through Western colonialism started. Large parts of the world were divided into ever tightening colonial empires. This process started with the thin permeation of the globe through the Portuguese and Spanish empires and found its climax with the deep permeation of 19th century high-imperialism,

127 Buzan and Wæver (2003) pp.50-51

128 Michael Barnett: “Institutions, Roles and Disorder: The Case of the Arab States System” pp.275-276; In: *International Studies Quarterly* (1993) pp.271-296

129 Barnett (1995) pp.14-15

130 For the discussion see Wohlforth, William et al. (2007): Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History, in: *European Journal of International Relations* 13 (2), pp.155–185

which covered the world with a net of military outposts, railways, schools and hospitals. In this last period, regional development was subordinated to global, or more precisely intra-European struggles. The fate of the Ottoman Empire or the kingdoms of the Niger were often decided not between local potentates, but by the power-plays between Paris, Berlin and London.

In this period the first globally integrated system developed and the European-style sovereign and territorial 'nation state' acquired a monopoly on the legitimate form of government, thereby laying the foundation that RSCs are built on. According to Buzan and Wæver, "states become the principal players on the security game board and, as the international system reaches global scale, room is created in which distinct regional security subsystems can emerge."¹³¹ This domination by Western powers brought Western ideas about statehood with it and led to decolonisation struggles dominated by both particularistic ideas of 'nationhood' and 'third world solidarity'. After the end of WWII, the weakened European empires gave birth to dozens of new nation states in Asia and Africa. Very quickly after their birth, and often even before that, these newly independent actors created regional subsystems with their own security dynamics. At the same time however, a new global overlay of superpower domination in the form of the bipolar system of the Cold War emerged.¹³²

Decolonization changed the balance between the European states and the states of other regions from the strong hierarchy of empire into the (theoretical) sovereign equality of nation states. This was most prominently symbolised in the one state - one vote system of the United Nations General Assembly. It is therefore fair to say, that the remaking of the world in the European image was not so much a product of colonisation, than a product of the process of de-colonisation. This Europeanisation of the world included two seemingly contradictory tendencies: exclusion and inclusion. While on the one hand sovereignty allowed a polity to separate itself from the outside world, there was also a strong drive to be "part of it" and be accepted by the international community. This meant that many non-European states had to sign up to 'standards of civilization',¹³³ from 'international law' to 'free trade'. These

131 Buzan and Wæver (2003) p.14

132 Barnett (1995) p.10

133 Cambell, John (2015): The Standard of 'Civilization' in International Society, In: Foreign Affairs, 4 Februar 2015

institutions not only regulated the roles available to civilised states, thereby making the sovereignty they established meaningless, but they also turned these states into agents of an assault on their own populations' cultural identity. As Buzan and Wæver put it: "The liberal core is actively hostile to rival modes of development."¹³⁴

2.2.2. States, Regional Structure and the Regional Order

Regional security orders are according to Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll "patterns of management that can provide a modicum of security" [...] "Such patterns shape both the roles that regional powers play as well as their orientations in doing so."¹³⁵ The basis of this order are generally sovereign states.

The modern Middle Eastern state did not exist prior to the regional order, indeed, the state and the regional order are mutually constitutive institutions often with inherent conflicts. According to Barnett, "the emergence of regional order in the Arab world was a consequence of the consolidation of state sovereignty and a changed meaning of Arab nationalism."¹³⁶ This consolidation of a state can happen because of both material as well as psychological reasons. States often become united through fear of an external threat, or the perception thereof. But states can also forge their own cohesiveness through material advantages in political economy like the ability of states to monopolise material incentives through state driven development policies.¹³⁷

RSCs as informal institutions are not formed consciously, but subconsciously through social interaction between states. This in itself is nothing remarkable, as most institutions are not a product of conscious design, but rather of routine behaviour, which creates identities, roles, and order simply by creating expectations towards the other members, or as Barnett puts it:

"It is in the process of interacting and participating within an institutional context that the actor comes to occupy a role. Institutions, then, are important socializing agents in that they comprise the social context in which norms and values are transferred from one actor to another and new identities and beliefs are formed. They encourage actors to occupy particular roles and modify their behaviour accordingly. To be sure, actors will obey a particular order for reasons other than feelings

134 Buzan and Wæver (2003) p.25

135 Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010) p.736

136 Barnett (1995) p.10

137 Barnett (1995) p.22-23

of justice or an inherent belief in the norms involved, and this simply recognizes that order is produced in part by norms and in part by coercion.”¹³⁸

This coercion happens through structure, which is here defined as the distribution of material capabilities necessary to affect security. These capabilities can include military, political, economic, or cultural means. The structure of a region thereby influences the way roles are chosen. It is only with these relative material capabilities that according to Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll an external player is “capable of consistently playing regional power roles across a range of security issues. Effective provision of leadership, custodianship, or protection requires certain capabilities.”¹³⁹

While the material structure is the necessary foundation of a regional order, questions of norms and thereby identity also play a pivotal part. How useful these aforementioned relative material capabilities are, depends on the ‘social’ regional order, as the behaviour of a state towards another is dependent on its own capabilities, needs and offers of the relevant region. Therefore, the structural analysis focussing on material capabilities can only be the first step towards understanding how states behave towards each other as Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll emphasise:

“In contrast to a neorealist perspective, accounting for the distribution of power alone does not effectively complete our task. The possession of such capabilities is not a sufficient condition for determining if a state will behave as a regional power; nor is the state that does so necessarily the one with the largest capabilities. While standard measures of capability can be employed to assess a state’s relative strength, they fall short of uncovering the more complex nature of influences that regional powers exert upon RSC members.”¹⁴⁰

While it is important to keep the global and the regional level separate, some states can be active on both levels, and great power intervention might even be responsible for many cases of the development of regional order.¹⁴¹ External great powers have strongly influenced the formation of the region, and the Middle East is often understood as a subordinated system, strongly affected by great power competition; this however should not be exaggerated by claiming a purely external origin of the RSC.¹⁴²

138 Barnett (1995) p.18 (See also chapter 2.1.3)

139 Frazier & Stewart-Ingersoll (2010) p.736

140 Frazier & Stewart-Ingersoll (2010) p.740

141 Buzan & Wæver (2003) p.14

142 Barnett (1993) p.280

2.3. Securitisation and the Discursive Making of Regional Roles

In an RSC, 'security' does not only refer to traditional ideas of security, like military issues. It also does not necessarily only refer to the security of the state as the only referent object; but can also include other collectives like the ruling families, religious communities, etc. Which define their "survival as threatened in terms of identity".¹⁴³ An issue is defined as 'threatening survival' by the securitising actor of the relevant object. It is therefore not important if this security threat 'really' exists, but that the audience perceives it as real. According to Buzan and Wæver, "the very act of labelling something a 'security issue', or 'threat' transforms the issue and is therefore in the political process of securitisation that distinct security dynamics originate."¹⁴⁴ Myriam Dunn calls this "distributed security."¹⁴⁵

Who then are the actors who have influence on the securitisation processes? Great powers can project their security interests beyond the RSC level while small powers have to be content with their own neighbourhood. "Possession of great power thus tends to override the regional imperative and small power to reinforce it."¹⁴⁶ Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll even claim that

"[m]ost prominent are the influences that occur through the behaviour of extra-regional great powers. [...], they can influence regional structure in ways that alter the distribution of capabilities (for example, USSR military aid to Nasser's Egypt in 1955-72). [They] can influence the behaviour of regional powers in ways that could encourage, deter, or reverse their actions [, or, they] can directly alter the security order itself (for example, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003)."¹⁴⁷

It is obvious that this ability will be much more difficult to gain for a newcomer than for a longstanding regional player.

Barnett notes the dichotomy between the Arab view of Arab politics as a game of solidarity and the scholarly assumption that Arab politics mostly happens along realist lines. He counterposts this view, which focuses on the 'survival strategies' of Arab leaders with Hourani's assertion that Arab politics has to be seen as expressing "a dialectic of unity and variety".¹⁴⁸ This questions the assumption that leaders are mechanically forced to take part in cycles of power struggles, simply because of the uncertainty caused by anarchy. Barnett therefore

143 Buzan and Wæver (2003) p.70

144 Buzan and Wæver (2003) p.71

145 Dunn & Mauer (2006) p.161

146 Buzan and Wæver (2003) p.46-47

147 Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010) p.732

148 Barnett, Michael (1998): Dialogues in Arab politics. Negotiations in Regional Order, Columbia University Press, New York p. VII

attempts to bridge the gap between the empirical different world views by using a constructivist via media. "Any effort to narrow this difference must recognize that Arab politics has a social foundation that is culturally distinctive yet theoretically recognizable."¹⁴⁹ The reasons for the different standpoints underlying these debates can be both questions of principles and interests of the states. Arab leaders have tried to integrate their own interests by using 'symbolic technologies', thereby trying to control the foreign policies of their rivals by subjugating them to a certain interpretation of Arabism as a guiding principle of how Arab politics should be done.¹⁵⁰ A change in the contents of discourse means nothing less than a change in the underlying structure. Hence tracing these contents can tell you a lot about the dynamics, which have driven these transformations in the state system.

One of the weak points of securitisation theory is the over-reliance on textual sources, and the neglect of the audience. This renders it often unable to measure the "impact of context on securitisation."¹⁵¹ However, exactly the complex effects of the RSC as a role making institution is of prime importance and is therefore moving away from a one-dimensional textual analysis to a complex model of analysis. This gives us the chance to look at the role making interaction process between the different levels of perspective and allows to better integrate the social context, especially as in this case the perspective of the audience can make-up for the perceived lack of impact analysis in securitisation studies.

The ability to influence discourses is often based on very material capabilities. Securitisation studies predominantly examine how security problems emerge, evolve, and dissolve and argues that language is constitutive of that very social reality. An issue 'shows itself' as a security problem through the discursive politics of 'security'.

"Securitisation is a pragmatic act or sustained argumentative practice aimed at convincing a target audience to accept, based on what it knows about the world, the claim that a specific development is threatening enough to deserve an immediate policy to curb it."¹⁵²

The idea behind securitisation is that issues or actors are framed in the terms of security thereby creating a hierarchy of issues.¹⁵³ Securitisation has happened, whenever the

149 Barnett (1998) p. VIII

150 See chapter 3

151 Balzacq (2010) p.62

152 Balzacq (2010) p.60

153 Dunn & Mauer (2006) p.200

overriding importance of something declared as relevant to security is accepted by the involved parties. For a new entrant into a regional system this can be beneficial or not. On the one side, being seen as a security issue can be negative if one is seen as a threat, but it could also be beneficial if one is seen as fitting into certain security needs. Of course, this benefit would only arise if a state is willing to fulfil this expectation towards its role. The new entry will be designated as a 'security provider' or a 'threat' for example, and the question would be if the new entrant is willing to live up to this role. This means that we have to look at the way in which China or its role in the Middle East are securitised in regional discourses. At the same time, we should look at how China itself pronounces its role in the region and if this is a securitising or de-securitising approach.¹⁵⁴ This means that we must see if China's role is used in a security relevant manner. For this, the security related-frame has to be identified to support or prevent this securitisation process.¹⁵⁵

Frames are the structures or categories that actors use when recognising reality and which have been present in the actors' mind beforehand. They use them to make sense of certain actions, which in our case means they interpret the actions of another actor according to a role they recognise.¹⁵⁶ Framing can involve the discussion of the problem, in our case the needs of a state, or the framing of the needs that the region plans to fulfil (diagnostic framing). The conclusion about how this problem can be solved by a certain actor (prognostics framing) and the reasoning why a different actor should act in a certain way or is forced to act in a certain way (motivational framing).¹⁵⁷ The resonance of these frames depends on the contents of the rhetorically activated belief systems. In Europe for example, the interaction with or even intervention in the political systems of other European member-states by European institutions is widely accepted and even expected by the roles that are assigned to the member states or institutions. Underling this is the belief system in Europe that the breaking of sovereignty is under certain defined circumstances necessary and beneficial. In many Asian states however, absolute sovereignty is deeply ingrained in the belief systems. They will hence

154 Buzan, Wæver & Wilde (1998) p.32

155 Dunn & Mauer (2014) p.202

156 Eriksson, Johan; Noreen, Erik (2002): *Setting the Agenda of Threats: An Explanatory Model*: Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Uppsala

157 Dunn & Mauer (2014) p.203; For the practice of framing states as 'rogue states' as part of international security policy and the associated roles see for example Wagner, Wolfgang, Wouter Werner & Michael Onderco (eds., 2014): *Deviance in Internationale Relations – 'Rogue States' and International Security*, Palgrave, Basingstoke; especially Malici, Akan & Stephen Walker (2014): *Role Theory and 'Rogue State'*, in: *ibid.*

see outside interference, such as criticism of their human rights situation, as illegitimate. Therefore, the role of an 'interventionist' is interpreted as colonialist and negative.

2.4. Conclusion: Regional Roles

Constructivist role theory can help us understand the socialisation processes of role location and attribution, enactment and role change through the two variables of role conception and role expectation. States take on certain roles in social interaction, which means there is no predefined outcome of this process, and while historical frames and narratives structure roles, roles are not inflexible or strictly predefined. Having a growing economy, or otherwise increased capabilities, does not mean that a state has to take on exactly the same role as another state in a similar situation, because of the differing hierarchisation of roles in discourses. To understand China's evolving role in the Middle Eastern region, we therefore have to analyse the discourses taking place on the different levels of the RSC. Stemming from the diverse location of the different discourses, different regional historical experiences shape the discourses in very different ways through historical narratives and the differing use of frames which is conditioned by these major narratives.

Accordingly, because of these regionally different narratives, ideal type roles are too imprecise and we therefore have to first outline the different roles used in different regions in different prioritisation patterns through the methodology of discourse-analysis. While discourse analysis does not provide us with a strong enough explanatory structure to predict outcomes, it still allows us to form a hypothesis to test for improving our understanding of these processes: If China's role conception, formed by its own perceived identity and capabilities, mismatches with the regional states' expectations, its role enactment will lead to role conflict with the regional states. This conflict persists until China adjusts its own role conception or manages to change the regional expectations until both match. Whether the audience of other actors in the Middle East greets China's role enactment with approval depends on the congruence of China's role conception and regional expectations. To understand these discourses, we first have to understand their historical conceptuality both in the Middle Eastern region and in China.

3. The Long Shadow of History - The Middle East and its Roles

“You know that a hundred years ago there was constant trouble and fighting in the Gulf; almost every man was a marauder or a pirate; [...] and security of trade or peace there was none. Then it was that the British Government intervened. [...] In the event of aggressions on any one by sea, the injured parties should not retaliate, but should refer the matter to the British Resident in the Persian Gulf; [and] the British Government should watch over the peace of the Gulf [...].”¹⁵⁸

Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, 1903

One can only understand a social institution like a regional system through its historical roots.¹⁵⁹ For the Middle East, this is a history of external powers shaping the region, and as we will see, historical references and cultural traditions play as important a role in modern day Middle Eastern discourses as in other regions, if not more. The Middle East is a result of Western intervention and today’s regional system was born when the Western colonial system started to extend over the globe. This might sound like a paradox, when the Middle East has been the origin of two ancient world civilizations and one of the focal points of global trade routes, long before the first Europeans could speak of themselves as ‘civilised’. However, due to the strong influence of colonial ideas like ‘nation state’ and ‘international security’, modern day regional discourses are embedded in a context of frames that started to influence the region in the period after the arrival of the colonial powers in the form of the Portuguese in the early 16th century.

158 Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India in a policy speech to assembled Sheikhs from the Trucial States on board the RIMS Argonaut off the coast of Sharjah in 1903, see Macris, Jeffrey R. (2010): The politics and security of the Gulf: Anglo-American Hegemony and the Shaping of a Region, Routledge, New York, p.16

159 Wright (2011)

This Eurocentric view on the region's history is justified, if only by the name of the region itself: The term 'Middle East' is a colonial invention, which appears for the first time in 1902 in a description of British military strategy in the Gulf, outlining the increasing Russian and German threats to British possessions.¹⁶⁰ This geographical frame defined the region by being in-between Europe and the European possessions of the 'Far East', namely India. In a clear sign of perceived decline of the once famed 'Orient', it was now in European eyes just something in-between. The importance of the term lies not in the fact that it seems to be just another sign of European imperial arrogance, but in the fact that over time this framing of the region as part of imperial strategy became so salient. Over time, the regional population itself started to identify with this Eurocentric description of its home as the Middle East (Arabic: ash-Sharq al-Awsat). Western discursive hegemony was so strong that the assigned role of being a staging off point for the British Empire became identity over time.

The need to find a new description for the region was a telling sign for the momentous changes in the regional structure after the disintegration of the Ottoman and Persian empires. The name change symbolically eradicated these empires giving way to the new geographical descriptions of states demarcated by the mandatory powers after the end of the First World War. The cartography of the region has been continuously re-imagined over the last two centuries giving new roles to new and old political entities. This did not go unnoticed, and anti-colonial politicians like Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru tried to resist Western discursive power by framing the region as "West-Asia" instead.¹⁶¹

The new regional identity cannot overshadow the fact that the really powerful actors, those that assigned these names, were others, which conceptualised their roles in ways that came close to divine creator status. According to Macris,

"no state has shaped the modern history of the Gulf more than Great Britain and the United States: Sometimes working together, sometimes at odds with one another, and sometimes simply indifferent, leaders of these two Western superpowers have drawn borders in the region, determined issues of war and peace, kept commerce moving and oil flowing, and chosen which leaders will rule. They have bequeathed a language of diplomacy and commerce. Their militaries have maintained order there, kept out other great powers, and prevented perpetually squabbling

160 Schwedler, Jillian & Deborah Gerner (2008): *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, p.13

161 Abhyankar, Rajendra (2008): *West Asia and the Region: Defining India's Role*, Academic Foundation, New Delhi, p.28

parties form making war on each other. In their absence—from 1971 to 1991—turmoil beset the Gulf.”¹⁶²

How did European powers get into this hegemonial position where they could assign roles and even identities? British might was obviously built on its material power, the cotton mills and cannon boats, but also on its ability to frame the world in a way that legitimised its own role in it as the guardian of peaceful trade that had the power to reorder the regional structure as it saw fit. The unintended result of this was the hardening of boundaries and the equal growth of identities around the colonial state creations in the region.¹⁶³

In the European narrative, development of a nation state meant that old entities with some kind of identity were moulded by military competition and war into bureaucratic, national, and finally democratic states. In the Middle East only Iran, Egypt and Turkey had some pre-existing state-identity. Until today, the global success of the European concept of ‘nation state’, is built on its economic and bureaucratic strength, but also on the fact that Europeans succeeded in inventing its ‘tradition’ and ‘normal-ness’. From this point on, Middle Eastern societies had to justify their ‘backwardness’ measured against those ‘normal’ states. This in turn justified the role of the ‘moderniser’, be it the domestic reformer or the external ‘benign’ interventionist.

For most Arabs, however the process of identification with a nation state was hampered by the lack of historical precedence and rival identities of Islam and Arab-ness. This made identity driven legitimisation of the state even more difficult. According to Buzan and Wæver the creation of these states was only made possible by “the presence of a strong international society which supports postcolonial states with a system of juridical sovereignty, and enables regimes, and even non-state actors, to finance military power by direct control of internationally marketable resources, especially oil.”¹⁶⁴ Thereby, international society created the oil exporting rentier state that seems so typical for the Arabian Gulf today. Under the European model “the state needed to raise revenue by taxing its population, which gave it an interest in economic development and required it to develop ways of relating to its population in a long-term and stable manner.”¹⁶⁵ The weak states that arose in the Middle East however were heavily reliant on international rent distribution, either through oil or political rents, to

162 Macris (2008) p.9

163 Schwedler & Gerner (2008) p.17

164 Buzan and Wæver (2003) p.185-186

165 Buzan and Wæver (2003) p.185

finance their military and bureaucratic expenditures. Hence, they had little incentive to build democratic or at least inclusive societies.¹⁶⁶

This process did not begin with the arrival of the first European ships in the Gulf in the late 15th century. Ottomans and Persians quickly swallowed up the Portuguese outposts in the Gulf and until the late 18th century the region remained dominated by these two empires.¹⁶⁷ Egypt was characterised by the continuous struggle between the Ottoman central government in Istanbul and the local rulers in Cairo. In the Gulf, there was a struggle between Shia Persia and the Sunni Ottomans. Most prominent among the local dynasties of the southern Gulf-shore was from the early 18th century onwards the family of al-Saud from the Hejaz. The British only arrived in the Gulf with the establishment of a British East India Company residency in Jask in 1763.¹⁶⁸

In this new era of global trade, the Middle East had become a backwater and the major colonial powers were more interested in the riches of the Americas and Asia. This only changed in 1798 with the arrival of a French expeditionary corps in Egypt under the young general Bonaparte. Bonaparte was interested in Egypt less for itself, but more for its strategic value as an access to the British colonies in India. He thereby securitized the Middle East. Perhaps we should say re-securitized the Middle East, as for centuries Europeans had framed the Muslim world as a threat, from the arrival of Islam in the 7th century up to the wars with the Ottoman-Turks in the early 18th century. In the later 18th century however, the region south and east of the Balkans played little part in European security discourses. All this changed with the arrival of Bonaparte. Although Britain quickly defeated his armies, it now became clear that strategic planners in Paris and London had to place a major emphasis on security in the Middle East.

Overall, the development of the region into an RSC from this point on can be divided into three broad stages. The first stage from 1800 to the end of the Second World War was dominated by the integration of the region into the Western colonial system and the creation of modern Middle Eastern nation states with their overlying regional system. The second stage from 1945

166 Milton Edwards (2011) p.93-98

167 For the early colonial endeavours of Europeans in the Gulf see: Cunha, Teles (2009) : The Portuguese Presence in the Persian Gulf; also Floor, Willem (2009): Dutch Relations with the Persian Gulf; in: Lawrence Potter (ed., 2009): The Persian Gulf in History, Palgrave Macmillan, New York

168 For a more detailed account of the reign of Britain, and British-India, in the Gulf see Onley, James (2009): Britain and the Gulf Sheikdoms, 1820-1971: The politics of protection: Centre for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar.

until 1991 was the time when the global level, the Cold War, heavily influenced the development of the regional level and the regional level with its discourses on identity heavily affected the development of the new nation states on the domestic level. Finally, the third stage was the post-Cold War period, when the discourse turned from the rivalry of global superpowers to the frames of 'Globalisation', the 'War on Terror', but also the talk of 'regional development', 'integration' and 'cultural identity'.

3.1. Order out of Chaos? British Hegemony creates the Middle East

The region can be divided into two regional sub-complexes: the Eastern Mediterranean including Egypt on the one hand, and the Gulf on the other. While both had been interconnected for centuries as part of the Arab/Islamic civilisation, the advantages of sea compared to land travel led to Egypt being more part of a Mediterranean World while the Gulf was more part of the Indian World.¹⁶⁹ Therefore, their interaction with the West was different and the roles that this interaction created were also different.

3.1.1. Modernisers, Colonisers and the Creation of Modern Egypt

Besides the securitisation of the region, Bonaparte's expedition had another major effect: Muhammad Ali Pascha, a young Turkish mercenary understood that the Ottoman system was outdated and could be easily defeated with Western military technology. He also understood that deeper reform was necessary for sustaining his new state.¹⁷⁰ He was quick to take power in Egypt and to start building a modern style army, bureaucracy and economy. With these capabilities he defeated the Ottoman armies multiple times and marched into Syria twice. He saw himself not as an Egyptian leader, but as a traditional empire builder in the wider region, as other Egyptian dynasties like the Fatimids and Mamluks had previously done. However, times had changed and due to the securitisation of the region in the European discourse, the European powers now took a strong interest in the regional balance of power. This interest certainly did not include a rejuvenated Muslim empire. The ensuing European interventions in 1833 and 1840 supported the Ottomans and stopped Muhammad Ali Pascha's advance.

169 Buzan and Wæver (2003) p.188

170 Sayyid-Marsot, Afaf Lutfi (2007): A history of Egypt. From the Arab Conquest to the Present, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp.54-82

Inadvertently, by confining Muhammad Ali Pascha in his role as the leader of Egypt, European powers helped to create the modern Egyptian nation state.¹⁷¹

From now on Egyptian leaders would focus on the modernisation of their own nation, with the only exception of the conquest of the Sudan for the plunder of slaves and ivory. By the time of Mohamed Ali's French trained grandson Ismail, Western discursive hegemony had become so dominant, that Western style modernization seemed to be the only legitimate form of rule. Thus, in 1875 Egypt followed Japan as only the second non-Western country to introduce the Gregorian calendar.¹⁷² This was no minor event. Introducing "Western models of celebrations" like national day, New Year, etc. was seen as a potent way of producing a nation state identity.¹⁷³ Ismail took this modernization drive to an ever-higher level of outright Europeanisation of Egypt, and one day famously declared: "Today Egypt is not a country in Africa anymore, but a country of Europe."¹⁷⁴ This discursive power of Europe, however, also had a very material side. Egypt became more and more indebted to Western banks, which increasingly took control of the Egyptian financial system. When Egyptian nationalists tried to rebel against what they perceived as a sell-out of national riches in 1882, Alexandria was bombarded and Egypt became a virtual British colony and remained so for the next 70 years.¹⁷⁵

Egyptian rulers now played the role of British 'clients', legitimising the rule of British officials inside the Egyptian bureaucracy. The narrative that legitimised Britain's presence was not only the restructuring of Egypt's debts, but also the modernisation of Egypt. Britain took the role of 'moderniser' and attributed the Egyptian authorities the role of 'implementer and enforcer. However, this external attribution of roles quickly came into conflict with the perception of Egypt's public.¹⁷⁶ One of the paradoxes of liberal imperialism, was the dual role that it assigned to the imperialist power. On the one side was the unscrupulous pursuit of national interest through the plunder of the colonies, while at the same time there was a strong humanist and modernising element, which often served to legitimise colonialism and imperialism in the eyes of the liberal British public. While colonial ideas always had obvious racist elements, the

171 Peretz, Don (1994): *The Middle East today*, Praeger, Westport, p.86

172 Podeh, Elie (2011): *The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East*: Cambridge University Press, p.75

173 Podeh (2011) p.75, For the attempt to create the identity of sovereignty through celebrations by both British and Egyptian officials see *ibid.* p.58-59

174 Cleveland, William (2004): *A History of the Modern Middle East*, Westview Press, Boulder, p.95

175 Sayyid-Marsot (2007) p.54-107

176 *Ibid.*

superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race was connected with humanist aspirations, giving 'rationalist' Britain the role of 'educator' of other 'irrational' races. On the ground, the implementation of this modernising project often fell victim to the needs of financing the empire, but schools, hospitals and transportation infrastructure still brought new ideas to the colonies.¹⁷⁷

Especially the armies, often trained by European instructors, became an instrument of modernisation. They formed new cells of politically aware, educated citizens who strongly believed in those ideological frames that the British had brought: The backwardness of their country, the superiority of Western technologies, sciences and social ideas and most importantly the role of the nation state as the only tool to achieve modernisation and independence. These new 'nationalists' quickly grew disappointed by the role and performance of Britain and other imperialist powers, as they could not fulfil the demands of their self-assigned role of 'moderniser'. The nationalists thereby quickly assigned the new role of 'imperialist' to Britain. As a counter-role, the nationalist leaders styled themselves as the 'avant-garde' that would lift their country out of the darkness of the past and break the chains of imperialism.¹⁷⁸

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War gave Britain and France the chance to "reconstruct the Arab world."¹⁷⁹ Egypt pro-forma became an independent nation state, as did other states, which were declared nations under the control of Britain and France.¹⁸⁰ During this time, a new discursive pattern emerged with the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The discourses before had been mostly between modernists and traditionalists. Now a new movement emerged which sought modernization not through a Western-style nation state but through a reform of the Muslim world and the reorientation towards the perceived fundamental values of Islamic sources, not its actual tradition. This new

177 For an overview over the debate on British liberal imperialism see: Koditschek, Theodore (2011): *Liberalism, Imperialism and the Historical Imagination. Nineteenth century visions of Greater Britain*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

178 To understand just how powerful this narrative of Western-style modernisation was with the nationalist elites, one only has to look at Mahmoud Mokhtar's Renaissance of Egypt statue, standing in front of Cairo University today. See Rodenbeck, Max (1999): *Cairo - The city victorious*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo

179 Barnett (1995) p.19

180 In the Egyptian case this was an international treaty, while Iraq or Syria simply were declared mandates of Britain and France, see Milton-Edwards, Beverley (2011): *Contemporary politics in the Middle East*, Polity Press, Cambridge, p.19-48

ideology of Islamism came in many facets, but it generally questioned the legitimacy of the Western style nation state as a secular and colonial imposition and insisted that the Islamic world community, the Ummah, was the only possible homeland for Muslims. In the second half of the 20th century, with many of the old elites delegitimized and colonialism widely hated, first Nationalism and later Islamism became the two main forms of political legitimacy and they continue to structure the discourses in the region until today.¹⁸¹ When the Second World War ended, the roles were clearly assigned: Whoever wanted to dominate Egyptian politics, regardless whether Islamist or Nationalist, had to fit the role of the ‘liberator’ and ‘moderniser’ against oppressive old elites and imperialist foreign powers.

3.1.2. **Fighting Pirates, Russians, and Wahhabis - Britain creates the Gulf’s Regional Order**

In the early 19th century, the barren southern coast of the Gulf was sparsely populated, and only in the northeast, where a certain amount of agriculture was possible, a dominant state had developed in the form of the Emirate of Fujairah. The arrival of the Royal Navy in 1809 heralded a time of intervention and domination. After the shock of Bonaparte’s invasion of Egypt, Britain wanted to close the Gulf as an access to British India for geostrategic competitors. To legitimize this intervention, it framed it as an anti-piracy operation. The British called this coast the ‘Pirate Coast’, and accused the coastal inhabitants, namely of the Emirate of Fujairah, of piracy.¹⁸² This was the start of the British presence over the next 162 years, which would form the modern states of the region and the regional security discourses, which determine the roles of external players until today. The role of external ‘security provider’ therefore has long historical roots, and today seems almost natural in the region.¹⁸³ Britain co-opted local dynasties in a ‘divide et impera’-strategy that guaranteed their safety against the big states of the region, the Ottomans, Persians and al-Sauds. The role conception of British rule in the Gulf is best depicted in a speech of British-India’s Viceroy Lord Curzon which he gave for an assembly of regional sheikhs on board the RIMS ‘Argonaut’ off the Sharjah coast in 1903. He gave a vivid depiction of the British narrative when he explained that before Britain provided security for the Gulf:

181 Schwedler, Jilian: Religion and Politics in the Middle East, in: Schwedler & Gerner (2008)

182 Davidson, Christopher (2008): Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success, Columbia University Press, New York, p.12

183 Wright (2011) p.77

“[...] almost every man was a marauder or a pirate; kidnapping and slave-trading flourished; fighting and bloodshed went on without stint or respite; no ship could put out to sea without fear of attack; the pearl fishery was a scene of annual conflict; and security of trade or peace there was none.”¹⁸⁴

It was this frame that made the presence of the British navy legitimate for providing a peaceful environment for regional development:

“Then it was that the British Government intervened and said that, in the interests of its own subjects and traders, and of its legitimate influence in the seas that wash the Indian coasts, this state of affairs must not continue. British flotillas appeared in these waters. British forces occupied the forts and towns on the coast that we see from this deck.”¹⁸⁵

Curzon then outlined the legal foundation of Britain’s presence, which clearly assigned the role of security provider to Britain:

„In 1820, the first general Treaty was signed [...] In the event of aggressions on any one by sea, the injured parties should not retaliate, but should refer the matter to the British Resident in the Persian Gulf; and that the British Government should watch over the peace of the Gulf and ensure at all times the observance of the Treaty.”¹⁸⁶

The importance of Curzon’s mentioning of the treaty obviously was, that in liberal British eyes, which were little concerned with the concept of unequal treaties, it made this agreement and the inherent distribution of roles voluntary. Historians, especially from the Gulf,¹⁸⁷ might question this narrative of Britain having come as a ‘protector’ of free trade. However, back then, Britain was convinced of its own civilizing effect on the local tribes. It believed that British hegemony, by eliminating the security dilemma among the sheikhs, would turn the “warlike identity” of the local tribes into a peaceful one.¹⁸⁸

Like in many parts of the Middle Eastern region, the concept of territorial states was new in the Gulf. Traditionally, control over people not territory mattered, except over some strategic assets like wells and harbours. The ‘dirrah’ was the territory where the tribe lived and sovereignty was associated with the ruler, not territory.¹⁸⁹ In the beginning, Britain reinforced this role of the ruler by investing legitimacy in local families.¹⁹⁰ They cemented this status in

184 Macris (2008) p.16

185 Ibid.

186 Ibid.

187 See Davies, Charles (1997): *The Blood-Red Arab Flag. An Investigation into Qasimi Piracy (1797-1820)*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter; Sulṭān ibn Muḥammad al-Qāsimī (1988): *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf*, Routledge, London

188 As one British political resident put it: “There can be no doubt that the vigilant watch maintained by our vessels of war, must give very considerable weight to the pacific opinions which I trust are gradually disseminating themselves in the minds of the Maritime Arabs.” Macris (2008) p.13

189 Peterson, J.E. (2011) *Security Dilemmas in the Contemporary Persian Gulf* in: Kamrava, Mehran (Hg.): *International politics of the Persian Gulf*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, pp.21-23

190 Kamrava (2011) p.3

the treaties of the 1890s, when it gave the ruling families the role of 'Head of State', while at the same time formalising its own role of 'security provider'. However, after 1920, the establishment of air bases for the new air routes from Europe to India and the first oil concessions made territorial demarcations necessary.¹⁹¹

Britain's focus in the Gulf, however, was not on the pearl-fishing villages of the southern shore of the Gulf, but on Persia. In the 19th Century, the northern side of the Gulf was ruled by the Persian Qajar dynasty, which by the end of the century fit the Western idea of decadent oriental despotism. As Persia was one of the most prized geopolitical possessions in the so called 'Great Game' with Russia over access to the Indian Ocean, Britain was more than willing to support Persia's modernisation to a degree, while at the same time making sure that Russian influence was checked.¹⁹² As in Egypt, Britain partly succeeded in its role as moderniser, but the fact that it also supported a traditional elite, which was seen as increasingly parasitic by its own population, led to an inter-role conflict. This inter-role conflict led to Britain being assigned again the role of 'imperialist' and increasingly becoming the target of nationalist agitation – a role that the West in general is assigned by the Islamic Republic of Iran until today.¹⁹³

Meanwhile, in the south, an altogether different political entity appeared. Already in the 18th century, the family of al-Saud had established an alliance with the fundamentalist religious sect of the Wahhabis. Over the course of the 19th century, it expanded its rule over much of the inner of the Arabian Peninsula. After a few tussles with the British, they accepted Saudi Arabia, as it was now called, as a state. In reaction, the family of al-Saud tried to turn its state into a more stable monarchy by getting rid of the more expansionist elements among the Wahhabis, massacring most of them in the 1920s.¹⁹⁴

After the consolidation of Saudi Arabia into a state, it developed a working relationship with the British. The threat of Saudi expansion into the smaller sheikdoms had been one of the major stabilizing forces of Britain's position in the Gulf for a long time. Both the Ottomans and

191 Peterson (2011) p.20

192 For a comprehensive overview over the geopolitical concepts and struggles see Hopkirk, Peter (1990): *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia*, John Murray Publishers, London

193 Milton Edwards, Beverly (2011) p.260-299

194 For more on the fights for the creation of Saudi Arabia see al-Enazy, Askar (2010): *The Creation of Saudi Arabia - Ibn Saud and British Imperial Policy (1914-1927)*, Routledge, Milton Park

the Saudis had always tried to swallow up the smaller entities of the Gulf, which thereby were more than willing to accept the role of Britain as regional protector. In the Jeddah Agreement of 1927, even the Saudis accepted Britain's role as protector of the smaller Gulf territories.¹⁹⁵ After the end of WWII it was obvious to all that the British would have to stay in the region, in order to guarantee security. The relationship between Riyadh and London never developed into the same kind of client-relationship that Britain had with the smaller emirates of the coast, but still offered the kingdom the protection that friendship with the Empire could bring. That this friendship was appreciated by the Saudi side as something only the Empire could give, was once expressed by one of Ibn Saud's deputies when he stated that Arab countries "need a powerful European friend and Great Britain is undoubtedly preferable to any other country to fill that role."¹⁹⁶

American oil companies received their first concessions in the region in the 1930s but production remained minimal. However, one of the major consequences of WWII was the increasing role of the US in Iranian politics and the new alliance between the Saudis and the Americans after the Red Sea conference of 1944. Consequently, the US became the biggest benefactor of Ibn Saud with millions of dollars in aid and 'Lend and Lease' contracts, which initiated the military relationship that binds the two countries until today. This was not always welcomed by Britain and the two countries openly rivalled for the friendship of Ibn Saud. The kingdom was eager to exploit this rivalry for its own benefits as it allowed Saudi Arabia to evade a strongly hierarchical attribution of roles as evident in the client-patron-relationship that defined Britain's relations with Egypt and most other Gulf States.¹⁹⁷

3.2. The Cold War - The US reluctantly takes over

The end of the Second World War reshaped the region by bringing in two new external powers. On the global level, the world was now divided into a capitalist West under the leadership of the US and a communist East under the leadership of the Soviet Union. On the regional level, between 1945 and 1956, European colonialism came to an end. According to Michael Barnett, "statehood presented Arab states with two potentially contradictory roles (that of sovereign

195 Wright (2011) p.78

196 Macris (2008) p.66

197 Macris (2008) p.70-71

state and that of promoter of the Arab nation) that created regional instability.¹⁹⁸ The newly independent states quickly engaged in a regional dialogue on identity and statehood. These discourses were mostly structured by the dichotomy between those who thought that the nation state should include all Arabs as a pan-Arab state and those who believed that it should be along the lines of the borders that the colonial powers had left behind. The cultural bond between the Arab states made this decade-long debate about recognising each other's sovereignty all the more important as, according to Barnett, "state sovereignty is a social institution (not a natural artefact of states but rather a consequence of and dependent upon the discursive and non-discursive practices of state and non-state actors). [...] Being recognized as sovereign amounts to a social permission granted by the community of states."¹⁹⁹

3.2.1. Nasser and the Role of Arab Leader

Before they left, European powers tried to perpetuate their influence by leaving behind political entities of their own making. However, within two and a half decades, between 1954 and 1979, the Western installed dynasties in Egypt, Iraq and lastly Iran where toppled by nationalist or religious movements. Egypt's new President Gamal Abdel Nasser and his pan-Arabists dominated the regional discourse in the 1950s and 1960s. From the beginning, the revolutionary government in Egypt took on two very different roles. Nasser used the role of 'national leader' as the foundation of his power, and the role of 'Arab leader' to solidify his domestic power and as a foreign policy tool. He achieved legitimacy in the role of Arab leader by mobilising the masses in other Arab countries.²⁰⁰ While in the beginning these two roles supplemented each other, Nasser increasingly faced inter-role conflicts.²⁰¹

The first major conflict arose after the unification of Egypt and Syria in 1958 into the United Arab Republic. While the 'national leader' role demanded that Nasser support the Egyptians

198 Michael Barnett (1995); *Sovereignty, Nationalism and Regional Order in the Arab States System*, in: Khalili, Laleh (2009): *Politics of the modern Arab world*, Routledge, New York, p.9

199 Barnett (1995) p.9

200 Gause III, Gregory (2011): *Saudi Arabia's regional security strategy*, In: Kamrava, Mehran (ed., 2011): *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, p.171

201 "Although upon independence Arab states were quite willing to recognize the legitimacy of sovereignty's norms as the basis of their relations with non-Arab states, they debated vigorously among themselves the meaning of Arab nationalism and how they should organize their relations." Barnett (1995) p.11-13. See also p.21 "Despite the construction of the League of Arab States with sovereignty at its core, Arab states continued to occupy two social Roles that conferred contradictory behavioural expectations: sovereignty demanded that they recognize each other's legitimacy, borders, and the principle of non-interference; while pan-Arabism held that Arab states were to defend the Arab nation, to uphold regional standard, of legitimacy, and indeed to deny the very distinction between the international and the domestic."

in the new state, the 'Arab leader' role demanded the fair and equal treatment of all citizens. The two roles thus had very different role demands. When Nasser chose to rely on his Egyptian role by installing Egyptians in nearly all important positions, he alienated Syrians and doomed the United Arab Republic, which consequently broke apart in 1962.²⁰² Shortly afterwards, the next role conflict was the civil war in Yemen (1962 - 1970). This time, Nasser chose the role of Arab Leader by sending Egyptian troops into Yemen, overstressing his army in the bloody civil war that followed. This continuous fighting hampered him from introducing the modernization projects in Egypt that would have been necessary on the national level and the demands of his role constrained his freedom of movement in the catastrophe that followed soon afterwards.²⁰³

In June 1967, while still having large parts of his forces involved in the Yemeni war, Nasser as Arab Leader accepted the challenge by Israel. Nasser was probably aware of the inferiority of his forces, but his role of Arab leader demanded him to take a step that was detrimental to the interests of Egypt. His discursive hegemony was still supreme, forcing the leaders of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon to follow him into the war against their better judgement; Six days later, pan-Arabism had been soundly defeated and it would never recover its former glory.²⁰⁴

The main framing tool in the pan-Arab discourses on role conceptions was the Israeli threat. Before the Second World War, the role of Arab Leader had been framed in anti-colonial frames. Nasser was first of all a leader who would help to rejuvenate the Arab nation in the face of European colonialism. When European colonialism ran out of steam after the end of the Second World War, Israel very soon became the focal point of Arabist and Islamist ideology. In his role as Arab Leader, Nasser was ultimately obliged to focus on the perceived Israeli threat to the Arab nation. In the case of the 1967 war, this heavily impeded Nasser's ability to act, thereby preventing Pan-Arabism from becoming the modernizing development tool that Arabists had hoped it to be. This inability to fulfil his role, in connection with the framing in

202 For the Syrian-Egyptian union see Sayyid-Marsot (2007) p.118

203 For Nasser's policy towards Yemen see Dresch, Paul (2000): *A History of Modern Yemen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.89-119

204 The events of the 'Six Days War' or 'June War' are described in more detail by Smith, Charles (2009): *The Arab Israeli Conflict*, in: Fawcett, Luise (ed., 2009): *International Relations of the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 238-240

the Cold War terms, basically made a role enactment according to the traditional idea of 'Arab leader' impossible.

Egypt's role not only had a strong interconnection between the domestic and regional level, but also with the global level, which was marked by the bipolarity of the Cold War. The Pan-Arabist movement, as a modernist-secularist national liberation movement, often stood in the same camp as other left-wing movements and the Communist International. While Nasser suppressed communism inside Egypt, the narrow-focussed Cold War perspective of the US forced Nasser to move closer towards the Soviet Union than he would have wished. His willingness to buy arms from Czechoslovakia led to the US boycott of World Bank loans for the building of the Aswan dam and thereby forced Nasser to accept a closer alliance with the Soviet Union.²⁰⁵ It is important to remember that Nasser took the role of Soviet ally not on his own account, but due to inter-role conflict resulting from his own role conception as a pan-Arabist leader and the expectations of Britain and the US. As Nasser's role enactment did not play well with American expectations, he was forced to follow the role that had been offered to him by the Cold War even if that was not his own choice.

Britain itself found it increasingly difficult to fulfil its role as regional security provider. Not only had the United States stolen its role, as the symbol of progress, and thereby made its role of moderniser increasingly less appealing to the Arabs, but Britain's resources had also been depleted by the long war, and its humiliation by Nasser with the help of the US and the USSR during the Suez Crisis had destroyed the nimbus of a great power. Additionally, the loss of India in 1948 made the upkeep of force levels in the Indian Ocean not only increasingly more expensive but also increasingly difficult to legitimise to the British public. Britain had to ensure the security of its empire at a much lesser expense and the Americans were not willing to foot the bill.

Consequently, Britain tried to limit its costs by taking on the role of a coordinator of collective defence rather than as a direct provider of regional security. It tried to import the new European security architecture into the region. However, Britain's role of imperialist made it impossible for it to assume the role of institution builder. In addition the western led regional

205 Sayyid-Marsot (2007) p.112

treaty system, the Baghdad pact (later CENTO), aimed, like NATO in Europe, at external aggressors, the USSR, while the danger for regime survival actually came from the inside of the new states.²⁰⁶ While the Americans supported these plans for collective security, they remained sceptical about their feasibility and were proven right by their failure. That the US itself would soon be seen as an enemy too by many Arabists was not obvious after WWII. Initially, many Arabs even looked to the US as an ally in their fight against colonialism.²⁰⁷

After the 1967 war and the demise of pan-Arabism in Egypt, Anwar al-Sadat as Egypt's next president, changed the idea of the role of an Egyptian leader by focusing purely on Egyptian national interests. Sadat was convinced that only the US, as the real superpower, would be able to support Egypt's development. By changing this role of the US from 'imperialist' to 'moderniser', he also changed the counter role of Egypt from 'anti-imperialist' to 'regional anchor of stability'.²⁰⁸ While Sadat never completely dropped Arabist terminology, he solely focused on Egyptian needs. He even made peace with Israel, even though this meant isolating himself from his Arab allies. It allowed him to escape from the role of the anti-American leader and positioned Egypt squarely in the pro-American camp, where to some extent it remains until today. While Egypt's role conception never changed in its rhetoric, and most Egyptians would still see their country as the leader of the Arab world, the political elite chose the role of a close and reliable ally of the West and even Israel.²⁰⁹

In bringing this role change about, the US itself became much more involved in the Middle East in the early 1970s. Especially under the National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, its earlier reluctance to openly support Israel changed dramatically, and it attributed itself the role of 'honest broker' in the region.²¹⁰ Both Israel and Egypt now took

206 Macris (2008) p.116

207 "The Arabs, many of whom in World War I looked to Britain to end the ascendancy of the Ottomans who had controlled the region since the 1500s, concluded that they had traded Istanbul's yoke for London's. Many Arabs felt trapped and enslaved. Even the generally accepted geographic term for their surroundings, the ME, stemmed from the West, and it framed the Arabs' existence largely in terms of their relations to London, Paris, and their other colonies in the Far East. America served as a new type of Great Power, free of colonial impulses and dedicated to an 'open door' of free commerce for all proved appealing to many locals, and President Woodrow Wilson's espousal of national self-determination based upon the consent of the governed attracted much favour and support in the Persian Gulf lands." Macris (2008) p.64

208 Korany, Bahgat & Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (eds., 2008): *The Foreign Policies of Arab States. The Challenge of Globalization*, American University of Cairo, Cairo, p.187-188

209 Sayyid-Marsot (2007) p.134-138

210 Rothkopf, David (2006): *Running the world. The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power*, Public Affairs, New York, p.147-152

on the roles of pro-Western anchors in a region that was seen as hostile to the West. The role of pan-Arab leader therewith did not evaporate but became unoccupied, even though other leaders like Muammar Gadhafi and Saddam Hussein tried to take on this role in vain.

While the Cold War kept on dominating the region, a new third force came into play in the 1970s: In Egypt, the pro-Western, pro-Israel course of the new Egyptian government and the non-performance of the pan-Arab role, handed this role to non-state actors. The role of modernising vanguard, started to shift away from the state to leftist organisations like the PLO, which combined the secular rhetoric of modernisation with a more revolutionary, and often violent impetus.²¹¹ However, increasingly new Islamist movements inside Egypt as well as in Palestine and Syria took over the role of vanguard of the Arab people. The Muslim Brothers in Egypt as well as the revolutionaries in Iran and Lebanon took on some of the Marxist organisational characteristics and even tried to take on their roles. For these Islamists, over time not destroying the state, but conquering and reconstructing it as a tool of Islamist modernisation became the goal.²¹² Slowly the concept of the struggle between pro-Western and anti-Western ideologies changed from belonging to the pro-American or the pro-Soviet camp, to a struggle of nation state versus Islamism.

The murder of Sadat in 1981 by members of the radical Islamist group al-Jihad came only two years after the Islamic revolution in Iran. More and more of these Islamist movements like Hamas took on the leading role of anti-Western resistance. While most Arab nation states fought these groups, they simultaneously exported them to Afghanistan, to support the fight of the Afghan Mujahedin against the Soviets, where a new internationalist jihadi movement was born.

3.2.2. The Gulf: Saudi Arabia and Iran are attributed the Role of Security Provider

While the US underwent this role change in the Mediterranean, Washington remained reluctant to take on a regional role in the Gulf. It saw itself more in a global role than a regional one and for President Truman and other post war administrations it was obvious that Britain should keep on playing the role of security provider in the Gulf.²¹³ For the moment, this was

211 Smith (2010) p. 238-240

212 Sayyid-Marsot (2007) p.138-140

213 Macris (2008) p.82

rather unproblematic, as Britain retained its welcome by the smaller Gulf States as a 'security provider' and in some cases even as a 'referee'.²¹⁴ However, Britain's economic and imperial decline also threatened its position in the Gulf. With the Independence of India in 1948, the main driver of Britain's Middle East policy had disappeared, but now oil and anti-Soviet containment had become the West's main interests in the region. However, British India had also been the administrative and military centre for British policy in the Gulf. After its loss, this role was taken over by the huge British base in Suez until the Suez Crisis in 1956 and then by the British base in Aden.²¹⁵

That the US had stayed in the region at all after WWII was mostly due to developments in Iran and Saudi Arabia: Iran as a neighbour of the Soviet Union became a major frontline in the Cold War. The US trained the Iranian security services and civilian administration to guard against possible communist infiltration. It is therefore no surprise that one of the first episodes of CIA involvement in the domestic politics of other states was the coup against Iran's nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh jointly organised with the British secret service in 1953.²¹⁶

In Saudi Arabia however, it was less the Cold War than the growing reliance on regional oil that kept the Americans involved. While the Iranian oil industry remained in the hand of the British, the US realized the importance of Saudi oil to fulfil its rapidly growing demand. It therefore struck a bargain with Riyadh that remained in force until the early 21st century: Oil for Security. The US took on the role of security provider for Saudi Arabia and the Saudis allowed in return Saudi ARAMCO, the newly formed American-Saudi oil company, to explore their riches.²¹⁷ While the US had built up a sizeable presence in Iran, helping with both the military and civilian modernisation of the country, the Saudi King Abdul-Aziz refused to let the US do any of these in his own land. He was concerned with the role that the Saudi monarch played as the guardian of bedouin tradition and the Islamic sanctuaries, while the Shah presented himself as a reformer and moderniser. In addition, the threat perception differed clearly between the King,

214 Macris gives an example from the year 1947 when "the Shaikh of Sharjah invited Shaikh Muhammed bin Hamad ash-Sharqi of Fujairah to lunch. Before accepting, the Shaikh of Fujairah consulted the Residency Agent stating that he feared that the Shaikh of Sharjah might be asking him to lunch to arrest him because Fujairah had, years ago, attained its independence by breaking away." See Macris (2008) p.90

215 Macris (2008) p.91

216 Yergin, Daniel (1992): *The Prize - The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*, Simon & Schuster, New York, p.450-479

217 Yergin (1992) p.410-414

who saw the neighbouring Hashemites in Iraq and Jordan as the biggest threat, and the Americans, who were only concerned with the Soviets. At the same time the King was convinced that the US was indebted to him for the granted oil concessions and should support him without asking for more.²¹⁸

Britain proved less and less capable to fulfil its role as security provider. When it lost its base in Aden in 1962, its ability to intervene in the Gulf became seriously limited. For most of the 1960s and 1970s, Iran and Iraq struggled for regional hegemony. When Kuwait gained independence from Britain in 1961, Iraq immediately threatened to annex its smaller neighbour. The government in Bagdad legitimised this move both by its supposed historical claims, as well as by the Arabist role conception, according to which Kuwait was simply a colonial creation. The rulers of the smaller Arab Gulf states became increasingly concerned about Britain's financial problems and the growing strength of Arabism, which seemed to pose a threat to their independence. They asked the US to step in,²¹⁹ but the US was more than reluctant to take on this role of security provider on a regional level and was content with urging Britain to keep on fulfilling this role itself. Local rulers, who started to reap the benefits of their oil industries, even offered to pay for the maintenance of British bases in the Gulf.

In 1968 the British government of Harold Wilson finally declared the retreat of British forces from East of Suez and it was clear that the smaller Gulf States would need to find another protector against their bigger neighbours.²²⁰ When asked if the US would take over Britain's "stewardship over the Gulf"²²¹ US officials pointed to regional powers as being responsible for

218 "If the United States sought to use Saudi territory in its battle against the Soviet Union, the Saudis believed, then the superpower ought to stand ready to defend the kingdom from its neighbours. Such a promise the U.S. never delivered, and Washington rebuffed Saudi attempts at such a formal agreement." Macris (2008) p. 94-95, p.97-98

219 "In 1966, for example, the brother of the ruler of Bahrain, travelled to Washington to voice his private concerns, and to encourage the United States to involve itself in the security of the region." Macris (2008) p.139:

220 "It is also possible to be fairly sure that the Gulf States will like to continue to have our obligation to protect them as a last resort in their dealings with a turbulent world of powers much larger and more rapacious than themselves, provided that the existence of this protection does not in itself add too greatly to the dangers that beset them. When we are in conflict with another Arab state or with powerful forces in the Arab world the strain on the Gulf Rulers is nearly intolerable. However parochial they may often be they feel in moments of stress as Arabs and they are conscious of the growing fervour of their populations for Arab causes. At the same time as Rulers responsible for their country's safety they are conscious of the comfortable feeling induced by having a frigate or two of the Royal Navy at their call over the horizon. The longer that we can avoid presenting them with this conflict in too acute a form, the longer will some elements of our present position remain." Macris (2008) p.123

221 While Oman was supposed to be able to remain on itself, the nine smaller Emirates were to found the union of United Arab Emirates. Qatar and Bahrain however later chose to become independent. "There existed some thought within the Foreign Office early in 1968 that London might prove better suited than the Arabs to craft a stable and independent Persian Gulf order, but the British consciously chose to thrust the duty upon the backs of the local rulers. [...] British diplomats had another reason to steer clear of the debate over the future political face of the Gulf, for they

regional security. This school of thought was canonised in the Nixon Doctrine, which was a reaction to the military disaster in Vietnam, and the realpolitik turn that followed. According to Kissinger, the US had overstretched itself in the idealist pursuit of global containment of the communist threat and could not afford anymore “the role of an international policeman.”²²² Simply put, the US was no longer willing to bear the demands of this international role and regional powers had to organise their own regional security.

In search for this new ‘security provider’, according to Macris, the US “deputized two of the region’s dominant powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the policemen in the region. The idea of relying on local, indigenous forces to provide security for Uncle Sam at a minimal price, without the need to commit US forces to the region, proved alluring to Washington officials.”²²³ This “fanning out of responsibilities”²²⁴ however led to the hubris of imperial Iran, which demanded the role of the ‘region’s policeman’ for itself²²⁵, aiming especially at Iraq which was the regions closest Soviet ally. Ironically, this role of ‘protector of the status-quo’ suddenly shifted to Iraq after the Iranian revolution of 1979, as Iran undertook a massive internally induced role change. The Iranian threat to export its revolution to the countries of the region led Iraq to also change its role, if not in its own eyes, than at least in the eyes of the US and the Arab Gulf states, from revisionist to protector of the status quo;²²⁶ A development that was fuelled by the widespread perception that Saudi Arabia was too weak to fulfil this role and to take on Iran.²²⁷

Together with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, this war also marked the beginning of a more direct role of the US in the region, documented in the Carter Doctrine, which declared any attempt of an external power to take over the Gulf as an attack on vital US interests and a

might become compelled by their London overlords to push for democratic reforms, as the British had done in other colonies prior to granting independence, a move that the diplomats believed the Gulf wasn’t ready for.” Macris (2008) p.181.

222 Macris (2008) p.181

223 Macris (2008) p.175

224 Ayoob, Mohammed (2011): American Policy towards the Persian Gulf - Strategies, Effectiveness, and Consequences, in: Kamrava, Mehran (ed.): International politics of the Persian Gulf. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, pp.124-125

225 Manea, Elham (2005): Regional Politics in the Gulf, Saqi Books, London, pp.107-108

226 Iraq attacked Iran in 1981 with the intention to use the perceived weakness of the Islamic republic to capture the Arab speaking province of Khuzestan. Tragically, the mismatch between the perceived role change in Saudi and American eyes and the role consistency in the self-conception of the decision makers in Baghdad would lead Saddam to miscalculate the response of the US when he invaded Kuwait in 1990.

227 Ayoob (2011) pp.126-127

reason for military intervention.²²⁸ While this was to be undertaken in cooperation with local partners, there was often a divergence between the global interests of the US and the regional interests of the Saudis. Globally, Saudi Arabia went along with the US, while regionally it often tried to pursue its own policy.²²⁹ According to Elham Manea, “unlike the US, which arranged security for the region around a possible Soviet threat, the regional actors saw instability as more likely to emanate from the region itself. That conviction has proven to be accurate, with the Second Gulf War a telling case in point.”²³⁰ This mismatch of threat perceptions during the Cold War forced the Saudis repeatedly to weigh their global and regional roles, as during the oil embargo of 1973, when the kingdom chose to act against its western allies to fight against its perceived main threat Israel, which was seen as an ally by the US.²³¹

The Iran-Iraq war ended with both states severely weakened, although Iran had taken over the role of ‘leader of regional resistance’ against the West. Performance of this role was hampered by the fact that the Sunnis of the region were less likely to accept this Iranian role than the Shiites. Therefore, the three major states in the Gulf took on three different roles: Saudi Arabia became the leader of the conservative Sunni states, underlining this new role conception by calling its monarch ‘Guardian of the two Holy Shrines’. Iraq remained the leader of the left wing pan-Arabist movement, while Iran took on the role of the leading resistance fighter against the West, especially after its involvement in the civil war in Lebanon.

In the 1980s the idea of Arab cooperation did not totally disappear, but was often moved to the sub-regional level, like the relatively successful Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), rather than the pan-Arab/regional level.²³² The GCC was founded as a multilateral institution in 1981 to take over the role of ‘arbitrator’ on the peninsula from the British.²³³ Because of the Iranian revolution it was also supposed to cover the role of ‘security provider’ due to the unwillingness of outside powers, namely the US, to do so, but it mostly failed to play this role effectively. Today the threat perception of the GCC states can be defined as both external and internal, stemming from both internal unrest and the threat of Iranian hegemony. The GCC was partly

228 Manea (2005) p.105

229 Gause III (2011) p.172

230 Manea (2005) p.107

231 Gause III (2011) p.173

232 Barnett (1995) p.26

233 Petersen (2011) p.26

successful in playing the role of a venue for mediation among the member states, limiting their threat perception towards each other.²³⁴ The GCC managed to unite the Gulf States to a certain degree in coordinating their foreign policy, leading Mehran Kamrava to claim that the power of the GCC is built on the Saudi military and Qatari and Emirati finance.²³⁵ At the end of the Cold War the Gulf States had found ways to create and locate their own roles in both the regional and international systems by constructing their own regional organisation.

3.3. After the Cold War – From Hegemony to Anarchy

In 1991, the Soviet Union disintegrated and the US became the only remaining state with the material capabilities to continue in the role of a superpower. As the counterpart disappeared, the role perception changed too. The US now became the lone superpower, with unprecedented global influence. The first decade of global American hegemony was dominated by the increasing trend of globalisation, symbolised for many by the spread of communication technologies like the internet, which the US promoted. However, as Ehteshami puts it, globalisation and regionalisation are “Siamese twins”.²³⁶ Although the Middle Eastern region is actually one of the least exposed regional systems in terms of international investments and regional trade, globalisation was often defined by its societies as a threat, reinforcing tradition, or at least ideas that were perceived to be traditional. That globalisation is seen as an existential threat in many Muslim societies, seems even more paradoxical as there had been a strong Islamic globalisation in earlier centuries, long before the modern state was invented.²³⁷

As was described in the last two chapters, the Middle Eastern RSC is highly securitised and „[m]uch of the international politics of the Gulf are framed as security.”²³⁸ Most regional actors, no matter if they are external or internal to the region, view it through a security lens and perceptions of threats are the main feature of their involvement.²³⁹ After 1991, the civil societies in most of the Gulf States became increasingly active in politics. Thereby, for many Arab governments the close alliance with the US became more of a problem. The Islamic

234 Kostiner, Joseph (2011): GCC Perceptions of Collective Security in the Post-Saddam era, In: Kamrava (ed., 2011), p.109

235 Kamrava (2011) p.10

236 Ehteshami, Anoushiravan (2007): Globalization and Geopolitics in the Middle East: Old Games, New Rules, Routledge, Abingdon, p.3. For a more thorough debate on the effects of globalisation on the region see *ibid.* p.20-46.

237 Ehteshami (2007) p.6-7 also p.11

238 Kamrava (2011) p.1

239 Kamrava (2011) p.2

identity that had always been part of the rulers' role conceptions, now had to be emphasised even more.²⁴⁰

3.3.1. The Lone Superpower Fails in the Role of the Honest Broker

As the regional security structure had been dominated by the Cold War, the end of this conflict brought with it great changes in the regional power structure and shook the regional order to its core. During the 1990s, the US took on the role of regional hegemon in two ways: First, the role consisted in acting as a regional 'security provider', protecting the states against their enemies both from the outside but also from the inside. Second, the role, at least in its US conception, consisted in playing the 'honest broker', leading the peace process between the Arab states and Israel. This fundamentally changed the roles available to local players. Henceforth, a state either had to be pro-US or anti-US. The stunning defeat of Saddam Hussein in the 1991 war led to most states accepting the hegemony of the US and thereby being coerced into some kind of economic liberalization and peace talks with Israel.

This US-attempt to build a 'New World Order' with itself in the role of its creator and its main guardian exemplified the fact that the influence of external powers is the principal characteristic of the Middle Eastern RSC. According to Monica Gariup, "in a unipolar global system, the structure of the sub-regional complex is inevitably constructed around the position of the hegemonic superpower."²⁴¹ The US now for the first time agreed to become the security provider for the region. This role change was in line with the US global role conception. Not only did the US emerge in the 1990s as the only credible guarantor of global order, but history also seemed to validate the idea of the inexorable march towards a global democratic order. Furthermore, the deeply held domestic view that American exceptionalism justified and required unquestioned American leadership legitimised an active global role. Its minimum objective was to prevent the emergence of another pole of power that could challenge American interests or limit American freedom of action in regions of the world of critical strategic interest, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Gulf.²⁴²

240 Wright (2011) p.82-83

241 Gariup, Monica (2008): Regionalism and Regionalization: The State of the Art. In: Beyond Regionalism?: Regional Cooperation, Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East, p.77

242 Krotz & Sperling (2013) p.231

One of the major outcomes of the end of the Cold War was that the new American security order had a much stronger regional outlook. In the policy of the Clinton administration, called “double containment”, Iran and Iraq took over the role as the main threats to regional stability. According to Wright, “the key by-product of this effort was that it framed Persian Gulf Security in the form of containment and branded Iran as a rogue state”²⁴³, the counter-role to the US in its role of security provider. For the regional audience, the image of US had changed. According to Manea “no longer was a close and public relationship with the US a liability. Nor was internationalized Gulf security a problem. In fact, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing Second Gulf War convinced these countries that an alliance with the US was the main guarantee to their security and defence.”²⁴⁴ Due to American failure to fulfil these regional role expectations however, the domestic costs for Arab states in this division of roles increased dramatically; the role of the US proved to be a “double edged sword” for Arab states in the long run.²⁴⁵

As said before, roles are both appropriated by states and conferred upon them by other states; states may occupy multiple roles; and inter-role conflict can lead to miscalculation and interstate conflict. This was illustrated by the 1991 Gulf War and Saudi Arabia’s decision to allow US troops on its soil in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. The role of sovereign state quickly led to the conclusion that a Western troop presence was required; the role of representative of the Arab or Islamic nation, however, indicated that such presence was anathema.²⁴⁶ This deepened alignment of Saudi Arabia with the US forced the anti-American elements in the Arab societies even more than before to take on the role of national resistance. The best-known example for this was of course the young Saudi Osama bin-Laden who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s and offered the Saudi Kingdom the protection of his fighters after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. The fact that the Saudis and other regional monarchies chose the US instead for the role of protector, convinced bin-Laden and others that these regimes were illegitimate and had to be destroyed.²⁴⁷

243 Wright (2011) p.91

244 Manea (2005) p.106

245 Wright (2011) p.93

246 Barnett (1993) p.277

247 Lacey, Robert (2010): Inside the Kingdom, Arrow Books, London, p.148-156

Just after the last shots had been fired in the Gulf, the US started to get serious about its role of 'honest broker'. Arab resistance to peace had lost two of its main backers, the Soviet Union and Saddam Hussein, and the region was more willing than before to accept the US sponsored peace talks. The new role of the US was most prominently displayed by the famous photograph of the signing of the Oslo Accords on the lawn of the White House, where US-President Clinton cajoled PLO-leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Rabin into shaking hands. However, after another quick success with a Jordanian peace treaty, the peace process became a frustrating and time-consuming obsession for the Clinton administration, culminating in the breakdown of the process in 2000. The intransigence of the regional parties, variously putting each other in the role of the blockader and denying the other to be a partner, proved stronger than the will of the lone superpower.²⁴⁸

3.3.2. 11 September to Arab Spring – Of 'Empire' and 'Decline'

The attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 were the culmination of the globalisation of terrorist activities, which had been a continuous side-phenomenon of America's role performance as global hegemon throughout the 1990s. While both regional and international terrorism were nothing new, the global event of 11 September and the ensuing 'Global War on Terror' were to reframe the relationship between the US and the region. Even before 11 September it had become clear that American military hegemony was able to protect the regional states from one other but was not able to deliver peace between Arabs and Israelis. In the Arab perspective, this mostly stemmed from the strong pro-Israel bias in Washington.

After 11 September, American hegemony in the region seemed to be at its strongest. Contrary to 1991, all regional governments sided with the US in its War against Terror, believing that the US would not only help them against their own internal enemies, but that it would also understand that it had to put more pressure on Israel. Since 2001, the role of the US took on a more and more hegemonic appearance, which culminated in countries being placed before the choice 'with us or against us'.²⁴⁹ The government of President George W. Bush did not consider the peace process a priority. While it managed to bring leaders like Libya's Muammar

248 The American role in the Oslo Peace Process is discussed by Quandt, William (2005): Peace process - American diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1967, Brookings Institution, Washington DC

249 Ayoob (2011) p.130

Qaddafi into the fold, its gains were squandered by invading Iraq in 2003.²⁵⁰ The policy of dual containment changed in President Bush's 'Axis of Evil'-speech in 2002 into the attempt to achieve dual regime change in Iraq and Iran. Iran consequently felt obliged to change its role from the careful rapprochement of the late 1990s and post 11 September, to nuclear deterrence.²⁵¹

The disaster of the occupation of Iraq was both a climax of US hegemony in the region and the beginning of its end.²⁵² With new Arab satellite channels broadcasting the suffering of the Iraqi population all around the region, regional states came to question the assumption that the US was a reliable partner in regime survival. The US had destabilized Arab societies with the invasion, while calling for the democratization of its Arab allies, which these were not willing to accept. Due to the perceived rise of Iran as a regional power after 2003, and the disappointment with the US in fulfilling its role of security provider after 11 September 2001, GCC countries started an arms-build-up.²⁵³ At the same time, the high costs, both financial and human, of the occupation of Iraq led to increasing war weariness in the US. When in January 2009 President Barack Obama came into office, most of the regional states had to ask themselves if the US was still willing to fulfil the role of the regional security provider. All the more so as global developments led most analysts to assume that a shift towards Asia was taking place in the Middle East.²⁵⁴ However, the unexpected events of the Arab Spring that started in December 2010 and led the region into years of chaos and bloodshed, changed the regional order and the roles of regional players once again.²⁵⁵

3.4. The Regional Players and their Roles

The two sub-complexes of the eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf have always been interconnected and are getting ever more so with the Gulf Arabs funding and influencing more

250 Henry Kissinger argues that the indifference to the perspectives and wishes of its partners already stems from the 1990s and the fact that the US was unchallenged and not dependent on its partners. See Kissinger, Henry (2002): *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the Twenty-First Century*, Free Press, London, p.190

251 Ayoob (2011) p.130-131 & p.151

252 For a more detailed discussion of U.S. policy in Iraq and the effects on the regional and international level see Robins, Philip: *The war for regime Change in Iraq*, in: Fawcett, Luise (ed., 2009): *Internationale Relations of the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

253 For the arms race in the Gulf after 2003 see Lawson, Fred (2011): *Sovereignty and boundaries in the Persian Gulf states: settling the peripheries in*: Kamrava, Mehran (ed.): *International politics of the Persian Gulf*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, pp.51-56

254 Ehteshami (2007) p.45

255 For a critical view on the Western orientalist view of the Arab Spring, see: Dabashi, Hamid (2012): *The Arab Spring: Delayed Defiance and the End of Postcolonialism*, Zed Books, London

and more groups in the domestic politics of Mediterranean states, especially after the start of the Arab Spring.²⁵⁶ Since the 1970s, the region had been dominated by four regional powers: Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. After the Second Gulf War, Iraq was crippled by sanctions, and US hegemony tilted the balance towards its own allies and clients.

Since 1991, Iran saw itself as the sole challenger to this American hegemony. The only other state that remained outside of the US orbit in the 1990s was Syria, which however still hoped to trade its allegiance for concessions in peace negotiations with Israel.²⁵⁷ Therefore, according to Elham Manea, as an “Islamic and revolutionary state, Iran has set itself up as an outspoken leader for the contemporary Islamic world. [...] It insists that any regional security arrangement should be the responsibility of the countries of the region, including itself.”²⁵⁸ While there is sufficient domestic debate about Iran’s role after the Arab Spring, be it as a ‘protector of Palestinians’, ‘super-regional power’, ‘security guardian of the Gulf’ or ‘core state in the New Free Islamic Middle East’, all of these roles see Iran as the state that can lead the region and these convictions seem to be equally held by Iranian reformists and extremists.²⁵⁹ Although Iran had long given up its original policy of exporting the Islamic revolution through the support of Shia-Islamic liberation movements in the region and adopted a pragmatic policy based on the national interests, it continued to be perceived as a threat by its neighbours in the Gulf. Iran’s role dilemma was caused by a lack of regional legitimacy. After the Arab Spring, and the decline of American influence in the region, the decision to grant legitimacy to Iran’s role needed to be made regionally. Iran had to seek legitimacy from Arab countries, as they had become the main players in the region. However, by 2013 Iran’s had not gained the required legitimacy²⁶⁰ and was still perceived as the biggest threat by all Gulf States.²⁶¹

Beyond the US, other external actors are also active in the region with European countries, Japan and Korea sharing interests with the hegemon. According to Gariup “Russia, India and China do not only consider the Middle East in general and the Gulf in particular as profitable

256 Buzan and Wæver (2003) p.193

257 Stäheli, Martin (2001): Die Syrische Aussenpolitik unter Hafez Assad – Balanceakt im globalen Umbruch, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, p. 387-508

258 Manea (2005) p.107-8

259 Ragab, Eman (2012): Iran’s Role Dilemma in the Arab Region after the Arab Revolutions, in: Majer, M. – Ondrejcsák, R. – Tarasovič, V. (eds., 2012): Panorama of global security environment 2012, CENAA, Bratislava, pp. 429-440. p.3

260 Ragab p.3 (2012)

261 Wright (2011) p.88

markets for energy and armaments products, but at a more grand strategic level, the region is important to them because it could be the stage of geopolitical competition against American hegemony.”²⁶²

3.4.1. Saudi Arabia - the embattled Sunni Hegemon

Saudi Arabia might not have been seeking a regional leadership role as actively as other states, but at least in the Saudis’ own perception, its position, resources and the threat perception of its neighbours forced it to become a regional leader.²⁶³ It therefore continuously enlarged its role of regional leadership and sub-regional hegemony. As long as it perceives Iran as a threat to both externally its own leadership role and internally to stability in its Shia East, it has to play an active regional role.

However, that the Kingdom perceives itself as the natural leader of the entire region, Arabs and Sunnis, can’t be singularly traced back at regional threat perceptions towards Iran and Iraq but also to its own historical identity.²⁶⁴ Contrary to many other developing states, the Saudi state was not built on a Western model and therefore lacks the widespread inferiority complex common among states that define themselves as a ‘developing country’. This unique source of identity formation in the kingdom was until recently mostly built on the transnational Muslim event of the Hajj, exemplified in the fact that Saudi Arabia followed other developing countries only in 2005 celebrating its national day. ²⁶⁵ “The Saudi Family justifies their role not by national identity but by Islam.”²⁶⁶ This however does not mean that Riyadh’s foreign policy is determined by the Ulema, the religious elite. While it plays a big role in domestic politics, the royal family has a firm grip on Saudi foreign policy; being subordinate to the ruling family, the Ulema’s role was and still is to sanction the regime’s actions.²⁶⁷

Because of the nature of its polity, Saudi Arabia always perceived security and regime survival as the same,²⁶⁸ and accordingly felt challenged domestically and regionally by both Shia Iran and Sunni Jihadism.²⁶⁹ After 1971, Saudi Arabia with the help of the US replaced Britain as the

262 Gariup (2008) p.77

263 Gause (2011) p.179

264 Manea (2005) p.108

265 Long, David (1997): The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, p. 44.

266 Gause III (2011) p.170

267 Manea p.124-125

268 Manea p.126

269 Gause III (2011) p.171

security provider for the smaller Arab Gulf States, although many of its smaller neighbours were and are suspicious of the kingdom's own ambitions towards them.²⁷⁰ Its huge oil resources not only allowed it to finance its own economic development, but also to give subsidies and finance aid to many Arab nations. Its petro-dollars and the position as the only oil producer able to swing world production due to its massive reserves, also gave it a primacy among regional states. As the guardian of the holy sites and the historical birthplace of Islam, it considered itself the natural leader of the Muslim or at least of the Sunni world. It used its oil wealth to fund strict Islamic groups, both violent and peaceful, and tried to spread its own austere Wahhabi Islam.

At the same time, its close alliance with the US gave it, besides internal trouble, regional strategic leverage. During the Cold War, Saudi Arabia had allied itself with the Christian West as communists were categorised as atheists and thereby considered to be worse than fellow believers – even if these were Christians.²⁷¹ According to Manea this “could also be made to conform to the classical model, for within Dar al-Islam are not only Muslims but also other monotheists subscribing to a divinely inspired revelation.”²⁷² 11 September proved to be a decisive shift in US-Saudi relations. “The Kingdom’s role as a regional pillar of American power changed to that of a near-pariah”, Ehteshami wrote.²⁷³ The disappointment towards the US in playing its role of ‘honest broker’ in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, led Saudi Arabia to take on a more active role and even talk about security issues by itself with Teheran in April 2001.²⁷⁴

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and the smaller GCC states has always been fluctuating.²⁷⁵ As Saudi Arabia could not be the regional hegemon, due to its conservative nature compared to the modernising neighbours in Egypt, Iran and Iraq, it balanced against any other possible hegemon. The al-Saud Family has a strong perception of regional politics as a balance of power game and does not like seeing itself being outdone by more revisionist-oriented countries like Iran or more recently Qatar.²⁷⁶ To alleviate for the lack of agility compared to those regional competitors, it used its money, tribal connections and Islam. It

270 Wright (2011) p.89

271 Manea p.124

272 Manea p.124

273 Ehteshami (2007) p.43

274 Lawson (2011) p.57

275 Gause III (2011) p.174

276 Gause III (2011) p.182 & 180

also used communities and families, like some tribes in Iraq and Syria and the Hariri family in Lebanon to further its own interests. To propagate its political views in the Arab world, the Saudis worked persistently to control the Arab press and satellite channels through strategic investments.²⁷⁷ To keep up both its domestic rentier economy and its foreign policy influence it was highly dependent on revenues from energy sales. Energy security in the kingdom was therefore closely connected to regime security in form of “security of demand”.²⁷⁸

For this reason alone, Saudi Arabia started to balance its dependency on the relationship with the US by developing a “Look East Strategy” towards Asia, where most of the future energy demand was supposed to be generated. This soft balancing was most visibly enacted in 2006, when the new King Abdullah made his first trip abroad to Beijing - instead of Washington.

3.4.2. The Dubai Model - The Rise of the smaller Gulf States as Regional Players

Another important development of the period since the end of the Cold War, and part of the phenomenon of globalisation, was the rise of the smaller Gulf States. While Kuwait had trouble recovering from Iraq’s invasion and struggled with its own democratisation attempts, the eastern Gulf states went from consolidation of their state formation to building ‘global cities’ which led them to take on new regional roles, trying to make up for their small size in both area and population compared to their big neighbour Saudi Arabia. But the relationship has remained complicated, and while the kingdom was obviously the most powerful state and necessary ally against other perceived threats like Iran, the smaller Gulf States still always remained wary of its leadership role.²⁷⁹

The first state to emerge on the international scene was Dubai. Since the 1970s the little trading port had developed into a regional and then even global trading and travel hub. It made use of its position in between three continents to place itself on the side of the beneficiaries of globalisation and to lure in both trade and investment. The role as a ‘global city’ has become the basis of Dubai’s stunning success story and the emirate is therefore dependent on identifying and utilising global trends as quickly and efficiently as possible. It saw itself as one of the main beneficiaries of the rapid economic development of Asia and established itself as

277 Gause III (2011) p.177-178

278 Dannreuther (2010) p.149

279 Manea p.109-110

a gateway not only to its own wider region but also to Central Asia and Africa for both Eastern and Western investors. This role demanded that Dubai navigate its neutrality between the regional and global players and host Israeli jewellery traders as well as Hamas officials.²⁸⁰ It was also one of the main beneficiaries of the US presence in the Gulf and therefore had to carefully walk on a tightrope between its Western ally and its neighbour and traditional trade partner Iran. Dubai even marketed its success story as the 'Dubai Model', ready for export to other developing nations.²⁸¹

While it cannot compete with Dubai in its success as a global city, Abu Dhabi as the oil rich capital of the Emirates tried to emulate the success of its smaller neighbour. Due to its oil revenue, it has more leeway and could take a more decisive foreign policy role. While Dubai had some freedom in its external relations, UAE foreign policy has always been dominated by Abu Dhabi. It was more conservative in its domestic and foreign outlook compared to Dubai and saw itself as a bastion of conservatism in regional politics. Together with Saudi Arabia, it fought against the influence of Islamist movements after the Arab Spring.²⁸² Like its bigger neighbour it practiced soft-balancing since 2003, most visibly by awarding a navy base to France in 2009, thereby demonstrating that, while it saw itself clearly in the Western camp, it still had alternatives to its dependency upon the US

In many ways, Qatar tried to copy the stellar success of Dubai, but there were also some marked differences, which enabled the discourse on a separate 'Qatar model'. Qatar increasingly took on the role of a mini-superpower – meaning a state that punched way above its weight simply because of its asymmetric material capabilities. These capabilities were fuelled by the country's hydrocarbon riches, which made it one of the wealthiest players in the world. These riches allowed it to invest heavily in European and American real estate. The most successful tool of Qatari power projection, however, was the founding of the satellite television

280 Davidson, Christopher (2007): The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai: Contrasting Roles in the International System In: Asian Affairs 38 (1) pp. 33–48; Davidson, Christopher (2008): Dubai -The Security Dimensions of the Region's Premier Free Port, In: Middle East Policy 15 (2) 2007, p. 143

281 Chorin, Ethan (2010): Articulating a Dubai Model of Development - The Case of Djibouti, Dubai School of Government, Dubai

282 Davidson, Christopher (2009): Abu Dhabi's New Economy: Oil, Investment and Domestic Development, in: Middle East Policy 16 (2) 2009, p. 59–79

channel Al-Jazeera.²⁸³ It has to be noted, that while Qatar for a while seemed to be the biggest success story of the region, the disasters of the Arab Spring and Qatar's active role in it have somehow dented the international sympathies for the rich mini-state. In the wake of this decline of Qatari influence, the UAE took over the role of the regional swing state. It considered its role as both a close ally of the US and Saudi Arabia as well as a mediator in regional disputes.²⁸⁴

3.4.3. Egypt – from Leader of the Arab World to Embattled State

Egypt's pivotal role in the region underwent a dramatic decline in the era of Hosni Mubarak. His role conception was focussed on being an Egyptian, not an Arab, leader and the audience, whose expectations had to be satisfied, was in Washington not the region.²⁸⁵ This role as a 'pillar of stability' also satisfied Saudi Arabia, which was pleased with Egypt staying out of the Gulf and the affairs of the peninsula after the conflicts between Nasser and the Saudis in the sixties. The fact that after 2001 the Bush administration was very careful in pushing Egypt towards more democratisation showed that, while there was a clear hierarchy in the relationship, Egypt under Mubarak could not be simply defined as a US client.²⁸⁶

After the overthrow of Mubarak in the course of the popular uprising of February 2011, the protesters demanded a foreign policy role change, especially regarding the unpopular close connection to the US as well as the cold peace with Israel. The new governments that came to power after Mubarak were more dependent on domestic pressure and both the Islamist and the military governments promised "to play a genuine regional role that would turn Egypt into a balance or a challenger to the traditional main players in the region", including by getting closer to Iran. However, the conflict in Syria, and the Iranian support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, increased the tension between Egypt, and its traditional allies in the GCC, and Iran.²⁸⁷

283 On Qatar's rise and the concept of a new model of modernity see: Allen Fromherz (2012): *Qatar – A modern history*, I.B.Tauris, London; For Al-Jazeera's effect on both regional and global discourses, see Ehteshami (2007) p.28; For Qatar's foreign policy during the Arab Spring see Steinberg, Guido (2012): *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, SWP Comments

284 al-Mashat, Abdel Monem (2008): *Politics of Constructive Engagement – The Foreign Policy of the United Arab Emirates*, in: Korani & Dessouki (2008)

285 Dessouki, Ali Hilal (2008): *Regional Leadership – the costs and dividends in the foreign policy of Egypt*, in: Korani & Dessouki (2008) p.169

286 Dessouki (2008) p.187-188

287 Ragab p.8-9 (2012)

Qatari support for the Muslim Brotherhood government of President Mohammed Mursi led to the deterioration of Egypt's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Both countries therefore supported the military coup d'état in June 2013. Under the new military government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt revived its Mubarak-era role of close ally of the US and the conservative Gulf States. The new government tried to steer the country back into the more conservative field of regional politics, while keeping a certain distance to the US by balancing behaviour, like high-profile arms deals with France and Russia.²⁸⁸

3.4.4. The Role of the US in the Region after the Iraq War 2003

After the 1991 Gulf War the US had multiple inter-role conflicts in the region. Its role as protector of Israel clashed with its self-assumed role of honest broker. When it attributed itself the role of a regional leviathan after 2001 and tried to change the political order of the region it faced stiff resistance. On the global level, the role of security provider through nuclear deterrence, which the US had played during the Cold War remained largely intact. In the American conception of its own role, the continuing existence of a strong Russian military with sizable nuclear capability as well as the rise of China, seemed to make it imperative to consolidate the military hegemony of the US and its allies.²⁸⁹ In this context the Gulf remained essential for the US role of global security provider due to its regional bases.²⁹⁰ However, the role conflicts as described before, made it increasingly difficult for regional actors to accept the role of the US in the region after the invasion of Iraq 2003.²⁹¹

The election of Barack Obama as US President in 2008 was seen by many as a major change in US foreign policy. However, Hanns Maull, among others, argues that the foreign policy role conception of the US has a remarkable degree of continuity around a few central themes:

“(1) an exclusive international leadership role, generally involving renunciation of imperialism; (2) the pursuit of US global power and purposes, based on broad domestic political support and the willingness to commit substantial national resources; (3) propagation of democracy, human rights,

288 For a rundown of the relations with different foreign players under the al-Sisi administration see Atlantic Council (2015): One year on – Egypt's Foreign Policy under al-Sisi, 8 June 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/one-year-on-foreign-policy-under-sisi>

289 Krotz & Sperling (2011) p.228-229: “The rise of assertive regional powers, particularly in the Persian Gulf region, and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 led the Department of Defence to identify two additional tasks for American military power in the 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review: transnational deterrence (the ability to deter attacks by non-state actors or engage those actors in counterinsurgency warfare) and regional deterrence (the ability to maintain regional stability by retaining the ability to engage in conventional warfare)”

290 Kamrava (2011) p.6

291 For a debate about the interconnectedness of regional perception of the US 'leadership' role expectations and US capacities after the Iraq War see Spencer, Claire (2010): The Middle East – Changing from External Arbiter to Regional Player, in: Niblett (2010)

rule of law, and market economics – the ‘American ideology’—as a universally applicable and a morally and practically preferable social order; (4) pragmatically internationalist policies that emphasize efficiency and effectiveness, resulting in a functional rather than a principled approach to multilateralism; and finally (5) a propensity for military intervention and, if deemed necessary, unilateral action—as an enforcer of international/regional/national ‘order’ as defined by the United States.”²⁹²

President Barak Obama avoided any deep military commitments in Syria and tried to extricate US forces from Iraq, focussed on the negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, and endorsed the Arab uprisings while trying not to get too involved. For him “‘(r)ightsizing’ the United States’ footprint in the region meant not only reducing its material presence but also exercising restraint diplomatically, stepping back and challenging allies to take greater responsibility for their own security.”²⁹³ Overall, this foreign policy role conception reflected a traditional dominance of ego expectations, both normative (the rejection of empire and the desire to lead by consent) and pragmatic (the cost-effectiveness of alliances and international followers), while alter expectations were subordinated, if taken up at all. In Libya, following the violent repression of the popular uprising against Muammar Gadhafi in spring 2011 the US was forced to act by French activism. In Syria, the US abstained from military action against the Assad government, even though the retreat from its self-proclaimed red lines on chemical weapons harmed both its global and its regional standing. For example, after 2011, the GCC-States, especially Saudi Arabia, decided to take over part of the role as ‘security provider’ against Iranian influence in Bahrain and Yemen, sometimes without coordinating with the US.²⁹⁴ “Efforts to remain even-handed and noninterventionist have infuriated partisans on all sides who wanted unconditional U.S. support rather than an honest broker.”²⁹⁵ When the Arab Spring turned into civil wars and authoritarian renaissance, the Obama-Administration had few fall-back options beyond cutting its losses and grudgingly accepting new realities. “The Obama administration’s refusal to intervene in Syria challenged expectations of U.S. power and has triggered outsized fears among U.S. allies, upset the perceived regional balance of power, and generated new patterns of alignment and conflict.”²⁹⁶

292 Maull (2013) p.170-171

293 Lynch, Marc (2015): Obama and the Middle East - Rightsizing the U.S. Role, in Foreign Affairs, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/obama-and-middle-east>

294 Ragab p.7 (2012)

295 Lynch (2015)

296 Ibid.

3.5. Conclusion – The Roles of the Middle Eastern RSC

As was outlined in the last pages, the regional discourse in the Middle East is highly securitized. Since the beginning of direct interactions with Western powers in modern times, relations in the region were perceived through the threat frame and external actors similarly view their role in the region and the role of regional players mostly through a securitised perspective. Accordingly, roles in the region and role expectations towards external players are hierarchized along security frames. Since the arrival of the British, external players played the roles of security provider and hegemon with the more or less enthusiastic support of local elites whose regime survival depended on the aid of the foreign actor. On the popular level, however, external powers were easily perceived in the role of imperialists and the narrative of anti-imperialist resistance as one of the main goals of the modern Middle Eastern state resonated with many populations in the Middle East. Even the conflict with Israel was frequently perceived through this frame. Ultimately therefore, elites and populations assess foreign actors first of all along their security role performance.

Because of this prevalence of the security perspective, balancing has been the main tool of Arab foreign policy over the last two hundred years. This is often the only option for Arab states to limit their dependency due to their material inferiority to external players. Whenever Arab states tried to play an independent role built on their own resources, like Nasser's Egypt and the oil producing states during the 1973 war, they failed. On the other hand, states like Saudi Arabia and the Emirates which practised soft balancing were relatively successful. For them, countries like France were useful to soft-balance against the strong dependence on the US. The other option available, hard-balancing, has been nearly impossible since the end of the Soviet Union, and only really attempted by Iran and to a lesser extent by Syria before 2011. The role of anti-hegemonial resistance, that Iran plays, has very costly role demands and is thereby shunned by most states. The populations of many soft balancing states however often demand more hard-balancing against the US and more robust measures against Israel.

We can distinguish two sub-regions, the Gulf and the Mediterranean, where foreign policy roles are conceptualised in very different ways by local actors and external actors are often faced with different role expectations. In Egypt, which conceives of itself both in the role of great power and leader of the Arab World, the possible roles of external actors are framed through Cold War-polarity, with the aim of hard-balancing the US which is often seen as a

political threat, and a hostile hegemon. In the Gulf States, where the threat perception from Iran is stronger and where external actors have historically not only legitimised but also protected local ruling families over the last two hundred years, external actors namely the US and Britain are seen more in the role of external security provider. Israel and Iran are considered threats by all regional states; however, for obvious reasons, Egypt focuses on Israel while Saudi Arabia perceives Iran as the main threat, especially since the start of the Syrian uprising in the course of the Arab Spring against Iran's ally, President Bashar al-Assad. Over the last years, Egypt has lost the status of regional power in the eyes of many Middle Eastern states and the West, due to its unwillingness or inability to fulfil certain demands of the leadership role. However, in its own eyes, Egypt is still the driving force behind regional development. Saudi Arabia on the other hand considers itself to be the leader of the conservative Sunnis in the region and to be the leader of the Gulf States, namely the members of the GCC. The Emirates as one of the smaller states used the process of globalisation to take on the role of a middleman for external players toward the region, namely as an investor, but also to play a mediating role between Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel and other regional states.

Therefore, new extra-regional actors are assessed by regional states according to the way they can play a role by either balancing the US, supporting regional states against Israel and Iran; to a lesser degree by their ability to support regime survival through economic development like ensuring security of demand for energy and supporting industrialisation through investment and technology transfer.

4. China's Search for a Global Role

“Major power relations are the key, neighboring countries are the priority, developing countries are the base and multilateralism is the platform.”

Hu Jintao, Speech at the UN-Summit, 22.09.2005²⁹⁷

As became clear in the last two chapters, historical experience shapes a country's view of the world and its own place in it. Accordingly, as China's direct relationship with the Middle Eastern region is relatively recent, its perspective on the Middle East is mostly informed by its global outlook. This chapter will therefore try to understand how China's overall foreign policy role-conception developed over the years.²⁹⁸ Like the states of the Middle East, albeit in a very different way, China's history doesn't neatly fit Western ideas about a 'normal' nation state, the primary unit on which the modern international system is built. Therefore, while China often plays the role of a 'normal' state in the (post-) Westphalian order of the early 21st century, one should not forget how long it took for China to acquire the trappings of a nation state.

Constructivist role theory postulates that ideas matter, and that even realpolitik-oriented foreign policymakers follow their historically-inspired conception of what is 'legitimate' and what is a 'national Interest'. So even if elites simply use principles and ideologies to further

297 (daguo shi guanjian, zhoubian shi shouyao, fazhangzhong guojia shi jichu, duobian shi wutai), translation after Medeiros, Evan (2009): China's International Behaviour, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, p.93, and Yang Jiemian (2014): The Self-Consciousness of Chinese-Characteristic Diplomatic Practice and Theory, in: : Zhao Jinjun & Chen Zhirui (eds., 2014): China and the International Society - Adaptation and Self-Consciousness, World Century Publishing Cooperation, Hackensack, p.12

298 There are so far few attempts to undertake a role theoretical analysis of China's foreign policy. Among the few are Shih Chiyu (2012): Assigning Role Characteristics to China: The Role versus the Ego State, in: Foreign Policy Analysis (2012) 8, 71-91, Gottwald, Jörn-Carsten & Niall Duggan (2011): Hesitant Adaptation – China's New Role in Global Policies, in: Harbisch et al (2011), also Klömpges, Hardy (2006): Rollentheorie und Chinesische Außenpolitik – Die Chinesische Vereinte Nationen-Politik zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts, Tectum Verlag, Marburg

their own regime stability, how they use them to frame and thus enable their own and restrict the policies of others, deserves our interest. That elites must publish their views in this process of framing facilitates the analytical process, which can dwell on a rich corpus of data because, as shown in the last chapter, concepts of legitimacy often have long historical roots.²⁹⁹

4.1. From Tianxia to Nation State

China has had a difficult relationship with international society ever since it came into contact with it through European colonialism in the 16th century.³⁰⁰ Until the 19th century, China was embedded in its own world, often referred to as the “Tianxia” or “all under Heaven”. At least in the Chinese perspective, this world was not made up of equal Westphalian states, but consisted of a dichotomy of ‘barbarian’ and ‘civilised,’ (i.e. sinicised) state entities. The first category, most prominently the nomadic people of the Mongolian steppe to the north, were basically either fought or bought continuously and separated from the Middle Kingdom by a system of Great Walls. The sinicised states of Korea, Vietnam and to a lesser degree Japan, which were connected to the Middle Kingdom by the “Tributary system”, comprised the second category.³⁰¹

This self-conception as ‘Middle Kingdom’ (Zhongguo) that China uses to depict its ‘central’ role in human civilisation or Tianxia is of course a very different concept from the slightly derogatory ‘Middle’ used in the European framing of the ‘Middle East’. In the Tianxia system, states were ordered hierarchically with one benevolent state in the centre, the ‘Middle Kingdom’. In this world, harmony is ensured, or so it was claimed, as every state knows his status and role through this hierarchy.³⁰² Roles were allocated in a clear-cut way. In the center of the system sat the ‘Son of Heaven’ (Tian Zi) who governed the Middle Kingdom and gave

299 For the historical legacy see Sutter, Robert (2013): *Foreign Relations of the PRC – The legacies and constraints of China’s international Politics since 1949*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham; For an in-depth debate about the impact of cultural heritage on China’s foreign policy outlook see Jacques, Martin (2009): *When China rules the World – The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World*, Penguin Books, London

300 For the Western perspective of one-way socialisation see Buzan, Barry (2010): *China in International Society - Is ‘Peaceful Rise’ Possible?* In: *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, 2010, p. 5–36

301 On the Tributary system see: Kang, David (2007): *China Rising - Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia*, Columbia Univ. Press, New York; For a critical assessment of the Tianxia concept see, Callahan, David (2008): *Chinese Visions of World Order - Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?*, in *International Studies Review* 10, p.749-761; The influence of the tributary system on role conceptions in Korea and Vietnam, and the continuing navigation in the role location exercise on the regional level between the US and China is described in Park, Joon-Woo, Gi-Wok Shin & Donald Keyser (ed., 2013): *Asia’s Middle Powers? The Identity and Regional Policy of South Korea and Vietnam*, Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center Books, Stanford

302 Shih Chiyu (2012) p. 77

legitimacy by his acknowledgement to the surrounding states. In exchange, these states would pay homage and tribute to the Son of Heaven. In post-Cultural Revolution China, this period is often portrayed as a time of peace and stability where interstate warfare was basically unknown and where the only danger was disunity in the Chinese state itself, as this would allow nomadic people to invade China. It is today often upheld as a possible alternative to the Western narrative of an anarchic international sphere and portrayed as a superior ordering principle. Chinese scholars like Wang Yiwei of Shanghai's Tongji University often compare this traditional Chinese division of the world in 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' people favorably to Western ideas of identity-construction; for which Wang names racism as a prime example.³⁰³

This world came to an end, when Western powers forced China to become a normal member of a Westphalian system of nominally equal nation states through a series of wars and unequal treaties between 1839 and 1901.³⁰⁴ China had not possessed any institutionalised diplomatic service or concept of international law in a Western sense for dealing with its East Asian neighbours. In the beginning it refused, to deal with the West in any other way than it would with some petty barbarian kingdom, misjudging the global change that had occurred with the expansion of a global international system and capitalism.³⁰⁵

The resulting opium wars, however, "forced China's leaders to acknowledge the existence of a wider world"³⁰⁶ and in 1861, after the Second Opium War, the Zongli Yamen ('Office for the management of business of foreign countries') was established. As the name says, it was supposed to fulfill the functions of a Foreign Ministry. However the responsible Minister, Prince Gong, was eager to emphasize the low status of the bureau inside the imperial bureaucracy in order to make clear which status Western countries had in the hierarchy of the Tianxia: "It cannot have a standing equal to that of the traditional government offices, thus preserving the distinction between China and foreign countries"³⁰⁷ Whatever the pretensions,

303 Wang Yiwei (2012): Seeking China's New Identity - the Myth of Chinese Nationalism, in: Cai Tuo (ed., 2012): Chinese Perspectives on Globalization and Autonomy, Brill, Leiden, p.262; it should be noted though, that the division of the world into civilised and barbarian, had always been a part of the western narrative too, as with the Greeks and the colonial world. For a critical discussion on 'Civilisation' as a concept of historical understanding see Callahan, William (2004): Contingent States – Greater China and Transnational Relations, University of Minnesota Press, London

304 Shih Chiyu (2012) p. 82

305 Mathew Mosca discusses the development of 'foreign policy' thinking of the Qing in the mid-19th century on the example of India. See Mosca, Matthew (2013): From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy – The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China, Stanford University Press, Stanford

306 Spence, Jonathan (1990): The Search for Modern China, Hutchinson, London p.199

307 Spence (1990) p.200

the pressure from the militarily and financially more powerful 'outside' was stronger and Prince Gong had already created a Qing flag on the demand of the British in 1852, thereby giving the 'Middle Kingdom' the trappings of a European Nation state. Another important step was, when in 1853 Henry Wheaton's "Elements of International Law" were translated into Chinese by an American missionary and later republished by the Zongli Yamen for the use of Chinese diplomats. Chinese diplomats thereby learned to navigate international law.³⁰⁸ Step by step the Middle Kingdom as a whole learned to live in a Westphalian order and after the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 it was even forced to introduce a proper Foreign Ministry, thereby acknowledging the equal nature of states.³⁰⁹ The 'Middle Kingdom' slowly turned into 'China'.

This change of the 'outside' quickly led to more comprehensive reform attempts on the 'inside' and, as for Middle Eastern states, the West quickly became the standard of 'modernisation'. Therefore, and in spite of recurring conservative backlashes, catching up with the 'modernised' West dominates Chinese political thinking to this day. This 'birth of modern China' was fraught with both colonial occupation and exploitation, as well as with civil war and Japanese invasion, making this process of redefining status and role in a new world order a painful and traumatic experience for China.³¹⁰ While Chinese historiography squarely puts the blame for this painful experience on disunity and weakness on the Chinese side, it is quite obvious that the role of the 'aggressor' and destroyer of this 'harmonious world' is played by foreigners; Western and Japanese alike. China ascribes itself the role of the innocent victim, often dramatized on screen in the rape of Chinese Women by 'Japanese devils'. An important part of this narrative is that only the determined leadership of the communist party was able to save China from the 'Century of National Humiliation' (yi bai nian guochi).³¹¹

After the end of communist ideology in a Western Marxist sense at the end of the 1970s, the CPC mostly legitimises itself through this role as the 'saviour' of China.³¹² Connected to this

308 Spence (1990) p.201

309 Spence (1990)

310 For China's encounter with the West see Spence (1990); and Osterhammel, Jürgen (1989): China und die Weltgesellschaft, Beck Verlag, München

311 The 'Century of National Humiliation' is a historical frame used by the Chinese government to frame the years between the Opium War and the 'Liberation of China' by the CPC see Wang Zheng (2012): Never Forget National Humiliation, Columbia University Press, New York. It is an important part of the overall narrative of the rejuvenation of China through the leadership of the communist party and plays an important role in both self-identification and separation from foreigners undertaken specially in the patriotic education campaign. On this see also: Callahan, William (2010): China- Pessoptimist Nation, Oxford University Press, Oxford

312 Wang, Zheng (2012)

narrative is a strong “victim mentality”, especially since 1989.³¹³ In this frame, China takes the role of a victim that needs to recover status and territory from other states because both were stolen from it:

“China has suffered humiliation and miseries as the victim of foreign bullies, and its full national integrity has not been achieved until today. For this reason, the Chinese government and its people highly cherish their national sovereignty and integrity”³¹⁴

For this ‘victim’ role to remain stable in the domestic perception and to give legitimacy to the modernisation policy, the historical narrative has to be continuously applied by referencing the People’s Republic of China as both the rightful heir of the ‘Middle Kingdom’ and the victim of an unfair history, as done by the president of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies Yang Jiemian: “China’s diplomatic record dates back thousands of years, enjoying both the ancient glory and the modern time’s embarrassment”.³¹⁵ This continuous recreation of victimisation and humiliation³¹⁶ in connection to a lost ‘Golden Age’, serves to define China’s modern search for a role, and is prevalent in most concepts of China’s place in the world.

This narrative of humiliation by other countries forms the basis for another important narrative that is essential for regime legitimacy; the narrative of a threatening ‘outside’ and the emphasis on unity on the ‘inside’, under the leadership of the party, which strongly influences China’s perspective on global matters until today.³¹⁷ In the worldview of Chinese leaders, the world is seen as dangerous and hostile to China and ruled by ‘hostile foreign forces’. To survive and develop in this world, China needs a strong hand on the inside to keep the country from disunity on its path to ‘modernization’, and also power on the outside, as otherwise internal disunity would immediately be abused by outside powers.³¹⁸ Because it feels itself surrounded by ‘hostile foreign forces’, the Chinese leadership is sure Western interference will be attracted by domestic troubles.³¹⁹ Therefore, as Shih Chiyu has put it, for the Chinese leaders, being a nation state first of all means that no one can represent the

313 Sutter (2013) p.19

314 Yang Jiemian (2014) p.3, in: Zhao Jinjun & Chen Zhirui (2014)

315 Yang Jiemian (2014) p.2-3.

316 Yong, Deng (2008): China's struggle for status. The realignment of international relations. 1. publ. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 56

317 On the differentiation of inside and outside (nei wai you bie) in the CPCs world view see Brady, Anne-Marie (2003): Making the foreign serve China - Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham

318 Sutter (2013) p.113

319 Wang Yizhou (2012): Rethinking State Interests, in: Cai Tuo (2012) p.173

Chinese people except the Chinese leaders, thereby negating sovereignty-breaking ideas like 'global values' or 'human rights'.³²⁰

On 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong declared China a People's Republic, and thereby ascribed it a new foreign policy role by putting it squarely into the socialist camp. This assigned the country the foreign policy roles of, depending on the perspective, 'revolutionary vanguard' and 'little brother' of the Soviet Union. Even if the Chinese leadership might have had massive problems with this second role, there can be no doubt that most other countries saw China as clearly playing a subservient role to the USSR.³²¹ While the rhetoric of this period framed foreign policy in 'internationalist' terms, statist ideas of "national rejuvenation" (fuxing/zhenxing) and becoming a "strong and rich great country" (fuqiang daguo) remained the aim of Chinese foreign policy.³²² As a third element beyond statist and internationalist ideas, Shih and Jin argue, that China never totally gave up the Tianxia mentality. For them, Mao's socialist rhetoric of "intermediate zone theory", "leaning to one side", and accepting the Soviet Union as bigger brother are all signals of establishing a relationship through hierarchy, emanating from Confucian concepts of order, and negating the equality of states in the Westphalian system.³²³ The overall more tactical than systematic approach of Mao's use of internationalist and progressive rhetoric, is perhaps best exemplified in his dictum to "use the past to serve the present and make the foreign serve China". (Gu wei jin yong, yang wei zhong yong).³²⁴

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, China experienced a strong shift in its foreign policy orientation and its role conception.³²⁵ Still, a few ideas of Mao's 'revolutionary' foreign policy

320 Shih Chiyu (2012) p. 77

321 For a discussion of China's tactical use of internationalist role frames for nationalist purposes, especially its relationship with the USSR, see Brady (2003) p.79-117. She questions the adequacy of real internationalist thinking among the Chinese leadership. For a debate both about the changes but also the importance of Chinese foreign policy rhetoric see: Mierzejewski, Dominik (2013): From Morality to Morality - The rhetoric of Chinese Foreign Policy over Four Decades in: Bin Wu, Yao Shujie and Chen Jian (2013): China's Development and Harmonization, Routledge, Milton Park

322 The concept of "rejuvenation" to make China a "rich and powerful country" has been around since the beginning of the 20th century and has been the core aim of Chinese foreign policy for a long time. See Medeiros (2009) p.7, however these concepts have been re-emphasised by the Xi administration after 2012.

323 Shih Chiyu (2012) p. 81

324 Brady (2003) p.1

325 For a more in-depth discussion of China's foreign policy after the reform period see Shambaugh, David (2011): China goes global – The partial Power, Oxford University Press, Oxford

remain, like the frame of “self-reliance” and the connected disapproval of alliances.³²⁶ The CPC simply redefined socialism to mean raising living standards domestically and a return to great power status internationally. Instrumental in achieving both aims was the ‘reform and opening up policy’ (Gaijie Kaifang) of Deng Xiaoping which brought market mechanisms, foreign direct investment (FDI) and resulting strong economic growth to the Chinese economy.

In foreign policy, Deng Xiaoping retained the frames of the “anti-hegemonic struggle for the third world” or the “detached balancer between the superpowers”³²⁷, otherwise he called for a more statist approach to world affairs in which national interests would override international solidarity, and relations with other countries first of all should serve China’s economic interests. Only in 2002 did China for the first time publish a white paper defining its national interest and “core national interests” thereby signalling officially the acceptance of the statist approach.³²⁸ However, Wang Yizhou argues that the idea of national interest was not new to the China of the 1980s, but was actually also prevalent during the times of Mao’s socialist foreign policy, when it was simply taboo to talk about them due to Maoist internationalist rhetoric.³²⁹

Bringing together the historical frames of ‘Tianxia’ and ‘Nation State’, Shih and Yin argue that today Chinese foreign policy has two leitmotifs; the “harmonious world” and “core national interest”.³³⁰ As these frames are often contradictory concepts in their Western understanding, Zhu Liqun of the school of the Chinese Foreign Ministry argues that Western IR can’t explain Chinese foreign policy. According to her, for a Chinese perspective there is no conflict between these two frames, but rather a discursive process, one could even argue a dialectic element that can only be understood from China’s foreign policy practice.³³¹ Shih Chiyü and Yin also point out the neglect of this process in Western IR:

“For many pre-modern latecomers, acquiring a national role conception is a confusing process. Watchers in Europe seldom appreciate that the latecomers’ acceptance of the institution of the

326 Sutter (2013) p.131 For Mao’s view on the alliance systems and the question of how important Mao’s ideology was for China’s foreign policy or if it was not just a reaction to western rejection and acceptance by the Soviet Union, see Harris, Stuart(2014): *China’s foreign Policy*, Polity Press, Cambridge

327 Shih Chiyu (2012) p. 81

328 For an in-depth discussion of the developments of China’s national interests, see Wang Yizhou (2012)

329 Wang Yizhou (2012) p.166

330 Shih Chiyu & Yin Jinwu (2013) p. 62 & p. 74

331 Zhu Liqun (2014): *China and International System: Two-Way Socialisation under the logic of Practice*, in: Zhao Jinjun & Chen Zhirui (2014)p.19

territorial state may rest upon antagonism towards European imperialism, rather than upon their national interest calculus.”³³²

So, finding a middle way between accepting its surrounding world and challenging it is a difficult and time-consuming process for Chinese foreign policy, leading to a continuous change between ‘keeping a low profile’ and the urge to change the unjust world order because of the “ideological discrimination and military alliances stressed by the West.”³³³

4.2. The Civilizational State - Finding a Role in the World

Lucien Pye famously said that China is a “civilisation pretending to be a state”.³³⁴ This pretension demands continuous search for a role and status, and Shih suggests describing China as a ‘civilizational state’, which has been in the process of “learning realism and preaching harmony.”³³⁵ Its foreign policy is therein understood as following Confucian ideas of teaching and learning. Zhu Liqun calls this process “two way socialization” where after China has learned from the West, and has been socialized by it into international society, the West now learns from China.³³⁶ Prevalent to this way of thinking about learning processes between the West and Asia is the peculiar conviction that the West does not understand Asia, but Asia understands the West.³³⁷

However, Shih Chiyu argues that in this process China suffers from the problem that making the World understand and accept China’s role is difficult as a nation state and to “to charm those outside is to adapt to their (that is, American) preferences. Thus, it can be argued that the introduction of soft power to China is more an illustration of American soft power than of Chinese soft power.”³³⁸ He argues that for China, the role it plays towards the other has always been more important than an identification process by domestic means, calling this a ‘role’ state versus an ‘ego state’. This has the effect that China has to continuously worry about its

332 Shih Chiyu & Yin Jinwu (2013): Between Core National Interest and a Harmonious World: Reconciling Self-Role Conceptions in Chinese Foreign Policy, in: The Chinese Journal of International Politics, Vol.6, 2013, 59-84 p. 66

333 Yang Jiemian (2014) p.3

334 Pye, Lucien (1990): China - Erratic State, Frustrated Society, Foreign Affairs, Vol 69, No.1, p.58

335 Shih Chiyu & Yin Jinwu (2013) p. 65; For a slightly different use of the concept of civilisational state see Zhang, Weiwei (2011): The China Wave – The Rise of a Civilisational State, World Century Publishing Cooperation, Hackensack

336 Zhu Liqun (2014) p.19

337 Shih Chiyu (2012) p. 76

338 For China’s debate of the ‘China threat theory’, the alleged strategic vilification of China by the West and China’s neighbours, notably Japan, see Yong Deng (2006): Reputation and the Security Dilemma - China Reacts to the China Threat Theory, in: Johnston, Alastair Iain & Robert Ross (eds., 2006): New directions in the Study of China’s foreign Policy, Stanford University Press, Stanford

image with the audience and tries to conform to international norms. In this interactionist concept, the 'other' and the audience want an actor to be a role taker not a role maker, to follow their own role expectations instead of creating new roles. This has put strong limitations on China's ability to 'invent' in its foreign policy. Role makers can, to a certain degree adjust the threat perception by the other, but a role enactment that does not fulfil the audience's expectations leads to the rekindling of the 'China threat' discourse, damaging the legitimacy of China's status.³³⁹ China, understood as a role state, feels the pressure of the role expectations and exhibits continuous anxiety over the evaluation by others. This anxiety can sometimes be overcome by a positive self-image, but more often leads to the worry that role performance cannot live up to expectations. China is in the continuous process of trying to fulfil certain norms, even using them strategically to legitimise domestic policies, as practised with its acceptance of the norms of the World Trade Organisation.³⁴⁰

For Shih Chiyu and Yin Jinwu, one of the major problems with this process is that other countries, which come from different cultural and historical backgrounds, do not always appreciate its concepts and attempts for 'harmony', nor do they understand the anxiety that China feels about its status in the world.³⁴¹ But because of its own learning process—perspective, China expects reciprocity for a modification of its self-role conception. If the other side is not forthcoming with this, China shows disciplining behaviour, for example through sanctions when other countries 'disrespect' China or the sole representation of it by the CPC leadership, for example by meeting the Dalai Lama or selling weapons to Taiwan.³⁴²

At the same time, China has undergone many successful role learning processes from being the "leading developing country" in the 1970s, to "responsible stakeholder" in the first decade of the 21st century:³⁴³

"Since Xi [Jinping] came to power, China has become a more aware, involved international actor and is pursuing innovative initiatives with the hope of becoming a new sort of great power" [...] "instead of looking at issues from a China-centric perspective, Beijing now looks at issues from a more global angle, using international trends to inform its external relations. China is now more aware of and

339 Shih Chiyu (2012) p. 71, 72; Horsburgh, Nordin and Breslin debate the question of innovation an invention in Chinese foreign policy in more detail see Horshurgh, Nicole, Astrid Nordin and Shaun Breslin (eds., 2014): Chinese Politics and International Relations – Innovation and Invention, Routledge, London

340 Shirk (2007) p.132

341 Shih Chiyu & Yin Jinwu (2013) p. 82

342 Shih Chiyu & Yin Jinwu (2013) p. 65

343 Gottwald & Duggan (2011) p. 235

takes more initiative on issues of global importance. Beijing is increasingly willing to assume responsibility on these matters.”³⁴⁴

Both the international and domestic levels influence the Chinese debate about what is appropriate foreign policy behaviour in the light of China’s rising capabilities. For Gottwald and Duggan, the impetus for China’s role learning attempts can be traced back to role expectations from the international community but are at the same time the result of domestic debates about its own self-role conceptions. That in these domestic debates the role of the Chinese foreign policy apparatus is first and foremost to protect Chinese interests abroad, is in itself nothing extremely uncommon, as most governments see their role as first of all achieving their constituents’ interests.³⁴⁵ What is different in China compared to the West, is the strong emphasis on enabling China’s return to international great power status, beyond economic interests, as “international status” is the most important value in Chinese foreign policy.³⁴⁶ Gottwald and Duggan argue for example that China’s main interest in joining the G20 was not to push through any kind of policy agenda, but simply a quest for status. When the demands of the G20 role became obvious, such as investing in the recovery of the world economy, China refused to take this responsibility.³⁴⁷ To say it more plainly, China often simply ‘plays’ the role of a great power without also enacting the role demands of this role.

4.3. Recalibrating the World Order on Chinese Terms - Towards a ‘Harmonious World’

In contrast to earlier revolutionary times, since the beginning of the reform period China has decided to generally accept the foundations of the international system. It does not intend anymore to abolish the whole system and rather wants to be part of and change it according to its own principles and interests.³⁴⁸ The model for this new world order is the ‘reestablishing’ of a ‘harmonious world’, which basically means that everybody plays his role. This concept was introduced to the global policy community at the UN Special Summit in 2005 by President Hu

344 Zhao Kejin (2013)

345 Gottwald & Duggan (2011) p. 242

346 Yong Deng (2005) p. 51

347 Gottwald & Duggan (2011) p. 246-249

348 Wang Yizhou (2012) p.170, For the debate on the perceived constraints that the current international system puts on China’s development and how it would like to reform the system see Li Jingzhi & Pu Ping (2014): *Reconstructing China – The Peaceful development, Economic Growth and International Role of an Emerging Superpower*, Mc Graw Hill Education, New York

Jintao.³⁴⁹ Since then it has confused Western observers, especially as it is often seen as contradicting the rather statist and realist-oriented goal of a ‘multipolar world’, which had been an outcome of the statist approach of the 1980s.³⁵⁰ However, multipolarity could also be understood as a precondition of the ‘harmonious world’ as for Beijing it seems to be the only way to stop other states, especially the US, from having a dominant position.³⁵¹

This idea of a ‘harmonious’ order, though often ridiculed by Western observers, is important because of China’s demand for status. Status has a dualistic nature and comes both out of material power and the idealist frame of ‘legitimacy’.³⁵² A key measure for status in China is whether China’s great power aspiration is internationally accepted as legitimate and whether its core national interests are respected by other great powers and neighbouring states.³⁵³ This perspective points to one of the major dilemmas of Chinese foreign policy role play according to Shih: When a state seeks recognition in a hierarchy, it faces the constant danger of being rejected. China often feels rejected by the traditional great powers and blames this on Western discrimination, ideological hostility, and fear of a rising China.³⁵⁴ Instances where China feels accepted in its role as a great power are therefore cherished as can be seen in the continuous referencing of the ‘Bandung Conference’ of 1955. The meeting of non-aligned nations was the first instance where China could present itself in the role of the ‘leader of the developing world.’ It did so by proposing foreign policy concepts like the “five principles of peaceful coexistence” and “seeking common ground while reserving differences”. In the Chinese view these were seen as consensual mechanisms, highlighting China as a ‘norm giver’ as the concepts: “were embraced by the Afro-Asian countries and eventually became one of the modern basic norms governing international relations.”³⁵⁵

At the time of the Bandung Conference, China did not accept the international order and international norms, which were often set by Western states. Therefore, the status given to it

349 For the harmonious world concept which has a Confucian tradition and a domestic pendant in the idea of the ‘harmonious society’ see Callahan; William (2013): *China Dreams – 20 Visions for the Future*, Oxford University Press, New York, p.44-52; also Medeiros (2009) p.48-50

350 While these are competing concepts about world order, both are a response to the ‘China threat’ discourse. Shih Chiyu & Yin Jinwu (2013) p. 71

351 Sutter (2013) p.130

352 Yong Deng (2005) p. 51

353 Yong Deng (2005) p. 53

354 Shih Chiyu (2012) p. 81

355 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 19

by other developing states was in line with its own role conception. After Deng's reforms, its general acceptance of the international order and international norms has to include the West or 'international society'. One way of achieving this acceptance by other great powers is the role of a 'responsible stakeholder', a role that China was framed in by former deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick.³⁵⁶ Zhu Liqun emphasizes the willingness of China for compliance with international norms which she also sees leading to a stronger willingness of China to take over more responsibility on the global level.³⁵⁷ However, in her view other countries have thus far stopped China from playing a bigger role as an agenda setter on the international stage.³⁵⁸ According to this narrative, whenever China takes over responsibility, its efforts are not appreciated.

China still understands world politics as a hierarchy³⁵⁹ and critics accuse China of simply using the 'Tianxia' frame in a reduced form to simply legitimise its foreign policy and exploitation of other countries and accordingly to proceed with its own civilising projects in the perceived periphery.³⁶⁰ In this view, China's new international institutions like the China-Africa Forum (FOCAC), where African heads of state would convene around the Chinese president to receive aid from China, are merely modern versions of tributary rituals, where representatives of foreign lands come to the 'centre' to re-enact the hierarchy.³⁶¹ In the Tianxia concept, all actors find their legitimate and appropriate position, status, and role. In this way, China's Third World policy enacts "the drama of giving without taking", similar to the presents the emperor gave to foreign delegations.³⁶² Beijing would obviously insist that this foreign policy behavior does not actually include a real hierarchy, as China does not dominate or exploit like all other states do.

For China, one of the ways of calling for a new order is by using the culturalist statement that American and European institutions and norms are ill-suited for the people outside the West, especially in Africa and the Middle East. China often points to its own successes, framing it as a 'China model' as when Yang Jiemian claims that China's foreign policy enjoys stability

356 Shirk (2007) p 127-128, see also Yong Deng (2005) p. 60

357 Zhu Liqun (2014) p.19

358 Zhu Liqun (2014) p.36

359 Yong Deng (2005) p. 58

360 Callaghan (2008)

361 Shih Chiyu (2012) p. 80

362 Shih Chiyu (2012) p. 80

because of one party rule since it's not "election driven," and the absence of the "senseless factionalism" of the West.³⁶³ However, while there is a consensus on criticising the shortcomings and over-interventionist aspects of the West's liberal order, there is so far very little consensus about what an alternative order or model could be.

4.4. Interests and Instruments of Chinese Foreign Policy

China's foreign policy interests are as multifaceted as those of other big and diverse states, but a few major interests stand out, especially to facilitate its export-driven economic development and to gain status. As discussed earlier, the Chinese state's main aim of 'rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' frames all kinds of internal and external policies, aims and interests, and highlights again the strong interconnection with the domestic developmental mission. The vehicle to reach this goal is first of all economic development, necessitating domestic and international stability needed for foreign trade and access to natural resources abroad.³⁶⁴ As the biggest concern of Chinese foreign policy remains maintaining domestic political order, the interests of Chinese foreign policy are named by Wang Feiling as "Preservation, Prosperity and International Power", with economic development as the key goal.³⁶⁵ Former Foreign Minister Qian Qichen once explained, how China's foreign policy is supposed to serve its domestic agenda, stating that: "Diplomacy is the extension of internal affairs".³⁶⁶ In this way Zhao Kejin of Tsinghua University summed up the primary aims of Chinese foreign policy in April 2013, after the leadership change which brought Xi Jinping to power:

"In its foreign policy, China seeks to achieve modernization, create a benevolent and peaceful external environment, and take steps that allow it to develop its domestic economy. To that end, the critical points of Chinese foreign policy are maintaining peaceful relations with other states and complying with the principles of fairness and justice. Beijing hopes to build momentum for its domestic development through its external activities, including securing resources overseas. The Chinese government contends that diplomacy should ensure the country's prosperity, open up new paths for the nation's rejuvenation, and create conditions that benefit the Chinese people."³⁶⁷

363 Yang Jiemian (2014) p.3.

364 Medeiros (2009) p.50

365 Wang Feiling (2005) p. 19; For another edited Volume giving a broader overview of the Chinese perspective on foreign policy see Wang Yizhou (ed., 2011): Transformation of Foreign Affairs and International Relations in China (1978-2008), Brill, Leiden

366 Gurtov, Mel (2010): Changing Perspectives and Policies, in: Dittmer & Yu (2010), p.14; For the close interrelation of domestic development and foreign policy see Jin Canrong (2014): China's Future: The path to Prosperity and Peace, Enrich Professional Press, Singapore

367 Zhao Kejin (2013)

This aspect of 'rejuvenation' also highlights a concern about the international status that was talked about earlier. China wants to be respected as a great power, perhaps even as the pivotal state it once was. However this 'rejuvenation' cannot solely come from its material strength, but will also depend on China finding its international role.³⁶⁸ Because of this importance of idealist factors, Wang Yizhou sees China having increasing 'responsibility interests', which he however locates only in the Asian surroundings of China and not in distant parts of the globe. Following Wang, one can summarize that China wants to achieve great power status by being active mostly in its own region and its global role will therefore be first of all a function of its East Asian regional role.³⁶⁹

When it comes to the 'style' of Chinese foreign policy in achieving these goals, Deng Xiaoping's credo of "keeping a low profile" (taoguang yanghui) still dominated Beijing's tactical thinking at least until the financial crisis of 2008. However, the increasing capabilities of the country have led a growing number of people inside the foreign policy community in Beijing, especially in the military, to think that China's power is now big enough to take a more assertive stance on the world stage or at least play a bigger role in international affairs.³⁷⁰ However, the majority of participants in China's foreign policy discourse still seems to be convinced that if at all, this 'assertiveness' can only apply in China's regional surroundings and the country's capabilities are still too limited to take on global responsibilities.

Ironically, while the country can be called more secure today than ever before, there has been a growing discourse of 'insecurity' in Beijing over the last twenty years.³⁷¹ The outcome of this discourse was a concept of comprehensive security, or "New Security" in 2002, which integrated the concepts of external and domestic security, showing how securitised the view of China's leaders of both the inside and the outside world is.³⁷² This approach was continued in 2013 with the founding of China's National Security Commission under Xi Jinping.³⁷³

368 Yong Deng (2005) p. 58

369 Wang Yizhou (2012) p.180-181

370 Johnston, Alastair Iain (2013): How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?, In: International Security Volume 37, Number 4, Spring 2013, pp. 7-48

371 Wang Feiling (2005) p. 22

372 Wang Feiling (2005) p. 26

373 Tiezzi, Shannon (2014): China's National Security Commission Holds First Meeting, in: the Diplomat, 16.04.2014

This feeling of insecurity however is mostly answered in an ego-centred way, focussing on ideas of autarchy. The deep traditional scepticism about alliances and even stable partnerships remains prevalent among most Chinese policy makers and scholars: “Such relationships of partners, friendly states and allies, formed in the long course of history, carry the marks of the Cold War period [...]”³⁷⁴ Instead, China emphasises ‘United front-tactics’, which could be defined as temporary alliances of convenience, as practiced by the CPC in its history with non-communist parties and states.³⁷⁵

The US is seen as the ‘main enemy’ and ironically this view has even increased in popularity in China with increasing Chinese interdependence. Many Chinese scholars see the relationship with the US as “one being an emerging power on the rise while the other an old-line empire on the decline.”³⁷⁶ Therefore, the US is often portrayed in Chinese sources as being afraid of a rising China challenging its unipolar position:

“While arousing the misgivings and worries of the surrounding nations of China, this fact also made the United States fear that China would challenge its hegemonic position in the world. Therefore, it would make use of Asian countries’ worries for China to play up the “China threat” theory with the purpose of keeping its presence in Asia.”³⁷⁷

China’s perspective on the international stage is obsessed with the narrative of the US trying to prevent the ‘rise of China’. In this narrative, the fact that other countries often hold negative views of China is normally seen as a result of a US conspiracy, and an important part of China’s self-perception. Only in this narrative can the perceived hostility of other states against a country that in its self-perception has never and will never show aggression be framed in a logical way. In this narrative, negative views of China by other countries are therefore never a result of Chinese foreign policy, but rather are due to hostile foreign forces, normally the US or Japan.

Contrary to this, Chinese foreign policy is normally depicted by Chinese diplomats and the Chinese media as consistent and with strong moral goals. Samuel Kim called this, “Firmness in principle and flexibility in application”. China sees itself as principled, while other states only search for power. While China might not be totally unique in this self-centered view, the level

374 Teng Jianqun (2011): The Third-Party Factors in China-U.S. Relations, in: China International Studies, January/February 2011, p.64

375 For the origin and evolution of the CPC’s United Front Policy see Braddy (2003)

376 Teng (2011) p.64-5

377 Ibid.

of discrepancy between domestic and international perception is troubling for some Western observers:

“Many Chinese truly believe that the foreign policy of China has always followed morally correct foreign policies in the interest of progressive world forces. They believe China has done nothing wrong in world affairs, if difficulties arise with other states over foreign policy concerns, the fault naturally lies with the other party.”³⁷⁸

This perspective of course seems contradictory to the learning process-approach. When one party is convinced that the other is always at fault, learning will be limited to better tactical responses to the other side’s actions.

Instead of challenging the US, according to Shih Chiyu and Yin Jinwu, China’s foreign policy takes the role of “demonstrating China’s civilizational attraction, [...] attempting to present alternative principles of IR.”³⁷⁹ Over time, other actors will learn the way of a ‘harmonious world’ in the same way that China will. This idea of other states learning from China has been prominent for a long time and China has traditionally rewarded the acceptance of the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ with aid and trade and the status of ‘friend of China’. Over the last years this has been replaced by the amorphous frame of ‘The Beijing Consensus’, meaning a focus on state centered relations and minimal interference by removing conditionality from aid and investment, in contrast to Western aid concepts, the so called ‘Washington Consensus’.³⁸⁰

On the operational level, China’s policy is often reactive and very seldomly innovative and follows competing goals.³⁸¹ It can also be described as heavily China-centered and focused on “win-win solutions”. These win-win solutions, are often contradictory with the international society’s demand for China to take on more responsibility, which might mean intervention against the interest of the third state. The main instrument of this foreign policy over the last three decades has been China’s growing economic muscle, and for some analysts the importance of trade in the foreign policy identity has become so strong that Zweig speaks of

378 Sutter (2013) p.132

379 Shih Chiyu & Yin Jinwu (2013) p. 67

380 Gurtov (2010) p.22

381 Sutter (2013) p.19.

“the rise of a new trading nation”, symbolized in China’s emphasis on resource diplomacy and the “going out” strategy.³⁸²

4.5. China’s Foreign Policy Framework

As the Director of the Shanghai Institute of International Studies Yang Jiemian points out, China’s foreign policy can be defined by four pillars (si da zhizhu):³⁸³ The relationship with other great powers, the consolidation of China’s position in its own neighbourhood, the continuing importance of the developing world in China’s foreign policy outlook and the use of multilateralism as one of its prime instruments. Evan Medeiros argues that the priority of these is not always clear but that it is generally accepted, that China has a strong focus on other great powers, especially the US and its own region, with the great powers normally being the top priority.³⁸⁴

4.5.1. A New Type of Great Power Relationship

Acceptance of its status as a great power is perhaps the most important aspect of China’s foreign policy. As this status depends on recognition by other countries, especially the other great powers, China wants to institutionalise this process of recognition. Then Vice-President Xi Jinping on the occasion of his trip to the US in 2012 aired the frame of a “Great Power Relationship of a New Type”.³⁸⁵ The concept remained an enigma for many observers, due to China’s understanding of this frame as a process rather than a fact, so Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi felt obliged to explain it in 2013:

“China had to become a great power and pursue great-power relations but that it should not do so in the mould of previous great powers. This means that China will not tolerate interference from foreign forces in its diplomatic decisions and will not seek alliances or hegemony. Instead, Beijing will pursue a path of peaceful development.”³⁸⁶

The process of delineating the details of this concept, comparable to a ‘civilising’ or ‘socialising’ process, will have to take place with the other Great Powers participating. This is especially

382 Zweig (2010) p.40, also Medeiros (2009) p.61-70

383 Yang Jiemian (2014) p.12

384 Medeiros (2009) p.93, also Sutter (2013) p.19 Zhu Zhiqun discusses China’s policies towards the different regions in more detail, see Zhu, Zhiqun (2010): *China’s New Diplomacy – Rationale, Strategies and Significance*, Ashgate, Farnham

385 Paul Mancinelli argues that the New Type of Great Power relationship is actually a rather consistent outgrowth of the Russian-Chinese relationship. It was first proposed as a model for Sino-U.S. relations by State Councillor Dai Binguo in 2008, but only used again in this context by then Vice-President Xi during his visit to the U.S. in 2012. See Mancinelli, Paul (2014): *Conceptualizing ‘New Type Great Power Relations’: The Sino-Russian model*, in: *Jamestown Foundation China Brief Volume XIV, Issue 9, May 7, 2014*

386 Zhao Kejin (2013)

true for the US, which is understood by China as the defining relationship for its future status and foreign policy role.³⁸⁷ From the Chinese perspective, that this relationship is often framed as a zero-sum-game and not as a process of mutual learning is one of the main obstacles to overcome:

“The core of the US-China relationship has long been competition, and Washington will not abandon competing with Beijing. China, however, has decided that the key to its future is not to fight a war with the United States—and certainly not to claim US turf—but instead to establish better relations between the two countries so that China can develop itself and create the necessary conditions for peace.”³⁸⁸

China depicts itself in this view as the ‘Middle Kingdom’ in that it is Beijing that gives to other states for the sake of harmony and it is the other states that should reciprocate by acknowledging China’s efforts, status, and interests in order to enable the learning process that leads to a harmonious relationship. In exchange for the US accepting China’s regional hierarchy in East Asia and its domestic order, China would accept the global hierarchy with the US on top:

“This increased interaction will allow the US and Chinese governments to form a consensus. (...) The two countries will need to respect each other’s core interests and avoid challenging each other’s bottom lines on these issues. For China, these interests are Taiwan, the South China Sea, Tibet, Xinjiang, and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands territorial dispute. This also means that China must not challenge the United States’ position as the global leader, and the United States must not challenge the ruling position of the Chinese Communist Party.”³⁸⁹

Simplified, the Chinese idea of a ‘Great Power Relationship of a New Type’ with the US demands reciprocity in both the acceptance of the status of the other and of its interests, or even spheres of interest. So China will accept the global leadership of the US as long as the US accepts China to be somehow equal, and stops interfering with China’s political order and regional East Asian sphere of influence. To harmonise this relationship, both sides have to learn their proper status and roles through interaction.

It is not always clear who is counted among the great powers by China. While Russia is definitely one of them, other emerging powers like India or Brazil might also be seen as equals:

“While not forgetting its old friends, China must actively expand its development of new partnerships. These relationships support China’s overseas interests and investments but are not motivated by strategic concerns. Xi’s first trip after assuming power was to Russia, which indicates

387 For different perspectives of this relationship see Shambaugh, David (ed., 2013): *Tangled Titans – The United States and China*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham

388 Zhao Kejin (2013)

389 Zhao Kejin (2013)

that Beijing prioritizes emerging countries, as China is one itself. This visit also testifies to China's emphasis on great-power relationships."³⁹⁰

Beijing's perspective on Europe is difficult to pinpoint. The years after the introduction of the Euro and the US-European split after the Iraq War 2003 were a time when China seemed to consider the EU as an important partner in balancing an aggressive US and supporting a multipolar world.³⁹¹ This view, however, has been dimmed by the Euro Crisis after 2009. Traditionally the big member states, such as the UK and France and sometimes Germany were also counted as big powers.³⁹²

4.5.2. China and its Neighbours

In the Chinese view, its East Asian regional role is the most important step towards establishing its global role³⁹³ and accordingly Southeast Asia is the only region where China sees itself as having a real strategic vision and an emphasis on governance through multilateral frameworks including or even led by China.³⁹⁴ In the region itself, China conceives of the proper order with itself on top, reflecting the old Tianxia system, even if not replicating it in the modern Westphalian world. This regional order is seen as 'natural' and only prevented by the interference of the US:

"China only began having trouble on territorial matters after the US pivot to Asia because the United States is attempting to undermine Beijing. Washington exaggerates Chinese aggressiveness and uses China as an imaginary threat to enhance the power of its alliances and provide an excuse for US arms sales. The power to shape contemporary global discourse is in the hands of the United States, but China will not simply give up its territorial interests."³⁹⁵

While most of China's neighbours seem to be worried about its rise³⁹⁶ and have welcomed the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia,' Beijing does not understand these concerns, ascribing them purely to hostile inference by the US. In 2013, the neighbourhood concept frame was

390 Zhao Kejin (2013)

391 For a more in-depth debate of the EU-China relationship see Brown, Kerry (ed., 2014): *China and the EU in Context – Insights for Business and Investors*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke

392 For a more in-depth discussion of China's relationship with the different powers see Medeiros (2009) p.95-124

393 Yong Deng (2005) p. 64

394 Dorsch (2010) p.61; also interview with Chinese Scholar, Beijing, April 2013

395 Zhao Kejin (2013) For a debate of the impact of China's rise on Asian security and perceptions of its its own periphery see Li Mingjiang & Kalyan Kumburi (eds., 2015): *China's Power and Asian Security*, Routledge, Milton Park; for a more discourse and role oriented approach see Horesh, Niv, Hyun Jin Kim and Peter Mauch (2015): *Superpower China – Historicising Beijing New Narratives of Leadership and East Asia's Response thereto*, World Scientific, Singapore

396 For an Indian Perspective on China see Gopal, S. & Nabeel Mancheri (eds., 2013): *Rise of China – Indian Perspectives*, Lancer Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi; Sharma, Sandeep (2014): *India and China – Strategic Energy Management and Security*, Book Enclave, Jaipur; also Janjan, Ravi (2013): *China's Foreign Policy*, Sumit Enterprises, New Delhi

widened by the 'One Belt One Road' Frame, connecting Eastern Europe and Africa to China's neighbourhood through a renewed version of the Silk Road.³⁹⁷

4.5.3. China and other Developing Countries

Perhaps the most important historical legacy of Mao's foreign policy outlook is China's self-conception as a developing country and the emphasis it puts on the relationship with other developing countries. Deng Xiaoping promised in 1984 that China will always be a "Third World country even if it had developed"³⁹⁸ This approach has two advantages for China. First, China is aware that many developing countries are unhappy with the existing world order, which is perceived to favour developed countries. Second, it enhances its own self-understanding as a civilizational state which is beneficent to other countries. China still defines itself as "leader of the Third World," a role conception from the Maoist period, which today can be understood as a supplement for the traditional hierarchy of the Tianxia system.

China's identification with the developing world has intensified because after the Cold War the need to identify as an enemy of the Soviet Union had vanished.³⁹⁹ However it does not follow the Soviet style support for resistance against the Western dominated international system but instead promotes its own model of making use of the international system from the inside in the Confucian role of a teacher as Shih and Yin state: "Beijing avoids involving itself in direct confrontation with the global power and instead coaches the local power on how to make a concession to restore harmony in the structure"⁴⁰⁰ This policy is likely to continue for the foreseeable future:

"Developing countries will be a cornerstone of China's foreign policy under Xi. Developing countries and emerging powers are China's reliable friends and sincere partners. [...] There have been accusations that Xi's recent visits to Latin America are part of a strategic plan to undermine US hegemony in the region. In reality, these visits have no strategic significance or considerations whatsoever. They represent comprehensive global diplomacy intended to establish a new, more balanced type of development relationship among partners. They are certainly not aimed at containing the United States."⁴⁰¹

In this, most attention over the last few years has been paid to China's role in Africa where China still defines itself as an 'all-weather friend' promoting 'non-intervention' by external

397 Caixin: One Belt, One Road, 12. October 2014 <http://english.caixin.com/2014-12-10/100761304.html>

398 Gurtov (2010) p.18

399 Ditmer (2010) p.1

400 Shih Chiyu & Yin Jinwu (2013) p. 74

401 Zhao Kejin (2013)

powers.⁴⁰² However, international criticism of its perceived shielding of autocrats and dictators, especially in Sudan, has been perceived as incompatible with the role of ‘responsible stakeholder’. This has led to a role adaptation where China supports what Gottwald and Duggan call “soft intervention.”⁴⁰³

4.5.4. Multilateralism

Because of its distrust of alliances and emphasis on full sovereignty, China has only in the last decade started to actively engage in building multilateral cooperation frameworks, although it started experimenting in participating in multilateral security mechanisms like the ASEAN Regional Forum in the early nineties.⁴⁰⁴

“Beijing has begun strengthening its networks, including ones in which the United States does not participate [...] Moreover, China has actively promoted reforms in global organizations such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the UN. The premise of these reforms is that China prioritizes sustainable domestic development first and external affairs second.”⁴⁰⁵

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was the first real attempt of institution-building that China took part in after 1996 and has so far been the most successful multilateral organisation founded by China. For Mel Gurtov, the SCO or ASEAN+3 symbolise the idea of a “multilateralism with Asian characteristics,” being often non-binding and containing Confucian- notions of reciprocity.⁴⁰⁶ Similarly, the cooperation with the other ‘rising powers’ has been institutionalised in the BRICS (Brasil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). China tries to bind developing nations to it, legitimising its dealings with them through formats like the China-Africa forum FOCAC, thereby as Shih argues, reconstructing the old hierarchies of tributary missions. While the BRICS emphasises China’s role as a ‘rising power’, the FOCAC and similar initiatives help stabilise China’s role as ‘leader of the developing world’.⁴⁰⁷

402 For China’s policy towards Africa in the new millennium see Hanauer, Larry & Lyle Morris: Chinese Engagement in Africa – Drivers, Reactions and Implications for US Policy, Rand Cooperation, Santa Monica

403 Gottwald & Duggan (2011) p.240

404 Gill, Bates (2007): Rising Star – China’s New Security Diplomacy, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., p.21

405 Zhao Kejin (2013)

406 Gurtov (2010) p.22

407 Shih (2012) p.80

4.6. Conclusion - China's Search for a Role in a Westphalian World

Since the traditional Chinese Tianxia system failed to incorporate the new European external actors in the 19th century, China finds itself in a continuous process of role location in the global and regional systems. While it has accepted the form of a Westphalian-type nation state, its perspective on itself and the surrounding world is still heavily influenced by its former traditional identity as a civilisation rather than a nation. The most prominent of these remnants of traditional conceptions about dealing with other state entities, is the persistent hierarchisation in these relations, even though China outwardly operates within a Westphalian system of equal states. Therefore, status always remains the main goal of Chinese foreign policy. The use of the concept of 'national interests' since the beginning of the 'opening-up and reform period' has not changed this.

While there is obviously no debate about a return to the old tributary system in East Asia, China has to juggle the influences of traditional Chinese-, revolutionary socialist- and nation state concepts in its discourse on its future role. So far there doesn't seem to exist a clear conception about its possible role or status in the world. Only in its own East Asian region, where historical precedent exists, a clear understanding in the Chinese debate that China should regain its rightful place on top of the East Asian hierarchy exists. The Chinese aim of becoming a 'strong and rich country' does not really address what its role should be in other regions. The only thing that can be said for certain, is that China wants to be seen as equal in status to other great powers like Russia, the EU, and perhaps even the US. It is important, however, to keep in mind the Chinese conception of international relations as a learning process, which focusses on continuous role re-evaluation and learning through social interaction.

When the CPC re-conceptualised socialism in the late 1970s to mean the dual goals of rising living standards at home and status abroad, it planned to achieve both goals through export-driven economic growth, which made China highly interdependent with the outside world. This frame of interdependence combined with the historically inspired insistence on sovereignty, leads China into a conflict of interest and thereby a role conflict. By guarding its own sovereignty through external trade, its own interests in other countries' internal affairs grow and its quest for international status makes it vulnerable to the Western hegemonic discourse on responsibility and the role of 'responsible stakeholder'. Traditionally, China tries

to solve this problem by de-securitising its relations with countries beyond its own region. China doesn't want to be seen as confrontational, at least not beyond those East Asian countries that it has territorial disputes with and preaches 'friendship' and 'non-intervention'. This is mandatory for a country that perceives itself to be highly export-dependent and for which, growth is only possible through access to markets and resources; therefore, conflicts with countries outside its own region are seen as not beneficial. At the same time, China wants to be seen as a developing country, as this frame allows it to play the role of a leader of the developing world, while also allowing it to evade the perception of being a neo-colonialist power that interferes in other states' affairs.

Therefore, when China says it wants to assume more responsibility, its understanding of this is quite the opposite of western conceptions of the term. Specifically, China means that it will interfere less or not at all in other countries' affairs, while for the West 'responsibility' means exactly a more interfering role. China also makes a clear distinction between its global role as a great power and as a regional power, and there is very little in the way of a role conception for regions beyond its neighbourhood so far. This also includes, that in its foreign policy role performance China will continue to focus on the role of East Asian regional power and prioritise the demands of this role.

5. China's Perception of its Role in the Middle East

*“China's active mediation and constructive role in the Sudan's Darfur issue, Iranian nuclear issue and Middle East issue has impressed the world so much that some overseas media proclaim that significant changes have taken place in China's diplomatic policy, evolving from a bystander to a pioneering mediator. [...] China's endeavour to promote the peaceful solution of the Middle East issue demonstrates a seriously positive image of a large and responsible country.”*⁴⁰⁸

Li Weijian, Department of West Asian and African Studies, SIIS, 2009

The Chinese debate on its own global role obviously has direct repercussions for its regional role conception. In this first chapter on the different levels of perspective, the pivotal question is therefore, how its carefulness not to engage in costly global acts of ‘responsibility’ reflect on its own role-conception in the region. The first important step in understanding how China talks about its role in the Middle East is to understand the institutional set-up for this discourse. The second step is understanding the historical narrative that China uses to frame its current role play in the region through central frames like ‘non-intervention’ and ‘anti-hegemonial’ policies. After we have traced these frames we can have a look at China’s perspective on the regional order, other external actors and regional forces, especially the Islamists. Finally, one can use these frames to understand how China interpreted its own role both before and during the Arab Spring.

408 Li Weijian (2009): The Transformation of the International System and China's Positive Diplomacy in the Middle East, in: Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia) Vol. 3, No. 1, 2009, p.34-36

5.1. China Considers the Middle East

That China's global role conception has great impact on how China sees the Middle East and its own role in it becomes evident, when we look at how China analyses the situation in the Middle East and the roles that the other actors play in it.

5.1.1. The Chinese Discourse: Middle East Studies and Policy Making in China

It is probably fair to say that for a country that still considers itself a developing country, China has one of the most extensive academic communities in the world; and the academic community working on the Middle East might be second only to the United States in size. While a detailed discussion of all the Chinese actors in the discourse on the Middle East would warrant its own study, the Chinese discourse is mostly driven by a few major institutes at big think tanks and universities, like the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), the China Institute of Current International Relations (CICIR) affiliated with the Ministry of Public Security, the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) affiliated with the Foreign Ministry, the Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS), and Shanghai International Studies University (SISU). These are understood to have the strongest influence on the Middle East discourse among policy makers.⁴⁰⁹

The great number of experts on the Middle East in China is all the more impressive given that Middle East studies in China only started sometime after the founding of the People's Republic.⁴¹⁰ The starting point for these studies was the conference of the non-aligned movement in the Indonesian town of Bandung in 1955, after which China began to develop its own policy towards the newly independent states of Africa and the Middle East and felt the need for a better understanding of the world beyond the great powers.

CASS was the first to establish an Institute in 1961, following Mao's demand that China "should have one institute on African studies." This was also the first Institute to focus research on the Middle East and Islam. Being founded on political demands, from the beginning the institute was tasked with writing "internal reports, and proposals for policy makers, not just academic analysis, and carry out teaching activities for graduate students and publish on the regions."

409 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2011

410 For an excellent overview over Middle East Studies in China see Sun Degang (2011): Six Decades of Chinese Middle East Studies - A Review, *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review*, 2. 2011, p.15-32

The institute was named “West Asia and Africa” to oppose the Western-centric term ‘Middle East’.⁴¹¹ Just three years later the Institute for Afro-Asian Studies was established at Peking University, which was the first institute to focus on academic research and language teaching related to the region.⁴¹²

While the major institutes are clearly centred in Beijing and Shanghai, Middle Eastern Studies are also undertaken outside the first-tyre, especially in provincial capitals with sizeable Muslim populations such as Kunming and Xian.⁴¹³ Xian’s North-Western University established its own institute on West-Asia also in 1964, which focussed on the history of the Middle East as its Professor Huang Mingxin explained: “Chairman Mao said ‘we should study religions in the world’. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, we began our transmission and also the research began.”⁴¹⁴ In the beginning, most scholars majored in language, not in history, political science or international relations.

This origin of international studies in language studies is not uncommon in China, and in many international relations or especially regional studies departments, the emphasis on language training is much higher than in Western institutions. In 2011 thirteen universities had their own Arabic departments. The traditional place to study Arabic abroad for Chinese researchers was Cairo University, but after 1992 many scholars were also invited to Jerusalem, often with the advantage of receiving financial support from the Israeli government and also the chance to study political science on a level comparable to Europe or the US.⁴¹⁵ This new focus on Israel was also a result of the lack of Arab interest in China, described by most scholars. “I don’t have the feeling that scholars in the Middle East have much interest in China, except perhaps in Israel.”⁴¹⁶ It might be a fair estimate, as forwarded by one Chinese scholar, that because of the influx of scholars from political science studies over the last years, which often receive

411 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2011

412 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011

413 Most of these have a country focus. South-West University in Chongqing, for example has an institute focusing on Iranian studies, seemingly the only one in China doing so. Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

414 Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

415 Traditionally, Cairo was the central place for Chinese scholars to study Arabic, as described by Craig-Harris (1992). Anecdotal evidence however, would point to rather high Arabic proficiency of those that have studied Arabic. The offer to study in Israel seems to have been mostly targeted at those scholars who do not speak a regional language, including Hebrew, but would take the opportunity to study or research in English in a regional environment. The Western practice of educating regional-studies scholars in more than one regional language, mostly Arabic and Persian, seems to be mostly unknown in China. Interview with Sun Degang, Shanghai, February 2011

416 Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

language training in English rather than Arabic, in most research institutes only half of the researchers speak a regional language, limiting the rest to mostly rely on Western and Chinese accounts of the region. Some Chinese scholars are convinced that there is a clear distinction between those scholars that have been in the West versus those that have ‘only’ been to the Middle East. This is because scholars who speak good Arabic tend to speak little English, and are therefore limited to Chinese and Arabic sources, which is seen as a limitation by many scholars.⁴¹⁷ From the perspective of Chinese scholars, most of their colleagues suffer either from not having access to regional sources, or not having access to the English literature on the region as they only speak either a regional language or English, but not both.⁴¹⁸

This last point is especially crucial as there seems to be wide ranging agreement that Middle Eastern studies in China are less advanced than in the West due to the lack of resources, theoretical training, and the novelty of Middle East studies in China. Field studies are seldom undertaken and activities are mostly focussed on exchange with scholars from both the West and the Middle East.⁴¹⁹ Some Middle East scholars have to focus on broader international relations due to the lack of interest in Chinese universities.⁴²⁰ Because of this disparity, Chinese scholars agree that the strongest influence on their studies comes from Western research, although most staff received their academic training in China. For example, around a third of the faculty of North-Western University’s West-Asia institute have studied in the West.⁴²¹

The subjects taught in Middle Eastern Studies in China are very diverse, but roughly speaking, Middle East Studies in China are focussed on three issues:

1. Regional order and the great powers: this includes studies on the effects of colonialism on the region, the current balance of power and the impact of globalisation, very much influenced by the general great power focus in China’s thinking about international relations.
2. Development and State Building: or as Wang Jinglie calls it, the “transitional period” of the Middle East, fitting into the ‘modernisation’ frame. The rather negative view on Islam seems

417 Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

418 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2011

419 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2011

420 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011: Due to this lack of interest among Chinese students, sometimes the courses on Middle Eastern topics are offered in English to attract international students.

421 Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

to be strongly influenced from Western theories about the lack of ‘enlightenment’ and ‘reform’ in Islamic thought. Islamism is often interpreted in China as a symbol of a “backward period”, and its rise seems a somehow difficult subject as it resists theories of modernisation that the Marxist/Chinese view normally espouses.⁴²²

3. Regional conflicts: like the conflict over the Iranian nuclear programme, the Palestine conflict, and the general instability of the regional structure.⁴²³

Introductory material used at universities often, like in the West, have a strong emphasis on ‘national history’ narratives, with very little discussion of China’s interests or roles in the region.⁴²⁴ Not all accounts, however, have this strong historical focus and there is an increasing number of works that now bring a stronger IR-oriented perspective to the debate, typically theory testing with Middle Eastern politics as case studies.⁴²⁵ With the outbreak of the Arab Spring, a rather frantic period of research activity started, trying to explain the unforeseen events.⁴²⁶ ‘Eyewitness accounts’ by former Chinese diplomats in the region seem to be very popular among teachers and researchers in Chinese universities.⁴²⁷ These are often framed with a level of authenticity, as Chinese diplomats are seen as having more hands-on experience with Middle Eastern politics than Chinese researchers who rarely do real field research. At the same time, there seems to be rather little engagement with Middle Eastern views on China so far.⁴²⁸

422 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2011

423 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2011

424 For introductory accounts of modern Middle Eastern history ordered by countries see the series edited by Peng Shuzhi that was used for teaching University students in Beijing: Wang, Tiezheng & Lin Songye (2000): *Zhongdong guojia tongshi: Shate a la bo juan*, General history of Middle East countries: Saudi Arabia, in: Peng, Shuzhi (2000), The Commercial Press ; Lei, Yu & Su Ruilin (2003): *Zhongdong guojia tongshi: Aiji juan*, General history of Middle East countries: Egypt, in: Peng, Shuzhi (2003), The Commercial Press; Wang, Tiezheng & Huang Minxing (2013): *Zhongdong shi*, Middle East History, in: Peng, Shuzhi (2013), People’s Publishing House; also in a more encyclopedic and biographical style: Shi, Yanchun (2002) : *Zhongdong fengyun renwu*, Influential people in the Middle East, World Affairs Press

425 For a more typical IR oriented account of Middle Eastern Politics see: Sun, Degang (2010): *Weiji guanli zhong de guojia anquan zhanlve*, National Security Strategy in Crisis Management: A Study of Preemption, in: Su, Changhe (2010), Shanghai People’s Publishing House; Li, Hongjie (2009): *Guojia liyi yu zhongguo de zhongdong zhengce*, National Interest and China’s Middle East Policy, Central Compilation & Translation Press

426 The perhaps earliest account of the Arab Spring was the collection edited by Ma, Xiaolin (2012): *A la bo jubian: xiya, beifei da dongdang shenceng guancha*, Arabian Upheaval: In-depth Observation on Turbulent West Asia and North Africa, Xinhua Publishing House

427 For some typical ‘eyewitness’ accounts by Chinese ambassadors on the Middle East see for example: Yuan, Lulin (1999): *Bosiwan zhengduo muji ji*, Witness of the fight in Gulf, Jiangsu People’s Press or Zhang, Weiqiu (2003): *Wo zai yilake dang dashi*, Ambassador in Iraq (1998-2003), World Affairs Press

428 Lu Jin’s review of the former Iranian Ambassador to China Fereydoun Verdinejad’s book “The Patient Dragon: China’s Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow” is a rather rare example. Lu, Jin (2013): *Yilang ren yanzhong de zhongguo lishi*

The importance of Middle East studies in China has increased over the last few years. This is mostly attributed to China's need for oil and the increasing dependency on the Middle East. Beyond energy, political initiatives like the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) were also seen as promoting the interest in Arab studies. This interest has extended from the energy sector to many areas, including issues related to politics, education, and military affairs. Stronger media coverage also heightened the interest in Middle Eastern issues.⁴²⁹

While in the beginning Middle Eastern and African studies were usually located in the same institute as both were put into the 'Third-World' or 'developing countries' frame, increasingly the study of the Middle East is separated from African studies. Wang Sulao, The head of the West-Asia center at Peking University, interpreted the establishment of his center in 2009 as symbolic for the growing importance of both the relations with the Middle East and Middle East studies in China.⁴³⁰ Others scholars however, pointed to the fact that the government still invests much more money into African research, which of course covers a wider area. It has to be said however, that generally most interviewees from Chinese academia were rather critical of Chinese expertise on the Middle East and attributed this to the lack of economic development and therefore investment opportunities in most parts of the region.

As in most countries, the influence of academic debates on actual foreign policy in China is a complicated issue. However, most interviewed scholars were convinced that the interest of the Chinese government in their research has increased over time, especially since the beginning of the Arab Spring. Of the research institutes CIIS, CICIR and CASS are supposed to be closest to the policy process, and scholars at CASS and CICIR frequently give briefings to central government officials.⁴³¹ Among the government agencies, policy research on the Middle East is done in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself and the International Department of the Communist Party's Central Committee. The Central Party School doesn't have an institute on the Middle East, though some of the school's scholars have written papers on the issue. While there doesn't seem to be a special section conducting research on the Middle East

wenhua he jingji fazhan: pingjie he zhayiy Naixin long: zhongguo de guoqu,xianzai he weilai, Review of and Excerpt from *The Patient Dragon: China's Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, p.201, in: Yang, Guang (2013)

429 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011

430 Ibid.

431 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2011

in the Defence Ministry, the PLA sometimes holds discussions on the Middle East.⁴³² The Ministry of Commerce also has its own research centre (CAITEC) that has a section doing research on the Middle East and Africa. Finally, some Chinese oil and construction companies have their own analysts⁴³³ and some have sponsored workshops and roundtables, giving them at least indirect influence on the discourse.⁴³⁴

5.1.2. **Civilisation, Silk Road and Colonialism: the use of History as a Legitimising Frame**

Most Chinese analysis of Sino-Arab relations follows a clear narrative path, leading from a shared history to a harmonious present and promising future. The historical overview frames China's presence in the region in terms of historical legitimacy. While in a Eurocentric analysis of global politics, the two regions are normally seen as very distant from each other, they are presented as connected by a shared history in Chinese research. This narrative basically contains three elements: the commonality of being an ancient civilisation, the common legacy of the 'Silk Road,' and the shared experience of victimisation by Western colonialism, thereby repeating the frames of culturalism, ancient glory and national humiliation discussed in the last chapter.⁴³⁵

The commonality of being one of the 'birthplaces of civilization' is seen as a frame for "a long history of mutual influence and fusion in the process of historical development among these ancient and splendid civilizations, which may be dated back to over 2000 years."⁴³⁶ This frame creates a bridge between both regions and follows the Chinese practice of countering the superior development level of the West with its ancient history to create equality. As most Middle Eastern countries cannot really be compared to China in the efficiency of their economy, they can be elevated to equal status by pointing at their equal civilizational heritage. This also sets the basis to create a common identity by indirectly pointing out that none of these 'birthplaces of civilisation' was in a Western country.

432 See for example Col. Liu Yuan's comments at the Annual Conference of China's Association of Political Science, Tsinghua University, Beijing, July 2011

433 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2011

434 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011

435 For a discussion of this narrative also see: Zambelis & Gentry (2008) p.66

436 Wang Jinglie (2010): Review and Thoughts over the Relationship between China and the Middle East, in: *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* Vol.4 Nr.1 2010 p.17, For a collection of the Wang Jinglie historical and political writings, including the Chinese version of this article see: Wang, Jinglie (2011): *Jiedu zhongdong: lilun goujian yu shizheng yanjiu*, Interpreting the Middle East: Theoretical Building and Empirical Research, World Publishing Corporation

The most frequently referenced historical frame in this narrative of thousands of years of interconnectivity is the famed 'Silk Road.' Almost every Sino-Arab event or article in China about the relationship will at some point pay homage to this shared tradition. Ideologically the Silk Road topic serves another important purpose. It wraps China's foreign policy in a mantle of historical legitimacy. China in this frame is not a 'rising power,' a role that can cause anxiety in other countries, where its arrival might cause worries about neo-colonialism, but is simply returning to its old turf. It is therefore no coincidence that the Chinese government chose to use the 'Silk Road' frame when it wanted to institutionalise and rationalise its approach to South-, Central- and West Asia in 2013.

The topic of colonialism and 'anticolonial solidarity' forms the third frame in this historical narrative. In this, the glorious past of both the Islamic world and China were destroyed by the West, traditionally interpreted in Marxist fashion:

"In more modern times, with the rise of capitalism in Western Europe and the establishment of capitalist systems in the world, the vast areas of Asia and Africa were colonized or semi-colonized, the intercourse between China and the Middle East countries has been interfered with and affected seriously."⁴³⁷

This shared victimisation by colonialism is seen as the reason for the break in the cordial relations between the Middle East and China. In this narrative, it was only the advent of capitalism, and with it colonialism, that is responsible for this break and if China now re-establishes its presence, this is not to be seen as an expansion of Chinese interests, but purely as righting the wrongs of colonialism. The irony that China's entry into the international capitalist system is also the reason for its return to the region is less debated.

In these three descriptions of the relationship, the Middle East is given the role of 'brotherly friend,' simply by pointing out the commonality of old civilisations and the Silk Road, and by 'altercasting' the colonising West in the role of 'enemy' or aggressor. This anchoring of roles in the distant past, again serves an important purpose when awarding roles in the present.

5.1.3. The Historical Depiction of the PRC and the Middle East

The Communist take-over and the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 brought with it the close alignment with the socialist camp during the Cold War. From a Chinese perspective

437 Wang Jinglie (2010) p.17

this is often framed as being part of the ‘anti-imperialist’ camp, a frame that should connect China and the region.⁴³⁸ However, as described in chapter three, most Arab countries were rather lukewarm to the newly emerging socialist camp and the foreign policy roles it ascribed.

That relations with the Middle East got off to a slow start is of course something that might at first look out of place in the frame of ‘brotherly friendship’ that Chinese authors use in their narrative. They therefore use different strategies to reconcile the frame and diplomatic history. Yang Guang, the head of the Institute of West Asian and African Studies at CASS, for example, explains that “suspicion” and “deep misunderstandings” by the Islamic states towards communist China were a result of “Western influence.”⁴³⁹ Another option is to separate the mistakes of Mao’s radical politics from the more harmonious world of the ‘reform and opening-up’ period. Finally, this disinterest can also simply be reframed as mutual, as when Wang Jinglie calls it the “period of waiting and seeing for mutual understanding and awareness” due to China being busy with post-war reconstruction and events in its close neighbourhood like the Korean War and the Taiwan-question.⁴⁴⁰ At the same time, most Middle Eastern countries were still colonies or semi-colonies, and most independent countries were conservative monarchies. They started diplomatic relations with the Guomindang government on Taiwan, an association which according to Beijing’s strict ‘one-China policy’ forbade relations with the People’s Republic.⁴⁴¹

The frame of ‘anti-imperialism’ becomes more useful for Chinese authors like Wang Jinglie when describing the period after the Bandung conference in 1955 which “profoundly promoted the development of the whole world movements against imperialism, colonialism and the causes of national independence and liberation, and provided an opportunity for China to show its peaceful diplomatic strategy to the world.” Until today the conference has the function of framing China as a part of the Third World: “In this way, the Afro-Asian countries were fully aware that China was part of a general assembly of solidarity and victory

438 Yang Guang frames this period into two sub-sections. “The Period of Revolution and War” lasting from 1945 to 1980 and the second one that followed after the “Reform and Opening Up” and reform and was marked as the “Period of Peace and Development”.⁴³⁸ This depiction is telling for a China-centric frame as there is little reason to speak of a less conflictual time in the Middle East after 1980. See Yang Guang (2013) p.9

439 Yang Guang (2013) p.3

440 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 18

441 or as Wang Jinglie puts it: “The Middle East countries (except Israel) are Islamic countries, where political and social lives are full of dense religious atmosphere. Under the media’s misleading information, there had been pre-emptive refusals to ‘communist China’.” Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 18

of Afro-Asian People.”⁴⁴² China used the stage, and the absence of the Soviet Union, to declare its solidarity with the causes of Egypt, Iran and the Palestinians. Bandung is therefore depicted as the turning point, where the Middle East and China for the first time had direct contact and started to establish diplomatic relations at least with the new left-wing republics whose foreign policy roles fitted better with Beijing’s self-role conception. At the same time this narrative of the conference also frames China in the role of foreign policy innovator and leader of the progressive world.

Afghanistan	1955	Iran	1971
Egypt	1956	Lebanon	1971
Syria	1956	Cyprus	1971
Yemen	1956	Jordan	1977
Iraq	1958	Oman	1978
Morocco	1958	Libya	1978
Algeria	1958	United Arab Emirates	1984
Sudan	1959	Qatar	1988
Tunisia	1964	Palestine	1988
Mauritania	1965	Bahrain	1989
Kuwait	1971	Saudi Arabia	1990
Turkey	1971	Israel	1992

Figure 4: Diplomatic Relations between China and the Middle Eastern States⁴⁴³

After the slow but promising start of the relationship in the mid-1950s, the 1960s in China’s perspective are remembered not only because of the split with the Soviet Union, but also because “the ‘Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution’[...] not only seriously impacted normal political and economic order, but also inevitably interfered with China's diplomatic activities.”

⁴⁴⁴ This had implications for China’s role in the Middle East, where all ambassadors except the one in Egypt were withdrawn. At the same time this period is often depicted as the period when Arab political developments were most favourable from a Chinese point of view:

“The secular forces’ thought and practice of national revival made some achievements, rinsed the disgrace brought about by the colonial rule, boosted the Arab nation’s sense of pride and self-esteem, carried out the nationalization policy and land reforms, popularized education, and laid a foundation for the evolution of the Arab world from a nomadic and agricultural society to a more industrial and modern society. But, as the Arab states had divergent interests, they failed to achieve the goal of Arab unity” ⁴⁴⁵

442 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 19

443 Source: Wang Jinglie (2010), grey are the states discussed in this book

444 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 20

445 Guo Xiangang (2011): The Arab World’s Search for a Third Way, in: China International Studies, Sep/Oct 2011 p.84-85

The Israel–Palestine conflict was the focus of China’s definition of its Middle East policy for a long time. China did not play any active role in the conflict but being among the first to acknowledge Palestine as a state, “fully demonstrated China’s firm position on supporting the Palestinian cause of national liberation,” according to Wang Jinglie.⁴⁴⁶

The biggest foreign policy success from a Chinese perspective in the early 1970s was the awarding of membership in the United Nations and a permanent seat in the Security Council to the People’s Republic. The Chinese narrative highlights the fact that a third of the 23 countries who sponsored China’s accession were Middle Eastern, and in the general assembly 15 Middle Eastern states voted in favour of Beijing.⁴⁴⁷

The new political realism that dominated Chinese foreign policy towards the end of the Cultural Revolution is depicted as the overarching frame that enabled better relations with pro-Western Middle Eastern countries, once again putting China in the active role:

“China focused on the development of relations with the pro-Western countries as well, such as Iran, which was a strategic pillar of the United States in the Gulf region, ruled by the Shah, and Turkey, the only NATO member in this region.”⁴⁴⁸

This offered China the chance to both side with its new global ally the US against the Soviet Union and at the same time leaving the diplomatic isolation in the region behind.

For the period after the beginning of the ‘reform and opening-up’ under Deng Xiaoping in 1978, a pragmatic and economy- driven approach to Middle Eastern countries is highlighted. This new pragmatism is normally depicted as a success, as it allowed China to navigate between the frontlines of regional conflicts, and finally made diplomatic relations with all regional countries possible.⁴⁴⁹

446 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 20-21 Conversely, Chinese analysts also acknowledge, that Israel was one of the first countries to recognise the People’s Republic, instead of Taiwan. That this did not lead to the start of diplomatic relations between the two new states, is often blamed on the U.S. which are seen as having torpedoed the establishment of relations during the Korean War. After the end of the war, the historic chance was gone as “[...], both the Chinese government and people strongly opposed the Suez War [...] and the “6- 5 War” (Six Days War) in 1967.”

447 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 20

448 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 20

449 These were: United Arab Emirates, Qatar, the Palestine Liberation Organization, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Israel The flexibility of China’s approach is seen as having been very useful as Huang Minxin explains: “Some important events in Middle East helped China a great deal. For example, the invasion of Iraq in Kuwait in 1990, you know in 1989 we had Tiananmen Square. After that, China’s relation with West improved. Another thing [...] when Clinton was in power, a Chinese airplane crashed with a U.S. airplane in the South China Sea. After 9.11 the relation improved again. [...] For example in Iran, before it was the Shah in power, but when Khomeini came to power he didn’t like China, because China had close relation with the Shah. But years later we had good relations with Iran.” Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

“The Middle East region, a mixture of contradictions, is one of the world's hottest spots. The establishment of diplomatic relations with all countries in this region enabled China to play a greater role in this area.”⁴⁵⁰

This “greater role”, that China sees itself as having taken on in the 1990s, after it had diplomatic relations with all countries in region, is implicitly framed as that of an ‘institution builder’ in line with its new-found emphasis on multilateralist frameworks. In the Chinese narrative, foreign relations are often depicted as a history of important state visits, and Middle Eastern relations are no exception here. Moreover, writers such as Wang Jinglie also highlight that these visits often kick-started new frameworks. For the Middle East, the most important ones are ‘strategic partnerships’, the China-Arab Friendship and Cooperation Forum (CAFCF), and the introduction of China’s Middle East envoys. The least institutionalised, and some would say most hollow ones are the ‘strategic partnerships’ which China has with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria.⁴⁵¹

The most institutionalised framework, the CASCF, was founded in 2004 during a visit of Hu Jintao to the Arab League headquarter in Cairo and Wang Jinglie, like others, emphasizes the active role that China took in establishing this framework “[...] through which China could further the positive influence in the Middle East affairs, has been boosting Sino-Arab friendship and cooperation since its creation.”⁴⁵² The CASCF, like its African precedent the FOCAC, was intended to legitimise China’s role as a ‘friend’ of the Arabs, to institutionalise friendship so to speak, thereby framing China as different from former colonial external powers.

While China’s Middle East envoys got some publicity in the West as a sign of China’s growing willingness to play a role in the ‘peace process’, Wang Jinglie describes their role rather differently:

“In order to better play her role in the Middle East affairs and promote proper settlement of relevant issues, China set up diplomatic envoys. Since 2002, the Chinese government has appointed three “Middle East envoys”, who have visited Middle East region for 10 times to publicize China’s stand and actively promote the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, especially the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.”⁴⁵³

450 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 20-21

451 For the meaning of strategic partnerships see Medeiros (2009) p.82

452 Hu Jintao put forward four principles enhance political relations, based on mutual respect, intensify economic and trade exchanges in order to achieve common development, expand cultural exchanges by learning from each other, and strengthen cooperation in international affairs for the purpose of safeguarding world peace and promoting common development Wang (2010) p. 23-25

453 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 23-25

There is normally little mention of how these envoys ‘actively promoted’ regional settlement, but a strong emphasis on ‘publicising China’s stand’. So the main role of these envoys is not to play the rather interventionist function of mediation that Western envoys play, but to propagate China’s stance, or “demonstrating civilisation” as Shih Chiyu would call it.⁴⁵⁴

Lastly, since 2004 China and the GCC have been involved in negotiations about a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). From the Chinese perspective the FTA holds the promise of “helping China to improve its trade balance by increasing exports to the Gulf and helping the GCC to promote an economic diversification strategy by making use of the Chinese market.”⁴⁵⁵ The Arab debate that increasing exports to the Gulf might actually be a hindrance for Gulf diversification and that market opening should also apply to the Chinese petroleum industry, the main stumbling block from the Chinese side, is not discussed. The hierarchy in this regard seemed to be rather clearly defined, as Huang Minxin puts it: “If globalization is a melting pot, then China is on the top of the pot, benefiting. The Middle East needs China’s help, because China is economically emerging and strong.”⁴⁵⁶

5.1.4. The Chinese Representation of the Regional Order – Islamists and External Powers

The depiction of the Middle East in Chinese academic texts and the Chinese media is not very different from that of Western media depictions; it is depicted as an area of turmoil and religious fanaticism. This can at least partly be traced back to the fact that Chinese analysis relies heavily on Western sources. The difference lies mostly in the Chinese emphasis on modernisation and the resulting depiction of religion as ‘backward’, at least in a more direct way than Western texts would ascribe this, and secondly in the negative role-assignment to the West.

The Chinese obsession with the United States also frames China’s thinking about the Middle East. Because of the huge US impact on Chinese role conceptions, it’s useful to have a deeper look at the Chinese view of the US role in the region and the regional reaction to it. The “unprecedented hegemonic perception” of the US’s role in the region frames the perspective on the regional political order for Gao Zugui, senior researcher at the Institute of International

454 Shih Chiyu (2013)

455 Yang Guang (2011): China's geo-economic engagement with the Gulf, IISS paper, 15 October 2011, p.11

456 Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

Strategic Studies of the Central Party School. He frames the regional US role as purely a function of geopolitics and America's global strategy to "strengthen its sole superpower status by overpowering and containing Europe, Japan, Russia, China, India and other strategic forces."⁴⁵⁷ Wu Bingbing of Peking University even calls the whole regional system as structured to "isolate and neutralize anti-American forces in the Middle East, to encourage Middle Eastern Islamic countries to accept a pro-American way."⁴⁵⁸ The interests of the US, while not totally denying its role as a 'security provider' are therefore mostly seen as enhancing its own power and defined as:

"[...] strengthening military presence in the region, maintaining US unilateral dominance over regional security framework, being in control of Gulf energy, countering terrorism and extremism, preventing WMD from proliferation, promoting American-brand democracy, uniting pro-American moderate states and containing Iran, the anti-American regional power."⁴⁵⁹

Other Chinese authors agree, that American foreign policy under Obama was seen as first of all focussed on "restoring America's leadership", which of course has a negative undertone of 'hegemony' in China.⁴⁶⁰ The aim of American hegemony in the Gulf for example is that "no other country is allowed to seek hegemonic control over the energy in the Gulf."⁴⁶¹ In this, Saudi Arabia is seen in the role of the "base" while Jordan and the other GCC states are in supporting roles.⁴⁶² While the US is seen as able to "maintain its regional dominance", Chinese analysts still emphasise the relative power shift and "pluralizing forces" with the rise of the smaller Gulf States and Iran.⁴⁶³

Gao Zugui airs a widespread view in China's Foreign policy community, when he states that the US has to "restore its leadership" is because its role of 'security provider' was damaged when its regional policy shifted away from "regime stability" to "regime change and human rights" after 2001, and the US is now seen in the region as a 'threat' to stability.⁴⁶⁴ The Iraq War 2003 is also seen as the reason for the strength of the anti-American camp led by Iran.

457 Gao Zugui (2011): Impact of the Changing Situation in the Middle East to the U.S. Strategy, p.5-8

458 Wu, Bingbing (2012): Change in the Middle East: A Case of Egypt, in: Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia) Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, p.28

459 Yang Jiemian (2007): Change in the Middle East: A Case of Egypt, in: Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia) Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, p.24-25

460 Jin Liangxiang (2010): Analysis on Obama Administration's Policy Adjustment of Iranian Nuclear Issue, In: Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia) Vol. 4, No. 2, 2010, p. 24

461 Yang Jiemian (2007) p.21-22

462 Wu Bingbing (2012) p.26

463 Li Weijian (2009) p.30-31

464 Gao Zugui (2011) p.16, also Yang Jiemian (2007) p.21-22

The US has strengthened Iran by “heating up religious conflicts” and thereby helping the emergence of the “Shiite Crescent” from Iran to Lebanon.⁴⁶⁵ Iran here clearly fills the role as the main obstacle to American hegemony by supporting Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas:

“The task of balancing Iran in Iraq, not only consumes a lot of US resources, but also reduces the flexibility space of the US Middle East strategy. In this configuration, the US-Iran contradiction is at the core; the US can only fight or reconcile with Iran, the middle zone is increasingly narrow.”⁴⁶⁶

Of the other external players in the region, the UK is seen as having given up on its former hegemonic role, but as still insisting on playing a role by taking part in US domination by being “the US deputy.” While Chinese analysts see a wide agreement on regional interests between the US and its European allies the Chinese zero-sum perspective fuels hope for a change in this: “The Europe Union has been sullen about being only a “philanthropist” in this region for many years.”⁴⁶⁷ Even before the Syrian and Ukrainian crises, Russia was seen as the most active foreign actor in the region in “an attempt to wield its great power role again” in balancing the US and supporting Iran.⁴⁶⁸ India with its deepening relations with Iran is often seen as flexible, moving between both sides, while Japan is seen as following “closely the US’ policy in the Gulf region with a strategic attempt of becoming ‘a normal state.’” and “keeping a close eye on China’s role in the Gulf.”⁴⁶⁹ In the Chinese perspective, “China and other big powers such as the European countries and America are in a complicated relationship, being both competitors and co-operative partners” with “the same interests to compete for in which they disagree with each other in many cases.”⁴⁷⁰

Arab governments are often accused in Chinese literature of having “not only failed to draw lines with the United States but took the side of it and accepted a huge amount of US aid.” Interpreted through the Chinese frame of ‘autarchy’, this siding with “Israel’s supporter - the United States”, and not a lack of political reform, is seen by Chinese observers as the main reason for the discontent of the Arab people with their governments.⁴⁷¹ It is important to note, that while the close relations of some Arab governments with Israel are often criticised and seen as not fulfilling role expectations as Arab leaders, Chinese authors and diplomats, can get

465 Wu Bingbing (2012) p.26

466 Wu Bingbing (2012) p.31

467 Li Weijian (2009) p.33

468 Yang Jiemin (2007) p.23

469 Ibid.

470 Li Weijian (2009) p.36

471 Guo Xiangang (2011) p.87

very irritated when criticised by Arab media for China's close relations to the Jewish state, as further below.

China's perspective on the Islamists as a political force in the Middle East is rather complicated. On the one hand religious movements are normally depicted along a modernist-Marxist axis as 'backward' and a stumbling block on Islamic' countries road to emancipation:

"The struggle between the religious and secular forces had greatly weakened the power of the Arab world as a whole. After entering the modern society, this outdated and backward form of government has largely been abandoned. The theocratic theories and practices now advocated by the religious forces in the Middle East thus do not conform to the laws of historical development."⁴⁷²

On the other hand, their contribution to the anti-colonial struggle, revolutions and anti-Western activism is duly noted. American foreign policy once again is seen as the main culprit for the existence of Islamist movements:

"American Middle East policy is manipulated by its strong domestic Jewish lobbying groups. [...] Even though Islamic fundamentalism is popular to some extent and could gain a victory in elections, it runs counter to contemporary international trends and its extremist groups resort to terrorist means and are indiscriminate in killing innocent people.[...] The Muslims distanced themselves from such extremism and the organizations, including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, started thinking about new ways to struggle."⁴⁷³

China's perspective on Iran is often framed in a similar way: While it is acknowledged that Iranian politicians like former President Mohammed Ahmadinejad, heated on the conflict with their "radical rhetoric"⁴⁷⁴, Iran is also seen as a bulwark against US regional hegemony. Therefore, the main culprit in the nuclear standoff between Iran and the West is US-Middle East policy. The riots and anti-government demonstrations in Teheran after the allegedly rigged elections in 2009 are depicted as a "Western intervention", which convinced the Iranian government "that the contradiction between the United States, Europe and Iran is a fundamental one for regime struggle."⁴⁷⁵ At the same time China interprets the nuclear standoff often through a strong 'developmental' frame:

"For the United States, the Iranian nuclear issue concerns security, [...] For Iran, its nuclear program may have security considerations, but there are more purposes on technological progress, economic development and improving people's livelihood which is an important part of economic modernization strategy."⁴⁷⁶

472 Guo Xiangang (2011) p.90

473 Ibid.

474 Jin Liangxiang (2010) p.15-16

475 Jin Liangxiang (2010) p.23

476 Jin Liangxiang (2010) p.17, Regionally, Iran is seen more as a victim of the Sunnis: "Historically, Iran had been under strong pressure from the Arab Sunnis for a long time and suffered the invasions of Mongolia and Ottoman Empire. It

The Chinese view of this perceived dichotomy also applies to the Arab Gulf states and “the GCC countries hope to change the situation of sole US dominance on security and political matters in the Gulf region.” According to Yang Jiemian, this becomes obvious in the fact that the Arab Gulf states disagree with the US on the use of force against Iran:⁴⁷⁷

“Vying for a regional leading role, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, the three major countries in the region, are involved in a fast growing conflict over national interests and sectarian contradictions, thus preventing them from playing the role of core countries in the region. “ [...] “The US has been pursuing a “balancing” strategy towards Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia from the Cold War through the post-Cold War period, but ended up with geo-strategic imbalance, defying the original objectives. [...] Like the case in the Middle East as a whole, the trends in the Gulf region will be dictated mostly by endogenous other than exogenous factors.”⁴⁷⁸

The narrative that the regional trend is against the US and that Western interference is responsible for all conflicts in the region, has the advantage that the relationship with Middle Eastern powers can be seen as harmonious and thereby serve the self-role conception of China as a popular and respected ‘great power’.

5.2. China’s Self-Role Conception in the Middle East

As outlined in the last Chapter, China understands its foreign policy role first of all as serving its domestic developmental interests, so to understand China’s role conception in the Middle East one has to first look at how China defines its interests in the region. While Chinese analysts normally find it easy to point out US regional interests, as they can be simply derived from the ‘hegemonic and colonialist’ narrative, clearly defining Chinese interests in the region seems to be a bit more difficult. The debate about China’s interests in the Middle East is often coloured by generalisations and reminiscence, as when Chinese scholars use the support of Arab countries for Beijing’s accession to the UN to substantiate the claim of Arabs and China needing each other.⁴⁷⁹ More to the point, Chinese researchers like Liu Zhongmin, the Deputy Director of Middle East Studies Institute of SISU, agree that the government’s perspective is still dominated by two frames towards the Middle East: energy and the fight against the “three

was reduced to a Russian and British colony in the modern times and has been under the threat of the United States for a long period. Its unique historical process makes Iran too sensitive to the external threats.”

477 Yang Jiemian (2007): Iraq-Iran Conundrums and U.S. Strategic Options in the Gulf Region In: *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 20 (in Asia) Vol. 1, No. 1, 2007, p.24

478 Yang Jiemian (2007) p.21, p.25-26

479 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011

evil forces” (terrorism, extremism, secessionism).⁴⁸⁰ For Wang Sulao only this additional security perspective gives the relationship its full meaning for China:

“In the West, they think China’s relationship with the Middle East just focuses on oil, but this is totally wrong. Oil is just one of the cooperation areas. The political area is another important cooperation area. China has more than 20 million Muslims who mostly live in Western China, such as Xinjiang. So good China-Middle East relations could have great influence on China’s internal political security.”⁴⁸¹

In this frame, China’s Muslim population is highly securitised into the role of a ‘threat’. Therefore, instability in the Middle East and Islamist agitation is interpreted as a danger to China’s domestic stability. Domestic security and energy security dominate, and securitise, China’s political and economic interests in the region.

5.2.1. Political Interests: Domestic and International Security

Similar to the Western perspective, the relationship to the Middle East is seen very much through a securitisation lens:

“[...] Religious extremism and national separatism, which have even become the "spiritual power" for China’s domestic "three evil forces", are still influential in the Middle East region in the long run. Terrorism, like the spread of a malignant tumour, has posed a "threat" to the security interests of our country.”⁴⁸²

This perspective also impacts the policy towards regional states, and national interests, namely security interests, trump the frames of ‘harmony’ and ‘friendship’:

“China should set distinct "red lines" around its “national interests and particularly core interests are inviolable. [...] On the basis of understanding the security interests of China clearly, we may ask the friendly countries in the Middle East for their cooperation for combating, or at least opposition for their domestic "three evil forces".”⁴⁸³

At the same time, China also faces challenges to its interest emanating from the regional states themselves, which are seen as liable of sympathising with the Uighurs:

“Another issue is the misunderstanding of China’s religion policy, especially on minority and Muslim policy. Such as the Xinjiang incident [the Urumqi riots of 2009]. Some of the Arab Muslims accused China of cracking down on Muslims in China. Even today some Middle Eastern countries think China is a communist country, and a communist country hates religion. [...] This is the area easy to create problems.”⁴⁸⁴

480 Liu Zhongmin: On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China’s Diplomacy, in: Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia) Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, p 11-12

481 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011

482 Wang Jinglie (2010) p.38 “The threats mentioned above may have not caused a seriously dangerous atmosphere or “facts”, but as the security risks and uncertainties, particularly the direct and indirect negative effects brought by terrorism, they should be treated seriously.”

483 Wang Jinglie (2010) p.38

484 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011

This is seen as especially problematic from a Chinese point of view, as China sees itself in need of the support of Middle Eastern countries in fighting terrorism, both in its own predominately Muslim regions and globally.⁴⁸⁵

Global terrorism has taken up an increasing space in the Chinese discourse over the last decade and Zhu Weilie, Director of the Middle East Studies Institute at SISU, and Vice President of the China Association of Middle East Studies even sees terrorism as the biggest global issue and the Middle East as pivotal in fighting it.⁴⁸⁶ A more specific aspect of the Chinese discourse might be the focus on the interaction between global terrorism and “the transformation of the international system and the reconstruction of the world’s new political and economic order”, thereby framing terrorism and global instability as phenomena of a global power shift. This emphasis on the global level’s influence on the regional level is also prevalent in Zhu Weilie’s analysis of the causes of terrorism. While he names the same internal, social and cultural factors as causing global terrorism, which with the obvious exception of undemocratic governance as a reason for violence, are frequently used in Western discourses as well, he emphasises external, meaning Western, factors because according to him “externally, the Middle East terrorism hinges on interference, invasion, occupation, and the rivalry for territory, resources and interest.”⁴⁸⁷

A different frame from the ‘domestic security’ frame often used by Chinese analysts is applied when Zhu Weilie points out that the Chinese engagement in anti-terrorism policies abroad is aimed at “protecting its overseas interest and meanwhile, it reflects China’s unique idea and mode of global governance.”⁴⁸⁸ For Zhu, China’s “oversees interests” had been attacked through the killing of two Chinese workers in Algeria and the bomb attacks on the Chinese consulate in Istanbul and the embassy in Ankara by alleged "East Turkistan" terrorists. He links this with Chinese victims in suicide bombings in Israel and Jordan to frame China as a victim of global terror even though those last attacks most likely did not specifically target Chinese. Zhu Weilie is aware that China’s expanding interests are increasing the likelihood of attacks on

485 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2013

486 Zhu Weilie (2011) p.1 research on Terrorism was supported by the Chinese Educational Ministry program “Islamic Middle East Region and the Transition of International System” and it is also supported by the Shanghai International Studies University “211” program (Stage III) and Key Discipline of Shanghai (B702).

487 Ibid.

488 Zhu Weilie (2011) p.1-2

Chinese citizens and its interests. In this frame, Zhu specifically highlights the danger that terrorism poses to Chinese interest in Saudi Arabia, due to China's extensive involvement in Saudi Oil exports.⁴⁸⁹

Chinese analysts acknowledge the problem, that definitions of terrorism differ between China and the West, but Zhu Weilie frames it as a cultural conflict in which China is neutral because China does "condemn and fight against all forms of terrorism."⁴⁹⁰ Implicitly the West is repeatedly accused by him of relying too much on military means, contrary to China which sees terrorism as a development problem.⁴⁹¹ He insists that China plays an active role in fighting global terrorism due to the "Chinese Government's Anti-terrorism Initiatives and Its role in the Middle East". In this, he frames both China's own initiatives like the SCO and its support for the US 'War on Terror' as signs of China's "responsibility". However, with a not so subtle hint at the US, he makes clear that China "opposes linking terrorism with certain nations and religions and is against double standards on the terrorism issue."⁴⁹² Once again the US plays a dual 'counter-role' in the Chinese discourse. On the one hand the cooperation with the US, and the US acknowledgement of this through listing the East Turkestan Movement as 'terrorist' in 2002, frames China as 'responsible' and gives legitimacy to its interests, while at the same time the US is also depicted in the role of fermenting the regional conflicts. While China sees itself as fair and neutral and a 'friend' of Muslim countries, the West is often even assigned the role of a supporter of terrorism out of ulterior motives:

"In the current world, some Western countries appear to have pursued double standards for a long time. Taking ideology or national interest as the standard, they have adopted a severe reprimand and strike against terrorism within their own or Western countries and have supported or covered up, condoned, or even encouraged terrorism that occurred in other countries holding as an excuse "humanitarian" and "human rights protection."⁴⁹³

This is a clear framing of Western lobbying on human rights as support for terrorism. That the US also has a difficult relationship with Islamists in the region does not lead Chinese analysts to apply the frame of 'common interests' to the relationship. On the contrary, the obsession with the US and its alleged determination to stop 'China's rise' is also visible in Chinese

489 Zhu Weilie (2011) p.2-3

490 Zhu Weilie (2011) p.6

491 Zhu Weilie (2011) p.7

492 Zhu Weilie highlights that in 2001 China sealed off the border with Afghanistan "which provided an important support for the U.S. anti-terrorism military operations in Afghanistan" in exchange for the US agreement to blacklist ETIM, see Zhu Weilie (2011) p.9 & p.13-14

493 Zhu Weilie (2011) p. 7-8

discussions on the Middle East. In these, the US often takes on a similar role to the one that it is assigned by Chinese analysts in East Asia⁴⁹⁴ with US intervention in regional affairs as the major source of all conflicts. As Gentry and Zambellis have shown, accusing the US of religious insensitivity is very common in China's criticism of US Middle East policy as a discursive instrument of positioning China in the role of 'friend' against the US 'hegemon'.⁴⁹⁵ The main difference in the depiction of the US and China's problem with Islamic fundamentalism lies in that the US problems are created by their own neo-colonial policies; China on the other hand only acts in protecting its sovereignty. Far from being depicted as a partner, the West is even framed as a threat:

"Obviously, China will face obstacles and resistance set by the United States-led Western countries when playing its role in the Middle East, but the diplomatic efforts may produce higher "input-output ratio", compared with the "direct conflict" with United States in other areas." [...] "the Middle East could be the buffer zone for China to perform its influence and adjust relations with great powers."⁴⁹⁶

The last idea of the Middle East as a 'buffer zone' for China of course reminds one of Mao's plan to use the 'Third World' as a buffer for China in the global struggle with imperialism. In this current struggle with the US, similarities in the political system with Arab regimes and China's past are seen as being helpful in supporting the 'United Front Tactic' as Wang Sulao outlines:

"We have a common political language with the Arabs. We always say, Arabia is China's friend, because some Middle Eastern countries support China on issues of human rights, One-China policy, and China's religious policy. This area is strongly criticized by the West, especially the US"⁴⁹⁷

Wang Jinglie emphasised this point with the frame that China 'was never aggressive':

"China never invaded other countries, unlike the US. Saudi Arabia is a Kingdom, Iran is a religious country, just because China never invaded other countries, that's why China could make friends with many countries. [...] Geopolitically, China only wants to make friends and build harmonious society, unlike the US. So I don't think China has special interest in this regard. And the Arabs' interest in China? Many Middle Eastern friends say they hope China to be very strong, to be against the US. Even many leaders express their need for China's support."⁴⁹⁸

From the Chinese perspective, the relationship with the Arab world is always framed as part of the global competition with the US over a more equal and just world order. The specific

494 For the Chinese depiction of the US role in East Asia see: Zhao (2012)

495 Zambellis & Gentry (2008) p.64-5: "China's criticism of U.S. rhetoric enhances its image as a friend to Arabs and Muslims, despite Beijing's dismal record on human and religious rights regarding its own ethnic Uighur Muslim minority community."

496 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 38

497 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011

498 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2013

interests of China towards the region as such however are normally seen by Chinese authors as economic, especially in regard to energy security.

5.2.2. The Middle East and China's Debate on 'Energy Security'

The wider security discourse in China does not only include traditional concepts of security like terrorism and geopolitical rivalry, but also the 'energy security' discourse, especially since the start of the 21st century. The Middle East takes an important role in this discourse due to its hydrocarbon deposits, and the role of energy supplier takes a prominent place when China thinks of the Middle East, especially the Gulf. Accordingly, the Gulf and China are often referenced as "strategic energy partners."⁴⁹⁹ The Chinese energy dilemma is sometimes reframed positively by stating that, the export strength of China in manufactured goods and its energy needs are mutually supportive for good relations between China and the Middle East: "There is a huge complementarity in the economic development of China and Middle East countries, which provides broad prospects for bilateral economic cooperation."⁵⁰⁰

In his overview of China's geo-economic engagement in the Gulf, the Director General of the Institute of West-Asian and African Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Yang Guang highlights the importance energy had in kick-starting China's relations with the Gulf when he says that "meaningful economic engagement" only started after China became a net oil importer in 1993. Thereby the relationship is also framed as part of China's 'reform and opening-up' policy:

"It is in this context that China-GCC economic engagement has evolved from a basic model of Chinese imports of Gulf energy, and Gulf imports of Chinese manufacturing products and construction services. [...] Today, the GCC has become the most important source of oil supply for China. Strategic and mutual interests of energy security have laid the foundation for this development."⁵⁰¹

This echoes the mainstream Western view that the relationship between China and the Arab states has been driven mostly by the desire of China to diversify the sources of its increasing energy needs and the need for the Arab states to lessen their dependency on Western buyers. Ironically, the discourse on energy security on both sides has become the main driver not only of economic engagement, but also of the Western discourse about China and the Middle East,

499 Yang Guang (2011): China's geo-economic engagement with the Gulf, IISS paper, 15 October 2011 , p.1

500 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 25-29

501 Yang Guang (2011) p.2

as the discourse is heavily interwoven with the Western energy security discourse as shown in chapter eight. In the following we will look at how the discourse about 'China's thirst for oil' fuels debates about the role China should take in the Middle East.

Yang Guang frames the Gulf as "China's critical option", as the Gulf, being the region with the biggest proven oil reserves, is the only chance to fulfil China's energy needs:

"The predominance of the Gulf oil producing countries therefore is very likely be assured and strengthened in the years ahead. In the eyes of China, as one of the largest oil importing countries, the Gulf region's abundance of resources, its geographic position and good transport links, make it the primary option on the list of international oil suppliers."⁵⁰²

This framing is important because it means that in the Chinese perspective there is no possibility for China to stay away from the unstable region by relying on other energy suppliers. This obviously influences the way China's possible political role in the region is debated. The main driver behind these debates is China's growing energy needs due to its rapid economic expansion. This has led to two debates which are heavily intertwined: China's domestic energy security discourse and the international debate about China's need to diversify its sources of its energy.⁵⁰³ This attempted diversification aims mostly at three areas: the CIS, Africa and the Gulf. Of these, the Gulf, due to its vast reserves, would, according to Yang Guang, be China's best option if it wanted to achieve long term energy security.

However, Yang Guang argues that this opportunity exists on both sides. In the same way that China has to be concerned about its energy security, the Gulf has to see China as a vital guarantee for its "oil export security".⁵⁰⁴ Eagerness in the Gulf for 'security of demand' is partly seen as a reaction to the West's attempts to diversify its own sources of energy since the 1991 Gulf War and especially since 11 September. Therefore, Yang Guang sees China as playing a pivotal a role for the Gulf as the Gulf does for China:

"In this context, Gulf oil exporters, which possess both resources and large spare capacity for oil production, face the challenge of seeking alternative and reliable markets for their long term oil export security. The rapid economic growth of China and India and their demand for oil, provides a new option. The increase of oil trade between the Gulf countries and East Asian oil importing

502 Yang Guang (2011) p.3

503 For a western overview on the discourse on Energy security in China see: Erica S. Downs: The Chinese Energy Security Debate, in *The China Quarterly* / Volume 177 / March 2004, pp 21-41 Also see: Caceres, Sigfrido Burgos & Sophal Ear (2013): *The Hungry Dragon – How China's resource quest is reshaping the World*, Routledge, Milton Park; Liu Currier, Carrie & Manochehr Dorraj (ed., 2011): *China's Energy Relationship with the Developing World*, Continuum, New York

504 Yang Guang (2011) p.4

countries such as Japan, India, China and Korea, has contributed to the shaping of the Asian oil trade block.”⁵⁰⁵

This framing of the energy relationship as a ‘win-win’ situation not only in the general roles of seller-buyer, but with the turn of both sides buying from each other is rather common among Chinese experts. They see the Middle East as in need of Chinese technology and Chinese goods. That China has trade deficits due to the energy imports with every regional country except the UAE is seen as proof of China’s positive role.⁵⁰⁶

Wang Jinglie points at the boost Chinese energy needs could give to regional industrialisation, if China aids regional countries in their endeavours with Chinese expertise in exchange for energy deals.⁵⁰⁷ Implicitly this frame of energy as a binding element often clearly distinguishes between Chinese energy interests on the one hand, which are framed as ‘legitimate’ because of China’s need to develop and which are portrayed as beneficial for the region, and Western energy interests on the other hand, which are framed as ‘illegitimate’ and ‘hegemonic’.

5.2.3. Non-energy Trade and Investment

Like other Chinese authors, Yang Guang emphasises again the relationship as undergoing a decisive change over the last ten years in parallel to the deepening oil trade.

“[...] Economic complementarities between the two sides are very strong, and rarely are they common between China and other developing countries. On the basis of strong economic complementarities, China and the Gulf countries have developed a model of trade and economic cooperation characterised by the exchange of oil for manufacturing products and construction services.”⁵⁰⁸

This change in the nature of the economic relationship between China and the Gulf is used to frame it as a deepening relationship as this means that China is not only the recipient of Middle Eastern products, hydrocarbons, but also the supplier of certain goods. A range of factors have made the Gulf region an attractive market for China in the period of 2003 to 2013: high oil prices, population growth, regional market integration- and economic diversification strategies have transformed the region in the Chinese perception from a pure source of raw materials into a major market for Chinese exports. The driving force of Chinese exports during this period

505 Yang Guang (2011) p.4

506 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011

507 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2013

508 Yang Guang (2011) p.7 Trade agreements had been signed with 21 Arab countries and 16 Arab countries have signed investment protection agreements with China by 2008. Ironically, that the trade of manufactured goods for raw materials is of course the traditional colonial trade pattern, seems of little concern to Chinese authors.

has been electrical products and machinery, accounting for roughly a third of total exports. Garments and textiles, which once were the mainstay of Chinese exports to the Gulf went from nearly half of exports to a fifth. At the same time the rapid increase of oil demand in China however has led to an even widening trade deficit between China and the Gulf.⁵⁰⁹

Ma Ping of the Institute of Islam and Hui at the Ningxia Academy of Social Sciences in Yinchuan, the staging point of the biggest China-Middle East economic exchange in form of the Ningxia forum, sees China's "going out" policy as the main reason for this rapid development of Sino-Arab economic relations and China as the main driver. For him the prime example for this active role of China in the economic relationship is the Ningxia Forum, which is organised annually for overseas Muslim businessmen in Ningxia's provincial capital, serving both the opening up of the Arab market and the development of Muslim areas in China.⁵¹⁰ This idea of developing the Muslim minority of the Hui has been one of the driving frames of China's economic approach to the Middle East after 2010, in part because the minority itself is highly securitised in China's internal discourses. During the CASCF 4th Arab-China Business Conference, held in Sharjah on 18 January 2012 to coincide with Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit, a Chinese official said that "we need to get the Hui in the Arab business; this is what the government decided after the Urumqi riots."⁵¹¹

Beyond trade, 'investment' and 'construction and infrastructure' are the two main frames used for describing the economic relationship between the Middle East and China. Since the beginning of this century, the rapid growth of oil income has kept the Gulf's construction market buoyant and it is now one of the most important construction markets in the world.

"Chinese construction companies are competitive players in the world's construction markets. [...] Thanks to their comparative advantages, in terms of their access to low cost and hard-working labour, combined with quality and timely project implementation, and increasing capacities for project design and to equipment supplies, Chinese companies have performed well in the Gulf construction markets over the past decade."⁵¹²

Less optimistic is the Chinese outlook on cross-border investment. The limited range of investment between both sides seems to puzzle Chinese analysts, although both sides have

509 Ibid.

510 Ma Ping (2013): Zhong A jingmao hezuo luntan de beijing, gongneng yu qianjing, Background, Functions and Prospects of the China-Arab States Economic and Trade Forum, in: Yang, Guang (2013)

511 Interview with Chinese official Sharjah conference January 2012 see also: Simpfendorfer, Ben: Hui Muslims take a short-cut to Dubai, May 26th, 2010, <http://www.silkroadassoc.com/blog/2010/05/26/hui-muslims-dubai/>

512 Yang Guang (2011) p.8

huge foreign currency reserves⁵¹³ Yang Guang explains this lack of investment mainly due to three factors:

“China is not strong enough to provide the capital-intensive technologies that the Gulf countries need, and Gulf investment cannot bring advanced technologies or the market access that China needs. [...], for many large Chinese investors, the purpose of investing abroad is either to transfer industries suffering from the saturation in their domestic markets or from the erosion of comparative advantages such as cheap labour costs, or to benefit from the high prices of resources and to address the problem of domestic resource scarcity. However, these expectations cannot be met in the Gulf region, as local labour costs are comparatively high. Capital intensive industries also dominate industrialisation on the one hand, and the upstream sectors of oil industries have yet to open up to foreign direct investment on the other. Thirdly, major Gulf investors, especially the region’s powerful sovereign wealth funds, still prefer portfolio investment. China is however reluctant to open up its stock exchange to foreign investors.”⁵¹⁴

Most of the investment takes place in the energy field “where it is possible for complementary strategic interests of both sides to be satisfied through direct investment.”⁵¹⁵ Yang Guang sees these interests in upgrading Chinese refineries to be able to process high sulphur GCC oil and GCC investment in the Chinese downstream sector. Because of its free trade agreements with the EU, Egypt is now perceived as a major destination for investment in production facilities by Chinese analysts, especially in the Chinese managed TEDA special zone near Suez.⁵¹⁶

Connected to the problem of lacking investment, most Chinese analysts acknowledge the imbalance of trade between China and the region. They see the problem not in China’s trade surplus in the non-energy trade sector, and the criticism this has caused in the Middle East about China only using the Middle East as a source of raw material and destination for processed goods, but frame it more as a problem of China not selling enough to the region:

“Although China’s deficit with the Gulf region does not appear to be a particularly big problem today, it is an issue that is expected to draw more attention in the coming years. It is likely to drive the Chinese side to address it by further promoting its export of goods and services to the Gulf region as it’s impossible to reduce the Gulf’s oil imports.”⁵¹⁷

5.2.4. Social Contacts

Much has been made, both in the West and in China, about China’s international “charm offensive”.⁵¹⁸ Language exchanges are the main feature often cited as cultural exchange,

513 Yang Guang (2011) p.8

514 Ibid.

515 Yang Guang (2011) p.9-10

516 Interview with Caitec-Analyst, Beijing, May 2013

517 Yang Guang (2011) p.10-11

518 For China’s attempts at soft power and its ‘charm offensive’ in developing countries see Kurlantzick, Joshua (2007): Charm Offensive - How China’s Soft Power is Transforming the World, Yale University Press, New York

including both the teaching of Middle Eastern languages as well as teaching Chinese in the Middle East.⁵¹⁹ Another aspect is the promotion of Chinese technology in the region as “it is particularly important for developing countries to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the field of science and technology.”⁵²⁰ Chinese state media have also broadcasted in Middle Eastern languages for decades and CCTV started its Arabic channel in 2011. Traditionally, one of the main avenues of China’s overseas aid and propaganda has been the use of medical teams, which continues to this day and which Wang Jinglie sees as a way to increase China’s ‘soft power’.⁵²¹

“China could take advantages of the opportunities so that many countries will recognize, receive, learn and follow the "Chinese model". Therefore, the "Chinese model" should be further publicized in a timely manner, accurately and effectively, as well as in Confucius Institutes around the world, the rise of Chinese medicine, catering culture, and the appeal of martial arts in the Middle East region and Africa, so as to enhance China’s “soft power”. [...]The Arabic TV channel launched recently in China offer a good platform to expand communication with Middle East countries, and spread Chinese culture, diplomacy and political ideas. Meanwhile, we should also pay attention to improving the "performing techniques" to become a set of programs people in the Middle East region like to watch, and avoid a "rigid propaganda model." ⁵²²

In line with this emphasis on public opinion, Wang Jinglie points to the negative effect bad business practices by Chinese traders have had on China-Russia relations, and calls for the Chinese government to regulate Chinese traders in the Middle East to prevent angry backlashes by locals. One shouldn’t forget that the debate about the lack of quality in Chinese production is perhaps even bigger in China than abroad and therefore Wang Jinglie sees a real risk for China’s image in the region from poor quality products. While he emphasises that big companies produce high quality products, cheaper products bring lower quality.

“Maybe this will influence China’s image in Middle East, but the government can’t control it. But on the other hand, many Middle East traders come to Yiwu to buy cheap pants and sell them in the Middle East. But when the pants get broken, consumers don’t know who sold them but only know they are made in China.”⁵²³

519 Named here are normally Ain Shams University in Cairo, Cairo University, al-Azhar University, Egypt Suez Canal University and the University of Technology which offer Chinese language courses to Egyptian students. There are also two Confucius Institutes in Egypt. With Saudi Arabia 13 cooperation agreements with Chinese universities were signed in 2009 and China promised to build three Chinese language departments in universities. see Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 25-29

520 Wang Jinglie (2010) p.25-29

521 “China has offered "persistent free help" which the rest of the countries in the world cannot do. Despite hard conditions, Chinese doctors, with the humanitarian spirit of "healing the sick and saving the dying", dedicated themselves to serve the local people, which not only won deep love and friendship of the local people, but also accumulated human resources for long-term and healthy development of relations between China and Middle East countries.” Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 30-31

522 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 38

523 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2013

These problems of cultural perception that the trade relationship creates, don't seem to be seen as contradicting the official perspective of brotherly affection between developing countries, and researchers like Wang Sulao seem to be convinced, without denying the aforementioned conflicts, that China is increasingly understood and therefore liked by the Arabs due to the increasing contacts:

"[...] they like China, Chinese have good reputation among Arabs. But not always. In recent years, Chinese feel less popular than past. Because there are more and more Chinese people working and living there, their quality is not always high, like drinking [...] Local people think you take away our jobs and your habits don't respect our customs. Sometimes there are conflicts. For example in Algeria two years ago. But it seems Arabs don't like US, much less than they like China. Arabs, especially their intellectuals they know Europe better than China. When I was in Egypt, they think China is even more backward than Egypt. But now I think the situation is changing a lot. China's image in the world is different than before. In 1997 when I was in Egypt, a small part of students admire China a lot, especially the development and culture of China. They don't like the US"⁵²⁴

In this perspective, even problematic issues in this relationship seem to be overshadowed by China being perceived in the positive counter-role to the US, and this view permeates China's own self-role conception in the region.

5.2.5. Chinas Role Conception before the Arab Spring

All these debates on interests and regional conditions have led to a wider discourse on China's role in the Middle East. This discourse took place against the background of China's global rise, the frame that was used was therefore mostly 'global responsibility' and the outcome normally a regional version of the 'responsible stakeholder' role. The role envisioned however was that of a 'role model', rather than a more active self-role:

"The world needs China, and she should also play a greater role in the world, particularly the model provided by China according to its own development for the developing countries that are seeking hard for their own developing way. Although to learn this model may be difficult for them for the reasons from social history and politics, providing it is a contribution for the development of the world."⁵²⁵

The overall outlook for relations with the Middle East was seen as very positive by most Chinese analysts. Especially in the economic field they saw China's economic successes and the change towards more sophisticated products as the foundation of this success, translating economic presence into a political role:

"For instance, China high speed train sold to the Arabs? Thirty years ago Chinese goods in Egypt were very limited, mostly fans or T-shirts, but now you can find many things, TV, air conditioners,

524 Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

525 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 38

etc. Many Middle Easterners like Chinese goods, with high quality and low price. Middle Easterners recognize the US as very strong, but they don't like the US. They know the US has high technology, but at the same time they always dislike them, from the colonial time until now. ⁵²⁶

Middle Eastern politics are often framed in terms of a global power shift away from a US dominated world: "As the unipolar order declines, various forces are rising, among which China has already become an important force in constructing a new world order." ⁵²⁷ Li Weijian points towards the international community in reaction to China's development expecting China to play a stronger role in the Middle East, while some Western countries would feel threatened and would try to contain China through the multilateral system. ⁵²⁸ Still, he emphasises that "China has no intention of becoming the leader in the resolution to the Middle East affairs" and then describes China's role by both the 'responsibility' and the 'national interest' frames:

"However, with the continuous growth of the overall national strength and international influence of China, the international call for China to take on more responsibilities is also getting louder and louder. At the same time, with the overseas expansion of China's national interests, China is bound to participate in the shaping of those regions where its interests lie and become a constructive partner that promotes regional stability. Now that there are more calls for China to make more efforts in the Middle East, China has chosen to become one of the stable regional forces, which suits both China's reality and the wishes of the Middle East as well to safeguard the interests of China." ⁵²⁹

When asked about a future change in China's role, most Chinese analysts assumed that it would mostly focus on a more active economic role and also focus more on the interests of Chinese expats living in the Middle East. A real political role in the region is still seen as being unwarranted, especially due to little demand for this role change from the Arab side. Contrary to official boasts about 'friendship', more policy oriented researchers are aware of the lack of Arab interest in China and that "[o]nly Saudi Arabia has a real interest in us [China], because the Saudis have a lot of pressure from their government." ⁵³⁰ For one Chinese analyst, China's major contribution to the region would still be "to help their economic development." ⁵³¹ Huang Minxin also argues, that further political engagement from the Chinese side faced difficulties in its global role conception because "usually the political situation is influenced by internal factors. [...] China usually follows the non-intervention principal. So it's difficult for

526 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2013

527 Li Weijian (2009) p.28

528 Li Weijian (2009) p.28-29

529 Li Weijian (2009) p.34

530 Interview with Chinese Analyst, Beijing, May 2013

531 Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

China, unless through pressure from the West.” He sees this pressure as the only reason why China has actually been more active in the politics of the region at least if China didn’t have direct interests of its own:

„In some cases, for instance in Libya, China’s voting made possible Western influence in Libya because Gadhafi followed a policy not friendly to China in recent years. I think the role will be bigger but still not very big.”⁵³²

When asked what China could add to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that the US could not supply, Huang recurred to the role China could play in financial support for the Arab side. He saw Arab support for a stronger political role after the Arab Spring only in those few countries that “feel the US puts more pressure on the Arab world. For some countries they hope China just helps economically, they are more pro-US or pro-West.”⁵³³ Other authors like Wang Jinglie also emphasise the necessity to move from a pure role model to the role of mediator in regional conflicts:

“For a long time, China has maintained good relations with Middle Eastern countries, and we should say that we have abundant political and diplomatic resources. China should play a greater role on major issues, such as the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Iraq issue, the Iran nuclear issue, and the Afghanistan issue. It is necessary to keep a low profile, but also make a difference.”⁵³⁴

Zhu Weilie sees China’s political role as having already increased during the 2006 Lebanon War by sending its envoy Sun Bigan to the region, supporting the French UNSC efforts and finally raising the number of Chinese peacekeepers in Lebanon to around 1,000. He sees China’s increased role as having been met with positive responses from the West and Arab states and to a certain degree from Israel:

“With the strengthening national power and expanding oversea interests, China's participations in international consultations on the Middle East matters and diplomacy efforts in regional contentious issues have been significantly enhanced. China's policies and diplomatic practices have been acknowledged and praised by the international society.”⁵³⁵

Yu Guoqing also sees China’s role in the Middle East peace process as having “generated positive feedback from concerned parties and the international community.”⁵³⁶ Li Xinfeng, in his analysis of the PLAN operation off the Somali coast, sees their result mostly in that it “shows the powerful image of the Chinese Navy and highlights China’s image as a responsible

532 Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

533 Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

534 Wang Jinglie (2010) p. 38

535 Zhu Weilie (2011) p.14

536 Yu, Guoqing (2013): A-Yi chongtu yu zhongguo zai zhongdong heping jincheng zhong de zuoyong, The Arab-Israeli Conflict and China’s role in the Middle East, p.44, in: Yang, Guang (2013)

country”.⁵³⁷ These positive assessments are summed up by Li Weijian’s conclusion about China’s relationship with the Middle East and other regional players:

“The summary is, that China has been proposing harmonious co-existence in both its diplomatic theory and practice [...]. China has demonstrated to the world that it takes the coordination with other major powers seriously and is willing to work together with the international community as a unique force in promoting stability in the Middle East.”⁵³⁸

In 2009, Chinese analysts like Li Weijian had no reason to believe that China’s relationship with the Middle East was on anything but a trajectory to harmonious relations and a rather comfortable process of regional role location for China.

5.3. The End of a Dream? - Chinese Views on the Arab Spring

In December 2010 the political situation in the Middle East once again started to change dramatically. For China, the uprisings of the Arab Spring proved challenging on many fronts, starting with implications for the domestic discourse on political order. The wider-reaching effect was that it raised questions about China’s foreign policy role in the Middle East. In the beginning China remained adamant in its support for the embattled authoritarian governments. Domestically, the Chinese authorities reacted to the news from Tunisia and Egypt with a media blackout trying to prevent news of the events seeping into the country.

5.3.1. Chinese Views on the Nature and Causes of the Arab Spring

Part of this early reaction to the events in the Middle East was a special kind of denial that dominated the Chinese perspective on the Arab Spring. When the authorities could not suppress the news about the uprisings anymore, they changed the narrative and denied the revolutionary character of the events.

This view resonates with the academic accounts of the events when Dong Manyuan of the CIIS emphasises that the “unrest was described by the US and European media as the Arab Uprising, the Arab Spring or the Arab Democratic Revolution” while in Dong’s perspective, like in the narrative transported by most Chinese analysts, “anti-government forces” were so active in Tunisia that “social order was destabilized.”⁵³⁹ Some, like Wang Jinglie, even criticised the Chinese media for buying into the Western euphoria, or the panic of the Chinese government:

537 Li Xinfeng (2013) p.73

538 Li Weijian (2009) p.37

539 Dong Manyuan(2011) p.34-35

“Some people describe it as revolution, but for me, if you mean revolution, what kind of revolution, who is the leader, the trend of the revolution? It’s not revolution, it’s just crisis!”⁵⁴⁰ This denial of the honorific title ‘revolution’ served not only the purpose of downplaying the events, and the effects it could have on China - Arab relations, but also as an opening salvo in countering the impression that the events in the Middle East were transferable to the situation in China.

Dong Manyuan is typical for this approach in highlighting the difference between both regimes and the regional specificity of the events, when he writes that “internal factors are the fundamental causes and external factors are the conditions.”⁵⁴¹ He sees this as a general challenge to the ‘China model’ as expressed by CPC Chairman Hu Jintao who on 1 July 2011 called the Arab Spring “one important test in the external environment” for China. This ‘test’ was further explained by Liu Zhongmin as “some negative impact on social stability”, for which the main culprit was easily found in Western media who “stirred up trouble, hoping for a Chinese version of an “Arab Spring” which may undermine China’s social stability and slow down its rise.” Finally, the Arab spring is even reframed as evidence of:

“[...] the correctness and advancement of CPC’s governing theory, which should increase China’s confidence in its developmental road. Firstly, China always takes development as the primary task of the Party’s governing and rejuvenating the country. [...] The root cause of the unrest in the Middle East is a crisis of development, namely, a crisis of the development model.”⁵⁴²

This “correctness” of the CPC’s development approach was eagerly asserted by many scholars. Others, like Beijing University scholar Wu Bingbing however, took a more analytic view of the fall of Mubarak:

“[...]the autocratic rule of the Mubarak regime being challenged by globalization; the imbalance between economic growth and social development which created severe unemployment and poverty problems, worsened by imported inflation resulting from the global financial crisis; and, the pro-US and pro-Israel foreign policy pursued by the Mubarak regime which caused resentment among the Egyptian people and stimulated protests.”⁵⁴³

He highlights the challenges both westernisation and globalisation pose to authoritarian rule:

“In both the Sadat and Hosni Mubarak eras, governance had become pro-Western, pro-Israel with increasing integration into the Western market economies” [...] “Globalization opened up cracks in

540 Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2011

541 Dong Manyuan (2011) p.43-47

542 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.4-5

543 Wu Bingbing (2012)p.19

the long-term authoritarian rule and the political pressure in Egypt, a group of Middle-class youth network activists emerged and developed into a new opposition.”⁵⁴⁴

While he argues that Al-Jazeera, the Internet and mobile phones created new platforms of communication, Wu still sees the discrepancy between “Economic and social development while challenging the financial crisis” as the main reason.

Another major reason is the close alignment between the US and Israel.⁵⁴⁵ Still, the narrative remained that the Arab Spring was at least partly a result of Western meddling:

“The efforts made by Western countries, led by the US, to influence these countries in the name of “democracy,” “human rights,” and “freedom of speech” have worked. The US along with Europe has never given up their efforts to introduce the Arab world to their own political systems, institutions, ideologies and lifestyles.”⁵⁴⁶

Ironically, Western interference was not only seen at play in causing the unrest, but especially being responsible for the bloodless fall of governments in Tunisia and Egypt as they “pressured the militaries of these two countries not to take any measures of repression [...]”⁵⁴⁷ This was not seen as a positive result of Western interference, but as evidence for the sinister intentions of Western powers:

“Their real purpose is to seize energy resources and market share and “return to Africa” with North Africa as a launching pad. The deep involvement of the US in the unrest of the Middle East and North Africa is an important development of “neo-interventionism,” and the “human rights above sovereignty” element can be found therein.”⁵⁴⁸

Besides Western Influence, another main culprit in China’s literature on the Arab Spring is the Islamist threat, something that was perceived all the more worrying as the secular republics, which China could historically relate to, seemed to become a thing of the past:

“[...] the secular forces’ ideas of national revival and their practices of social transformation that emerged after World War I have suffered a major setback and failure. Meanwhile, Islamic fundamentalist organizations, another branch of the major forces in the Middle East, either charged forward at the forefront, or added fuel to the fire behind the scenes, or simply patiently boded their time in this turmoil. However, their ideology is not in line with the trend of the times and some of them even engage in terrorist activities and have a poor image, thus rendering them difficult to obtain power over the current power structures.”⁵⁴⁹

544 Wu Bingbing (2012) p.21-22

545 Wu Bingbing (2012) p.22-23

546 Guo Xiangang (2011) p.89-92

547 Ibid.

548 Dong Manyuan (2011) p.48-53

549 Guo Xiangang (2011) p. 83

This does not mean that Chinese scholars completely negated the legitimacy of Islamist politics as Wu Bingbing argued that in “a country with the Muslim population as the majority, it is impossible for Islam not to play any role in politics.” Still, overall for him, American hegemony remained the ultimate reason for the revolts when he asserts that “[...] the change in Egypt can be seen as the inevitable result of US hegemony in the Middle East”⁵⁵⁰ That this focus on American hegemony as the main reason for Egypt’s instability and problems reflected the wider academic mood in China, was highlighted in the CASS West Asia and Africa Research Institute’s report on the perspective of Chinese Students on the Arab Spring.⁵⁵¹

5.3.2. China’s Discourse on Western “Neo-Interventionism” in the Arab Spring

This interpretation of the Arab Spring as a US-inspired conspiracy is very widespread among Chinese observers and is in line with the general tendency of the Chinese leadership to view world politics as a result of the machinations of either ‘imperialist’ or ‘foreign hostile forces’. The Arab Spring is thereby only another attempt do “bring Western-style democracy to the region,” and part of a “Greater Middle East Plan” which failed because the “social development in the Arab world” was not ready for democracy.⁵⁵²

The same frame is also put over US calls on Arab governments not to restrict the cyber freedom of their citizens, as secretary of state Hillary Clinton did during the Arab Spring: “This means taking a grip of the young people’s political trends will help manipulate the political situation in these countries to a great extent.”⁵⁵³ In the Chinese perspective these attempts to support political change are not seen as inspired by humanitarian concerns, but attributed squarely to US strategic interests. This view is often substantiated by pointing at Western support for authoritarian governments in the region and its refusal to accept democratically elected but anti-western governments, like Hamas in Palestine:

“Western-style democracy has a poor image in the Arab world. American Middle East policy takes its own interests as a benchmark; as long as a regime is pro-American, the United States will support it no matter whether it is democratic or not. Otherwise, the regime will be suppressed with a firm hand.”⁵⁵⁴

550 Wu Bingbing (2012) p.31

551 IWAAS Xiya feizhou yanjiusuo guoqing diaoyanzu (2013): Zhongguo daxuesheng ruhe kandai jinnian zhongdong guojia jubian, Recent Changes in Middle Eastern Countries in the Eyes of Chinese Students, in: Yang, Guang (2013) p.209

552 Guo Xiangang (2011) p. 93-99

553 Gao Zugui (2011) p. 18

554 Guo Xiangang (2011) p. 93-99

This US 'pragmatism' in supporting some democracy movements when they seem to serve US interests, while at the same time supporting undemocratic allies like Saudi Arabia is frequently noted in Chinese literature. Therefore the Western legitimisation of "the interventionist acts" by framing them as 'humanitarian' and according to 'international law', is seen by Chinese authors as a cynical machiavellian power-play in which, "using 'multilateralism', the US asked its Western and regional allies to be on the front while it gave support in the back."⁵⁵⁵ Accordingly, the 2012 intervention in Libya was not interpreted as having been forced on the US by its European allies, but as a plot, framed by Chinese authors and politicians as "neo-interventionism" by the hegemon to assert itself.⁵⁵⁶

"In cooperation with its European allies, Washington resorts to the UN 1973 Resolution on Libya and the protection of civilians as its legal basis to carry out large-scale air strikes against Libya, [and] is making full use of the opportunity of regime-change to turn Libya into a strategic pillar in Africa in the future."⁵⁵⁷

That the uprising in Libya turned into a full scale war, is also seen as a result of this Western military intervention. In this frame, the attempt to violently suppress the "anti-government protests" was a result of Gadhafi "learning from the "mistakes" of Ben Ali and Mubarak. For Chinese commentators, Gaddafi had tried in vain to accommodate the West but was never accepted, as he had to learn when he tried to suppress the uprisings, proving that adhering to Western demands was no guarantee for acceptance by the West:

"Western countries, including the US, the UK, and France reacted to this immediately by condemning Gaddafi's "atrocities," claiming that "Gaddafi has lost governing legitimacy and should step down." With support from Western countries, Libya's opposition forces grew rapidly. In order to realize an earlier fall of the Gaddafi regime, the US, UK and France pushed the UN Security Council to adopt Resolution 1970 and Resolution 1973 to impose sanctions and a "no-fly zone" against Libya. The US, the UK and France had stepped beyond Resolution 1973 to launch massive air strikes and other military interventions beginning on March 19th, and in the meantime had been providing Libya's opposition forces with funding, military equipment, and personnel training. On June 27th, the United States, the UK and France pushed the International Criminal Court to issue an arrest warrant for Gaddafi, accusing him of crimes against humanity. This also helped make the West's military intervention seem more legitimate".⁵⁵⁸

Chinese observers often note, that China is not resisting fighting international threats in general, as this could raise the accusation of being 'weak' on international terrorism. For example, Zhu Weilie emphasises that the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was indirectly

555 Dong Manyuan (2011) p. 48-53

556 Wang, Lincong (2013): Xin ganyu zhuyi dui zhongdong diqu anquan ji guoji guanxi de yingxiang, Neo-interventionism's Influence on Middle East Security and International Relations, in: Yang, Guang (2013), p.227

557 Gao Zugui (2011) p.19

558 Dong Manyuan (2011) p.36-38

supported by China as a legitimate war “[...] to combat the al-Qaeda group and the Taliban regime which was verified by evidence was supported by the United Nations, China and other powers, as well as Islamic countries”,⁵⁵⁹ as opposed to the “intervention” in Libya,

Following the experience of the perceived Western neo-interventionism to push through regime change in the Middle East, China was unwilling to cooperate again with the West when escalating violence in Syria from summer 2011 onwards led to calls for another international intervention. The perception of a Western-induced regime change is even more pronounced in the debate on Syria than it is on the Libyan case, sometimes even denying, albeit indirectly by citing only Syrian government sources, the atrocities of the civil war:

“Official statements by Syria accused the foreign media of exaggerating the number of casualties. The US and the EU continuously exerted their influence in hope of bringing about changes in Syria. [...] On May 20th, Obama said that President Bashar “should get out of the way.””⁵⁶⁰

The Chinese perception of the Syrian crisis followed the tendency in China’s foreign policy to interpret regional politics from the global and not from a regional or domestic level, as when Liu Yueqin says “the crisis In Syria is the game between the United States and Russia.”⁵⁶¹ Using the same framing, the Chinese newspaper Global Times attacked the debate in the West about possible military strikes against the Assad regime in 2013 after the alleged use of chemical weapons by regime forces:

“As countries built on the rule of law, the US and France have made reckless decisions. The problem is both Washington and Paris do not really care about international law. Every action they take on Syria stems from their own political judgment of Syria's national situation. Such a judgment is also based on their geopolitical interests in this area [...] The Assad regime, which has struggled for two years under intense pressure from Western countries, has already become a thorn in the side of the US. How much longer it can stand will test whether and to what extent the pattern of global powers has shifted.”⁵⁶²

It is important to note the different roles that are attributed to the US and China in the framing process. The US is set in the role of ‘interventionist’ or ‘trouble maker’ driven solely by its own inferior motifs. China on the other hand casts itself not only in a rather passive but even a defensive role. For example while according to Liu Yueqin, “neo-interventionism becomes a major threat to Syrian security”, this frame does not apply when China got involved in the crisis:

559 Zhu Weilie (2011) p. 7-8

560 Dong Manyuan (2011) p.41-42

561 Liu Yueqin (2013): Xuliya weiji yu zhongdong diqu anquan jushi de xin fazhan, The Syria Crisis and Middle East Security, in: Yang, Guang (2013)

562 Global Times: U.S. ignoring logic as it beats war drums, in: Global Times, 04 September 2013

“China and Russia are powers that maintain the security of Syria and the Middle East, their actions prevented largely the West from imposing forces [sic] against Syria.”⁵⁶³ While China’s role is actually talked about relatively little when compared to the US’s role, by assigning the US the negative role, China casts itself in a positive counter-role.

5.3.3. The Role of the US and the Regional Order after the Arab Spring

Chinese analysts did not only insist on the US playing a very active, and negative, role in fermenting the Arab Spring. As the Arab Spring deteriorated increasingly into bloody civil wars the US, was increasingly seen as the loser - and deservedly so, in the Chinese view:

“The United States, being the exterior force most deeply involved in the region, has the biggest strategic interests in the Middle East. Washington’s strategy in the region itself played a major part in leading to the current evolving upheaval. Now this strategy is suffering severe shocks. American interests, objectives and policy implementation are confronted with the most complicated challenges since the end of the Cold War. America’s handling of these challenges as well as its possible policy readjustments will exert important impacts to the evolving situation and the posture in the region.”⁵⁶⁴

Wu Bingbing also detects a weakening of the US-led regional order in the Middle East:

“A new strategic structure in the Middle East would emerge through the change, with pro-US group, anti-US group, and a group in the Middle as three main groups, based on competition between the Iranian model and the Turkish model, and US hegemonic power in the region would be weakened correspondingly.”⁵⁶⁵

One big question for Chinese researchers obviously had to be if the traditional alliances of the US with Arab states have been weakened because of the abandoning of their erstwhile allies in the face of public anger. Gao Zugui, for example, argues the loss of trust by Arab leaders “will impact the United States and Europe’s efforts to promote their strategy in the Middle East.”⁵⁶⁶ Similarly, Gao sees America’s position weakened: “In dealing with crises, many Middle East states believe that America’s influence in the region is declining and they also question the credibility of America as an ally.”⁵⁶⁷

Beyond, and as a result of this weakened position, the role that the strengthened Islamist movements of the region would play in US regional policy was a sign for the increasing

563 Liu Yueqin (2013) p.248

564 Gao Zugui (2011) p.4

565 Wu Bingbing (2012) p.20

566 “The U.S. and Europe did not appreciate the “contributions” made by Mubarak and Ben Ali when they supported the U.S.’s strategy in the Middle East, first upholding the Camp David Accords, then supporting the Oslo Accords, and then offering a hand in the fight against terrorism. They abandoned their two allies at their critical moments.” Gao (2011) p.15-16

567 Gao Zugui (2011) p.15-16

difficulties of the US to play its global role, as the Western conundrum of supporting democratisation on the one hand while rejecting Islamist movements on the other hand led to new challenges:

“The United States is considering a change in its policy towards Islamist forces, and accumulating motivating force and possibility to readjust its relations with major players there and to reshape the political configuration in the region. While clearly expressing its supports to the Middle East states for their development of a Western-style democracy and civil society, the United States is very much concerned about a rapid and excessive expansion of radical and terrorist Islamist forces.”⁵⁶⁸

The opposite opinion, that the central role played by the US in the Arab Spring showed that the US was not in decline, was also expressed by some scholars in anonymous interviews. According to this point of view, the regional states understood that the US remained the ‘indispensable’ nation in the region, without which nothing could be done. That the US was reluctant to intervene as strongly as it might have done in previous years, showed not how unimportant the US was, but how much everybody would miss it as a regional player.⁵⁶⁹ Accordingly, the initial hope of some Chinese media that the US might actually be driven out of the region by the events was refuted by most analysts:

“As a matter of fact, US position as “the only superpower” will not change within a short period [...] neither will its dominance over the Middle Eastern affairs. In fact, the US is already keeping an eye on China’s ambition of dominance over Middle Eastern affairs. If the Chinese media and academic circles have simply interpreted the unrest in the Middle East from the perspective of gaming between China and the US, the US will surely raise suspicions about China's strategy, which is not helpful either for the Sino-US relationship or China's diplomacy in the Middle East.”⁵⁷⁰

Liu Zhongmin also warned against the hope among some Chinese foreign policy makers, that the US might be bogged down in the Middle East due to the Arab Spring, and therefore would have no resources left anymore for its ‘pivot to Asia’:

“The Obama administration has not changed its strategic contraction in the Middle East and improving relations with the Islamic world so as to pave the way for moving its centre of strategy to the Asia-Pacific region.”⁵⁷¹

Concerning the question of winners and losers of the Arab Spring in the regional power play, Iran was generally seen as the big winner by Chinese authors: “[W]ith the strategic pressure on it greatly alleviated, Iran will play a bigger role in the region [...] and try to change the quality

568 Gao Zugui (2011) p.19

569 Interview with Chinese Analyst (CICIR), Beijing, May 2013

570 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.6

571 Ibid.: “At present, there is such unrealistic optimism in Chinese media which exaggerates how much the unrest in the Middle East can restrain the U.S. from moving its centre of strategy eastward, believing it is time for China to advance into another period of strategic opportunities after 9/11.”

of the Street Revolution of Arab countries by exporting its own Islamic Revolution so as to increase its space of strategic manoeuvre."⁵⁷² That the Arab states were generally seen as the losers, following the historical Chinese narrative of external weakness mainly resulting from internal turmoil, is emphasised, when Israel and Turkey are named as the other big winners; Israel as it would have the opportunity to "divide and disintegrate the Arab countries" and Turkey "with its role in the region being increased markedly", being able to decide the "post-transition period of the Middle East and North Africa."⁵⁷³ In Turkey's case, Wu Bingbing sees this success as a result of shrewd manoeuvring in siding with the GCC and Saudi Arabia to pressure Iran and distancing itself from Israel at the same time. This argument of course follows the tendency in Chinese analysis to frame 'alliances' as negative and see an 'independent' foreign policy as the prerequisite of success.⁵⁷⁴

Iran and Turkey were also perceived as the big winners due to their Islamist governments, now seen by Chinese authors as on the winning side; and seemingly the overall assessment of Islamist movements softened a little bit after 2011:

"Islamic fundamentalism does not conform to the trend of the times, and people are averse to the terrorist acts of extremist groups; but the Islamic fundamentalist groups are relatively free from corruption and dare to resist the US regional penetration and Israeli aggression. Therefore, they are deeply admired by the Muslim people."⁵⁷⁵ [...] "In the current turmoil in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood did not take drastic means to express its political aspirations but kept a low profile and participated in negotiations with the military conducted by the opposition parties."⁵⁷⁶

These Islamist governments were not seen as automatically more anti-Western however, and Guo Xiangang argues that they would be even more reliant on help from the West than their predecessors, due to the economic difficulties after the revolutions; „but not at the cost of relations with emerging economies as well as major developing countries“, as he assures his concerned readers.⁵⁷⁷

572 Gao Zugui (2011) p.15

573 Ibid.

574 Wu Bingbing (2012) p.31

575 Guo (2011) p. 90

576 Ibid.

577 Guo Xiangang (2011) p. 93-99

5.3.4. Assessing China's Role in the Arab Spring

Besides this assessment of the Arab Spring, the assessment of China's handling of the crisis itself is also indicative of the impact of the Arab Spring on China's role considerations in the Middle East.

A crisis of such magnitude and geographical scope as the Arab Spring obviously led to some stock-taking on the side of China's foreign policy institutions; and one of the most prominent attempts in this regards was Liu Zhongmin research on China's role in the Middle East which received special funding for this purpose.⁵⁷⁸

Rather unsurprisingly, his overall judgement is very positive, concluding that "[F]rom crisis management to the overall planning, China's response to the unrest in the Middle East has achieved great success." He argues that China coped with the domestic effects of the crisis, the evacuation of Chinese citizens as well as dealing with the great powers and "consolidating and adjusting its relations with Arab countries smoothly."⁵⁷⁹ He refutes domestic criticism of China's handling of the Arab Spring and calls it one of the "largest diplomatic victories in China's crisis management since the beginning of the 21st century."⁵⁸⁰

Interestingly, his first point refers not to the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya, which most Western sources would also have deemed the greatest and most spectacular success of China during the Arab Spring but starts with the narrative of the pitfalls of alliances. This returns multiple times in the analysis, both of the overall Middle East situation as well as in the analysis of the Arab Spring. Liu favourably compares the independence of China's foreign policy, through which it "properly balanced the relationship between independent diplomacy and participation in the international system", to the predicament of many Arab governments: "Western allies have lost the support of their people, while those challenging the international system have lost the development opportunity rendered by globalization."⁵⁸¹

578 Namely; "Islamic Elements in Contemporary Middle East International Relations" (08JJDGJW256) and "Islamic Middle East Region and the Transition of International System" (08JZD0039), and it is also supported by the Shanghai International Studies University "211" program (Stage III) and Key Discipline of Shanghai (B702), see Liu (2012) p.1

579 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.1-2

580 Ibid.

581 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.4-5

This highlighting of neutrality in the face of the dichotomy between adapting and resisting the US-led international system is an important justification of China's regional and global role. Many analysts argue that China is the only 'neutral' player in the Syrian conflict, and that this non-intervention is actually part of China's role as a 'responsible stakeholder' in regional affairs, as an intervention would kill more people than non-intervention.⁵⁸² Wang Sulao of Beijing University insisted that China "is the only neutral country in the Syrian Problem. The US and Europe together with Qatar and Saudi Arabia support the rebels. Russia and Iran support Assad. Only China is neutral, because we never interfere in other countries!"⁵⁸³ It should be noted however, that in the internal discourse of China's agencies there is also another narrative, according to which China's 'neutral' stand has led to disagreement with important players in the region. Supporters of this slightly more critical view highlight that this refusal to play a security role, was an automatic result of China's lack of instruments with which it could actually put pressure on countries in the region.⁵⁸⁴

That this 'neutral' role was difficult for many Arabs to accept, and often seen as 'anti-Arab' was something that did not elude Chinese observers.

"Islam is very difficult in Muslim countries, especially in Middle East to have a democracy. However, the new revolution show that it's not that people don't like democracy, it's just the condition is not good yet. So this is a challenge for China, because our political reform is very slow. Some Arabic speaking scholars are criticizing China. Many countries need China for economic development. After years, China will have good relation with these countries. Some say China always say 'Arab brothers', but now the brothers are changing."⁵⁸⁵

Other reactions by China to the Arab Spring find praise across the board of analysts, especially the evacuation from Libya which is often embedded into patriotic themes:

"[...]This operation would open an important page in Chinese military history as an important event simply because of the calming effect the high-flying national flag on the warship Xuzhou had on those Chinese nationals threatened by the conflict."⁵⁸⁶

This ability to protect its own citizens abroad plays an important part in the definition of a 'rich and strong country'. The lack of care that Chinese embassies and Chinese foreign policy in general gives to Chinese citizens abroad, is often criticised by Chinese expats. Therefore, this ability is generally seen as an important feature of China's new standing in the world. Some

582 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011

583 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, April 2013

584 Interview with Chinese Analyst (CICIR), Beijing, May 2013

585 Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

586 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.10

Chinese foreign policy analysts even see this as a major contribution to the ‘responsible stakeholder’ concept. “At the current phase of its development China’s responsibility first of all has to go to its own citizens abroad, this is the normal behaviour of a stakeholder in the international system.”⁵⁸⁷

One of the major points of criticism for many authors has been the handling of the Arab Spring by the Chinese media. As Liu Zhongmin points out, China was not able to establish a counter narrative to Western hegemonic discourses:

“The absence of reports from the official mainstream media often arouses suspicions of the masses toward the stand of the government. When the media got the green light for comprehensive reports, many of them followed the Western media blindly, referring to the unrests as “Jasmine Revolution”, “Arab Spring” or “Democracy Revolution”, which reveals a lack of discourse system in the Chinese media. [Also] China’s Middle Eastern studies especially that of specific countries, is still lagging behind.”⁵⁸⁸

This general feeling of ignorance towards what was actually going on in Middle East is one of the major reasons for Liu that China had no choice but to remain neutral during the Arab Spring, refusing to play any political role.

5.3.5. Lessons for China’s Foreign Policy in the Region

Criticism of government policy is obviously more subdued in texts of Chinese think tanks and the overall success of the foreign ministry rarely questioned. However, many analysts, are willing to offer advice on how to improve handling of crises such as the Arab Spring. Liu Zhongmin sees the interference of the West as costly to their foreign policy, while China’s losses were actually negligible. He cites the then Chinese foreign minister on his first visit to the Middle East who said that the non-interference principle goes together with the opposition to the use of force and the commitment to helping regional states to solve problems themselves. At the same time he denies that China simply looked on. He refers instead to the many visits of Chinese officials to the region, trying to coordinate with regional powers, “accomplishing something to some extent”, which Liu sees as a manifestation of China’s responsibility as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council.⁵⁸⁹

587 Interview with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011

588 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.11

589 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.8

There is a broad agreement among Chinese analysts that the instruments of China's Middle East Policy have to be improved as many of them decry Beijing's inability to play a more active role during the events.

"The Middle East is very important in world politics, so no world power can avoid getting involved in the Middle East. As China is an emerging power, the US hopes that China becomes a responsible power, so China can't avoid to get involved in the Middle East. So the Middle East is now an important stage for China to show its new international role. Maybe this thing has no direct connection with you, but it can show your role in the world. For instance, in Libya, the US and France wanted interfere and the choice of China was important, because everyone in the world was looking at China."⁵⁹⁰

The consensus seems to be that China was not only overwhelmed by the developments of the Arab Spring but also that it often lacked the ability to take the initiative in new and challenging situations. For proponents of this view, the Chinese government has focused too much on government to government exchanges and lacked channels to civil society groups.

"China has to deal with the political oppositions in its diplomacy as the US and Europe have already made it a priority in their Middle East diplomacy to strengthen their ties with the mass of the Middle Eastern countries and encourage the building of civil society so as to influence the political transformation in Middle Eastern countries."⁵⁹¹ [...] Due to a lack of channels for contact with non-government forces and relevant personnel and the lack of non-governmental forces, China's contact with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the National Transitional Council of Libya was apparently lagging behind that of other great powers."⁵⁹²

As a result of these perceived deficiencies in the reaction to the Arab Spring, there also seems to be agreement among Chinese analysts, that the Arab Spring served as a wake-up call for China's foreign policy makers and that this has led to a much more activist approach to the region afterwards.⁵⁹³ One prime example seems to be that the information gathering in the region had been insufficient and too focussed on China's own political narrative, thereby missing some of the more important developments. As a result, for example, the embassies are now said to play less of a role in informing China's researchers about the region and researchers are given more leeway in doing their own research, including field research. While this seems to have been limited to two delegations of researchers per year, the delegations going to the region in the years following the uprising are reported to have gained more direct and valuable information than previous delegations.⁵⁹⁴

590 Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011

591 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.17

592 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.10

593 Interview with Chinese Analyst, Beijing, May 2013

594 Ibid.

China's perceived lack of a more strategic approach to the region, especially during the Arab Spring, has been a persistent theme in interviews with Chinese analysts, though it would be fair to say that most analysts in the world ask their governments to behave more strategically.

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While Liu Zhongmin has a very positive view of China's policies during the Arab Spring, he still thinks that its Middle East policies have to be tested against their long-term results. Because of the "tremendous interests of China in this region, the rapidity of information transmission in the globalization era and the pluralism of public opinions" it will have to be prepared for more to come. Due to the increasing importance of the Middle East for China, Liu calls for a better definition of the Middle East in China's overall foreign policy strategy.⁵⁹⁶ He laments that in contrast to other regions, China has not published its Middle East strategy. However, he insists that China has a strategy and the lack of publication is simply due to the "complicated situation in the region."⁵⁹⁷ He thinks that China should move beyond its traditional interest in energy and the three evils, and should emphasise China's responsibility in the region:

"The security and development issues in the Middle East have become an important part of global governance and an unavoidable problem in China's implementation of international responsibilities. In particular, China's foreign policies on many issues such as energy, trade, finance and global climate changes need the support from Middle Eastern countries."⁵⁹⁸

Liu sees the need for developing this comprehensive strategy due to the geostrategic importance of the Middle East, which he thinks is still not well understood in China. Indeed, he calls the Middle East the "heartland" of geopolitics and refers to Central Asia's direct importance for the security situation in Xinjiang. He also emphasises the importance of the Middle East for expanding China's maritime security interest in its "energy channel". Emphasis is also placed on the US 'pivot to Asia', which he thinks should drive China beyond its obsession with the "three evils".⁵⁹⁹

While arguing for stronger Chinese activism in the region, many Chinese analysts concluded that the non-interference principle has to stay. It is supposed to form the basis of a neutral

595 Interview with Li Weijian, Shanghai Jan 2011, other interviews May 2013

596 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.11

597 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p. 11-12 Similar to the texts discussed earlier, he thinks this strategy should also refer to historical ties, besides talking about current interests and instruments.

598 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.13

599 Ibid.

role, as it is often seen as the fundamental basis of trust between Arab states and China. Liu calls for a new strategic approach to the region, advocating for China to increase its economic aid and investment in the Middle East, especially to the revolutionary countries, and to learn how to further its interest through this. This should not lead to China taking sides, but actually enable China to take on a new role as a “mediator”.⁶⁰⁰ This role as a mediator became perhaps the most visible, and most trumpeted by Chinese media, sign of China’s role aspirations for the region When President Xi Jinping offered China’s service as a mediator between Israel and Palestine during simultaneous visits of both heads of governments to Beijing in April 2013. However, as one Chinese researcher explained, “We are well aware that we have no ability to really become a mediator between Israel and the Palestinians. But this is the only role that we can play because it is neutral and thereby doesn’t cost anything.”⁶⁰¹

The media is often seen by Chinese analysts as a driving factor behind demands for a stronger Chinese role in the Middle East:

“After the outbreak of the unrest in the Middle East, the media in China and overseas both called on China to increase involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. In the international community, the West and even the Arab world put forward the theory of “China’s responsibilities”, urging China, a great power with increasing strength, to take on more international responsibilities for the transformation of Middle Eastern countries. [...] The people and governments of Arab countries also have similar expectations. Apart from more aid from China, they also hope China can uphold justice, balance or even resist the pressure imposed on them by the West.”⁶⁰²

While Liu adds, that China’s foreign policy of course should never be controlled by the media or the public, he still mentions that the Chinese media have called on the government to become more active in Middle Eastern affairs and to “establish China’s image as a responsible great power.”⁶⁰³

5.4. Conclusion – China’s Role Conception in the Middle East

China’s perspective on the Middle East is framed by the narrative of pre-Western globalization, which is comprised of the shared heritage of being an ancient civilisation, the centuries of connection through the Silk Road, and the shared victimisation by colonialism. This narrative

600 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.14 „Therefore, China’s identity when engaging in Middle Eastern affairs should be a righteous coordinator instead of a leader, playing a constructive role instead of a leading or even a dominant role. China should not act as a “diplomatic broker” of the West or seek to “cultivate and support pro-Chinese political forces” so as not to lose the initiative in its diplomacy in the Middle East or its characteristics of independent diplomacy.”

601 Interview with Chinese Analyst, Beijing, May 2013

602 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.13

603 Liu Zhongmin (2012) p.14

is instrumental in several ways. It references China's own historicising identity production, takes the narrative of a globalization that China benefited from, but that was driven by Western colonialism and finally shifts to a narrative where the Middle East and East Asian powers already had a connection through the Silk Road long before the rise of the West. In the end, the narrative establishes a bond between Third World countries, often presenting China as the 'leader of the developing world'. In this way, China is not "entering" the Middle East, but simply rebuilding ancient ties. This narrative establishes legitimacy for China to be in the region, denying any likeness to Western colonial expansionism.

The leadership role for China is framed as the initiator of frameworks like the CAFCE, which is understood as a mutual attempt initiated by China. These frameworks are depicted most of all as serving the purpose of enhancing "mutual understanding", thus referencing the process of role learning undertaken by China on the global level. In the same way, China's Middle East envoys are less described as pushing the Middle East peace process forward, but rather as helping other countries 'understand' the Chinese perspective. This institutionalised interaction between China and Middle Eastern countries can thereby be best understood with Shih and Jin as restaging traditional role plays of tributary missions. Contrary to this depiction of benevolent Chinese inaction, Western countries are normally depicted as actively and cynically abusing humanitarian frames for the benefit of their own strategies and interests.

Because of the strong frame of 'modernisation' in China's political thinking, its perspective on the Middle East is very similar to the Western perspective in its clichés about the "backwardness" of the political order and the religious fervour of the Middle East. The difference of course lies in the Marxist terminology used for framing this 'backwardness'. The Islamists are seen in China as the symbol of this 'backwardness', while at the same time they are also depicted as a form of legitimate resistance against Western imperialism. Islam in this way is stripped of its religious content and understood in a cultural way, similar to the Chinese notion of 'Chinese characteristics'. Assigning the role of interventionist, or 'trouble maker', to the US has the advantage for China of enabling it to talk about the problems in the region without having to criticize regional elites or to even call for change. It also has the advantage of automatically attributing the role of 'friend' to China by establishing a positive counter-role to the negative US role.

Similarly, China frames its energy needs as normal for an industrializing country and as purely commercial, while at the same time framing its energy deals as an act of commercial balancing, and of supporting regional states against the strong dependency on the West. The possible danger to regional economies of a strong dependence on China is not debated. Regional criticism of the non-energy trade imbalance, however, is referenced by most Chinese scholars, probably because the non-energy trade as well as construction and infrastructure projects are a niche where China sees itself as playing the role of benefactor to local partners.

Fighting the 'three evils' is seen by China as its most important political interest in the region and having good relations with Middle Eastern states gives China a certain role in fighting the "three Evils", even without being directly involved. China wants to prevent Middle Eastern countries from having a negative effect on its own Muslim minorities, and even sees trade with the Middle East as a tool to integrate its own Muslims more into its economic success story. This follows the narrative that ethnic and religious problems in China stem first of all from social and economic problems and thereby can also be solved through economic measures.

Until the Arab Spring, in the Chinese debate the Middle East also had the role of an ideological ally, as the only region in the world without a functioning democracy it seemed to offer a good argument for culture-based political order. With the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Chinese perception changed, and the Middle East was perceived even more as a source of instability and a threat to Chinese domestic order. China tried to counter this threat in its debate by portraying the Arab Spring as a specifically Arab phenomenon and emphasising that the Chinese political system performed much better than Arab political systems in delivering development and prosperity to its population. Once again, the US was put in the role of the 'trouble maker'. China portrays itself as having been cheated by the West on the implementation of the no-fly zone in Libya and does not describe its initial support for the international intervention in Libya as a role change, but as in-line with its role of a friend of the member states of the African Union and the Arab League. On Syria, China saw itself as the only state playing the role of a neutral state while all other major powers and regional actors are seen as being part of the conflict. Officially, China considers the position of the US in the region as weakened, while unofficially Chinese interview partners point to the fact that the traditionally anti-American governments have basically disappeared or been weakened.

China officially considers its own reaction to the Arab Spring as a success, although again the official and unofficial statements vary and Chinese analysts criticise China's reactions to the Arab Spring as coming too late. Its non-interference-stand and its concept of a "harmonious world" leads China to insist on purely government-to-government relations with other countries which made it more difficult for China to get access to the revolutionary groups after they were vying for power in the aftermath of the revolutions. Most analysts in China agree that China should take on a more active role in the Middle East and expand its regional foreign policy instruments through research and information gathering on the region.

6. Regional Perceptions of China's Role in the Middle East

“China remains this mystery we cannot understand, we cannot love her or even hate her, and all this despite every veto she slaps in the face of the Arab World within the Security Council right now.”

- Umayma al-Khamis, Saudi Columnist⁶⁰⁴

The Middle Eastern RSC is rather unique in the paradox that language and religion serve as both unifying and divisive elements in its discourses, in a way perhaps found nowhere else in the world. While the Arab language, shared history, and the Islamic faith unite most of the regional actors and frame their discourse, they also raise the temperature dramatically in their conflicts, even more perhaps with the members that share these traits than with those who do not. As we saw in the third chapter, the discourses are structured simultaneously by the frames of Arab and Islamic unity and religious, ethnic and political conflict. The roles that external actors get assigned in this regional discourse are heavily securitised and can even be simplified to the question ‘How does an external actor serve or endanger regime survival?’ The relative weakness of Arab states leads them to tend towards balancing behaviour and to expect external actors to enact roles that serve this balancing. The strong regionalisation of identity through the frames of Arab-ness, Islam, colonial victimisation and the conflict with Israel lead to a rather unique phenomenon. Regional discourse is more important in the Middle Eastern RSC than in other RSCs because issues of traditional security and identity are

604 al-Sudairi, Mohammed Turki (2012): Sino-Saudi Relations: An Economic History, GRC Gulf Papers, p.2

discussed on a regional level, while issues of economic security are discussed more on the domestic level, as analysed in the next chapter.⁶⁰⁵

6.1. The Structure of the Arab Discourse on China

One fundamental problem when comparing discourses in China about the Middle East and in the Middle East about China, is the vast difference in publications about the other side. The Arab world fares dismally in comparison to other regions when it comes to education. It was even cited by the UNDP human development index as one of the regions where standards of development, like literacy, were actually deteriorating, even before the upheavals of the Arab Spring.⁶⁰⁶ The dismal state of the region also shows in the publishing landscape in the Arab world. One only has to compare the limited size and contents of the book shops in Cairo, still seen as the centre of Arab intellectual life, with the vast expanses of the major bookstores in Beijing to see the difference in publishing, and probably reading, activity in both countries. This means that we can make no direct comparison between the vast publishing in China on the Middle East and the basically non-existent publishing in the Middle East on China.⁶⁰⁷ We therefore have to partly rely on the few Arab publications that exist on China, and primarily rely on interviews and questionnaires undertaken during the course of this study.

Another aspect that distinguishes the Middle East from China is the Middle East's rather vibrant media scene. There are numerous newspaper and TV commentaries on China, and they became even more numerous as China was drawn into the Middle Eastern limelight during the Arab Spring. However, it is important to remember, as the Saudi researcher Mohammed Turki al-Sudairi pointed out, that most of these media commentators have to refer to Western sources for information about China due to the lack of indigenous sources and that thereby "[...] the media commentary as a whole has manifested new strands of scepticism and pessimism about China. These strands have [...] reproduced common motifs found in the

605 Interviews Cairo, Dubai, Beijing, 2012-2013

606 United Nations Development Programme (2002): Arab Human Development Report - Creating Opportunities for Future Generations, United Nations Publications, New York

607 One of the few, Western, attempts so far to have a more thorough look into the image of China in the Arab world, is 'China through Arab Eyes: American Influence in the Middle East' by Chris Zambelis and Brandon Gentry from 2008. Different to most other analysis it looks mostly at the political dimension and especially the importance that the comparison to the U.S. plays in this perception. Another author that focuses on the Arab perspective of the relationship is Mohamed bin Huwaidin, Professor of Political Science at the United Arab Emirates University in Al-Ain. He wrote in his 2008 article 'China in the Middle East - Perspectives from the Arab World' how Arabs are still unsure of what to expect from China and that there is still a long way to go for the development of a real strategic partnership between the People's Republic and Arab states.

Western media about China, including overheard critiques about the country's dismal human rights record and its authoritarian political system [...]."⁶⁰⁸

This strong reliance on Western opinion might have multiple reasons, with the difference in media usage between China and the Middle East being just one of them. Generally, as the Australian economist Ben Simpfendorfer has pointed out, internet usage in China and the Arab world is very different, with the digital discourse in the Arab world being more 'cosmopolitan' or open due to its regional nature and the stronger penetration by Western news outlets in Middle Eastern media, as opposed to the 'indigenous' nature of the Chinese internet.⁶⁰⁹ This difference in the media landscape is problematic for discourse analysis of course, as it raises the question about how 'authentic' these opinions can be. However it can be argued that this is less of a problem for this research, as we are not looking for some 'true' Arab opinion, but the 'actual' perception of China. It just has to be kept in mind that an Arab newspaper commentary criticising China on its human rights record might not have the same importance and endurance to the Arab reader, or be picked up by the same civil society as one might have in the West.

So perhaps Mohammed al-Sudairi's verdict about the Saudi media applies to Arab public opinion in general, lamenting the existence of a formidable "knowledge gap" about China. He attributes this gap to the fact that most Arab, or in his case Saudi, media follow the government's lead in declaring Sino-Arab relations as 'important' or 'strategic', without having much knowledge about the nature of this relationship themselves. This lack of knowledge about China, along with the requirement to talk about it, leads the media to be overly positive on the subject. Reporters and commentators also have to turn to Western sources and fall into "adopting viewpoints and critiques alien to the Saudi context or comfortable historical legacies dating from the Cold War". At least in Saudi Arabia, al-Sudairi sees a stifling effect by these tendencies on the public debate about China.⁶¹⁰ These limitations in establishing a corpus of

608 al-Sudairi (2013) p.11

609 Simpfendorfer, Ben (2009): A Top 100 guide, July 31st, <http://www.silkroadassoc.com/blog/2009/07/31/a-top-100-guide/>

610 "It can be said then that the confluence of these tendencies – the goading of a larger political order that wants to foster better relations on the one hand, and a knowledge gap that undermines these efforts and encourages a resort to outside sources and assumptions on the other – serves to complicate overall attitudes about China in the Saudi discourse: despite widespread political messaging asserting traditional friendship and strategic convergence, China emerges as neither friend nor foe in the commentary. This confusion is easily reflected in the absence of a proper and wide-ranging debate on the future of Sino-Saudi relations." al-Sudairi (2013) p.12

data have to be kept in mind when we look at how China is perceived on the regional level, especially as this is not intended to be a comparison between current and former depictions of China in Arab discourse. Even when we look at the historical development of ties, we only use a '21st -century-lens'.

6.2. The Arab Discourse on China's Historical Role

Most Arab writers see China as a relatively new player in their region and don't seem to consider their relationship as going back much further than the 1990s, except when referring to the historical links of the 'Silk Road'. However, it is obvious that the Silk Road frame plays a much less prominent role in the Arab narratives than it does in the Chinese narrative. Perhaps because the term Silk Road is a Western term - coined by the German orientalist von Richthofen in the 19th century - that hierarchises the relationship in favour of the producer of Silk (China), it has little power in the Arab discourse and most interviewees professed that they had only heard of the term when they started reading about China or from Chinese counterparts.⁶¹¹

One of the recurring frames used in Arab narratives about an ancient connection between the Arabs and China is, as is common in these situations, a reference to the prophet Mohamed. The prophet is supposed to have advised Muslims to "Seek knowledge, even if it's in China."⁶¹² This reference is normally used as an indicator of ancient Arab knowledge about China. However, one could argue that here China is more a symbolic description for 'far away', that it symbolises more distance than intimacy, and that it actually shows the lack of real reference points in the Arab imagination about China. Others probably would point out that bringing in the Prophet himself is supposed to not only give the relationship divine blessing, but also that it is supposed to symbolise a pre-Western approach to international relations similar to the term Silk Road.⁶¹³

Historical contacts of course are also remembered from the 'golden age' of Arab expansion, which coincided with the 'golden age' of China's Tang dynasty in the eighth century, again referencing a glorious past predating the regional appearance of the West:

611 Interviews in Dubai & Cairo 2011-2013

612 Olimat (2013) p.7

613 Interviews in Dubai and Cairo, September 2011-March 2012

“[Tang-Emperor] Gaozong asked [the Arab conqueror of Central Asia] Kutiba to halt his advance and sent him some of his advisers to negotiate for peace. Kutiba agreed to the negotiations and, in so doing, he was adhering to Islam’s theory of war and peace.”⁶¹⁴

Interestingly, this depiction by Mohammed Olimat follows the tendency in the Arab narrative to state that the battle of Tallas in 751 AD “put an end to Chinese expansion in Central Asia” instead of putting an end to Arab expansion eastwards, as it is often depicted in the rest of the world.⁶¹⁵ Again it should be noted that Arab writers seem to emphasise the ‘Silk Road’ frame much less than their Chinese or Western counterparts. This might be connected in part to the Silk Road lying in pre-Islamic times, before the ‘golden age of Islam’ in the eight to tenth century, where the foreign product of silk might not be as important in Arab eyes.

Regarding the more modern history of their relationship, most Arab authors broadly follow the Chinese narrative of anti-imperialist solidarity.⁶¹⁶ Arab writers however often embed it in the Arab perspective of Cold War history wherein “China managed to maintain a healthy distance from its ideological brother, the USSR, by adopting the principle of competitive independence, especially regarding its policies toward the Third World.”⁶¹⁷ In the eyes of Emirati scholar Mohammed bin-Huwaidin, this policy of independence made it easier for China to preach its ideology to the Third World through economic, military and political aid. Abdul-Aziz Sager, then chairman of the Gulf Research Centre in Dubai, supports the view that Chinese Arab relations in the Gulf only started with post-WW II relations:

“China neither has strong historical ties nor has it developed long-term strategic interests in the Gulf till now. Any role that it did have in the Middle East was laced with Maoist ideology and influenced by Third World solidarity for leftist independence movements.”⁶¹⁸

Again, emphasising the point that Arab perspectives start the relationship much later than Chinese and Western Authors, bin-Huwaidin divides the history of this relationship into three stages. The first starts with the 1955 Bandung Conference, which he sees as: “the beginning of Arab interest in China”.⁶¹⁹ He names specifically Chinese political and military support for national liberation movements in Palestine and political support for Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt in their “struggles against imperial powers”.⁶²⁰ So the anti-imperialist frame sticks to the

614 Olimat (2013) p.8

615 Olimat (2013) p.9

616 see for this also Zambelis & Gentry (2008) p.66

617 bin-Huwaidin, Mohamed: ‘China in the Middle East Perspectives from the Arab World’, 2006, p. 68

618 Sager (2005) p.3

619 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p.68

620 Ibid.

Arab perception of this period, even if China's role seems not very prominent compared to other international players and their involvement in the Middle Eastern politics of this period.

It is also important to understand that the role assigned to China in this period is not the role of 'revolutionary vanguard' that Mao might have conceived of, but rather the role of the 'offshore balancer'.

"Throughout the Arab world, China's role was limited to providing political, military and economic support to aid in facing external threats. China was also ready to give this aid in order to expand its influence vis-à-vis the West, and later the Soviet Union."⁶²¹

There is very limited Arab debate about Maoist perspectives on the Middle East, and never does it seem to move beyond the academic discourse. The emphasis is less on Mao's 'class struggle' rhetoric than on putting him into the role of a 'Third World Leader' comparable to Nasser.⁶²² Again this role is first of all interpreted in a realpolitik way. For example, when Mao divided the world into three zones and called the Middle East the "intermediate zone", his main view of this zone according to Olimat was that it should not be dominated by a "hostile power", as this would be a threat to the survival of the PRC.⁶²³

China's role conception in the Arab-Israeli conflict exemplifies for Olimat the mismatch with regional role expectations for China. Contrary to the regional, or Western, perception, China did not see the conflict as a religious or ethnic one, but instead:

"[...] continued to perceive the conflict as a confrontation between imperialism and Third World countries in particular. [...] Mao advocated that 'local problems would be settled by the local peoples alone, and that no Middle East problem could be settled thoroughly before outside intervention, which had caused or sustained it, was liquidated.'⁶²⁴

While from an Arab perspective the conflict remained vital in the relationship with China, the non-interference position by China seems to puzzle Arab states: "The Arab side seems to have misread Chinese diplomatic statements on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and ignored the impartial Chinese attitude towards the conflict."⁶²⁵ Olimat sees the fault here less with Chinese ambiguity than with misplaced Arab expectations, when the Arab states were hoping that China would intervene in the conflict on their side: "It is as if the Arabs were drowning in a sea

621 Ibid.

622 Abdelrahman, Zainab Aisa (2011): *al-Aliqat al-masria al-sinia 1957-1970 (Sino-Egyptian Relations 1957-1970)*, Egyptian General Book Authority, Cairo

623 Olimat (2013) p.17

624 Olimat (2013) p.17-18

625 Olimat (2013) p.20-21

of conflicts and looked to China as a saviour, but the latter ignored the calls for rescue.”⁶²⁶ Olimat points out that it was the hope that China would play a ‘balancer’ role, especially in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which gave the impulse for many Arab states to support the accession of the PRC to the UN in 1971.⁶²⁷

The second period of the early relationship between China and the Arab World came after the pragmatist turn by China’s foreign policy in the 1980s. This period was dominated by China’s economic reforms, and the regional threat perceptions generated by the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and is therefore framed by Mohammed bin-Huwaidin as a time of “investment in Chinese military and political capabilities”, when he sees the relationship dominated by Sino-Arab arms deals:

“This is not to say that China no longer had political importance in the Arab world, rather that military cooperation was the most prominent feature of this period of time, with Sino-Arab cooperation in other fields taking second place.”⁶²⁸

This security frame, as opposed to the earlier dominance of ideology, is also the frame that bin-Huwaidin puts on the start of the Saudi-Chinese relationship:

“The Iran-Iraq war also transformed Sino-Saudi relations; whereas the Saudis eschewed diplomatic ties before the war, in the wake of the conflict they prioritized strategic initiatives that necessitated stronger ties to China, for example the purchase of advanced Chinese missiles to balance out Iranian and Israeli weaponry.”⁶²⁹

Once again bin-Huwaidin thinks that this growing cooperation with China was only the result of the reluctance of Western countries to help the Arabs against Israel, and not born out of a sincere interest for China or its products. That the Arab states supported Beijing in its competition with Taiwan was for him less a result of Arab convictions and more because China was willing to balance out policies of Western powers that were seen as detrimental to Arab interests. In its support for UN-Actions against Saddam Hussein after the invasion of Kuwait in 1991 bin-Huwaidin even assigns China the label of a “responsible state”⁶³⁰ that knows its obligations towards the region and plays the role that is expected by the regional states from a member of the UNSC. For bin-Huwaidin the 1991 war thereby “[...] demonstrated the

626 Ibid.

627 Olimat (2013) p.22

628 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p.69

629 Ibid.

630 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p.70

strategic political and military role China could play in influencing Arab conflicts and regional security in the Middle East.”⁶³¹

However even while these political interactions went on, for most Arab analysts the real relationship between the two sides only emerged with the growth of the economic relationship, and Sager argues that it was Chinese energy companies that were the trailblazers:

“The deepening of the relationship is therefore purely a function of China’s oil policies, not of political or even cultural ties. As its thirst for oil has grown, energy security has become a cornerstone of its Middle East policy.”⁶³²

This ‘energy’ framework for the historical development of closer and more frequent Chinese-Arab interactions as ‘buyer’ and ‘seller’ is a frame frequently used in Arab descriptions. Ezzat Shahrour, writing for the Al-Jazeera Center for Studies in Qatar, questions the historical interest of China in a political role in the Middle East. He argues that China was well aware of the pitfalls of the region for international powers, and therefore only sought diplomatic recognition from the regional states while insisting that “the problems of the Middle East must be resolved through peoples of the region and away from any external interventions.”⁶³³ For him it was only the Chinese ‘energy security’ issue that framed the Middle East as part of the overall Chinese ‘security’ discourse.

In a similar way, bin-Huwaidin frames the relationship as starting only with the beginning of meaningful Chinese energy imports from the early 1990s onwards, but emphasises that the reality of ‘energy interdependence’ also complicated the relationship:

“With the world’s largest proven oil reserves in the Middle East and North Africa, China’s energy needs made reinvigorated relations with Middle Eastern states inevitable.”[Because of]“the centrality of petroleum sales in Sino-Arab and Sino-Persian relations, China’s closer ties to the Middle East have necessitated more complicated bilateral relationships.”⁶³⁴

This intensification of the relationship induced by China’s energy dependency does not, however, intrinsically change the relationship. It rather seems to stabilise the frame of the external power’s role. This is the role of a ‘balancer’ in the style of Cold War great power rivalry,

631 Ibid.

632 Sager (2005) p.3

633 Shahrour, Ezzat (2012): al-sin wa al-sharq al-‘awsat: malamih muqarabat jadida (China and the Middle East – features of a New Approach), in al-Jazeera Studies Centre, 11. Juni 2012, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ResourceGallery/media/Documents/2012/6/11/2012611142545253734China%20and%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf>

634 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p.71

which remains the predominant frame for thinking about international politics in the Middle East:

“For instance, China has been a bulwark against US and UN initiatives to stem the humanitarian crisis in Sudan’s Darfur region because of the strategic importance of Sino-Sudanese trade. [...] As Chinese interests in the Middle East have become more complicated so too have Middle Eastern interests in China.”⁶³⁵

This frames China’s Middle East policies as mostly driven by Chinese economic interests. It therefore brings up the question as to whether China is seen by the Arab states purely as a convenient ‘balancer’ against the US, as indicated by the public opinion polls discussed below, or as a real ‘partner’, or even ‘friend’.

6.3. The Arab Discourse on China’s Role as a ‘Balancer’ or ‘Partner’

As discussed in Chapter three, the idea of a ‘balance of power’ between rival great powers, which has to be used by the weaker Arab states to further their own interests, dominated the regional discourse during the Cold War. The end of the Cold War in 1991 left the Arabs without this treasured balance and the resulting manoeuvring space. As we have seen, the new role of China in the Middle East is often conceived by Arabs using the ‘energy relationship’ frame. Considering what a highly political frame ‘energy’ is in the Middle East, where both regional security and in many cases regime survival is directly linked to the energy trade, it is important to look at how ideas of ‘balance of power’ have affected the Arab view of growing interconnectivity and the role that China has been awarded by the regional actors.

6.3.1. Elite Perceptions of China and Public Opinion

Elite or leaders’ perceptions of China can be very different from popular perceptions of it. As al-Sudairi argues, for most leaders China looks like an attractive alternative to the US. This role as a ‘balancer’ is interesting both for those states which see the US as an ‘enemy’, as well as those who see the US as a ‘friend’ but feel that sometimes Washington is a bit too close for comfort. The idea of unipolarity has always been seen as detrimental to the Arab bargaining position, and therefore it is exactly the closeness to the US of some of the Arab leadership circles that makes them look for a balancing power. This is obviously helped by Chinese ‘no-strings-attached’- development funding and perhaps even some feeling of solidarity for being often at the same receiving end of Western human rights criticism. Zambellis and Gentry argue

635 Ibid.

that it is in this pro-US sphere where the Chinese narrative about its own potential role finds eager listeners, as governments feel under pressure from their discontented populations and because “closer Sino-Arab relations enhance public perceptions that Arab regimes are in fact acting on their own discretion and not as instruments of US foreign policy.”⁶³⁶

Mohammed al-Sudairi argues that one of the main reasons for China taking on this counter-role here is the widespread disappointment Arab elites have with the foreign policy role of the European Union, which after the transatlantic split surrounding the Iraq War was briefly seen as a possible balancer to American hegemony.

“Beneath this enthusiasm is a seemingly widespread desire among the Arab elite to engender a transformation in their region’s current geopolitical circumstances which can only be realistically executed with the support of a non-traditional revanchist power un-associated with (and perhaps even opposed to) the status quo powers (namely, the United States and Israel.) Given China’s own rapid ascension and intensifying rivalry with the United States, its appropriation of such a role in the Middle East seems almost pre-determined.”⁶³⁷

However, most leaders probably only pay lip service here and actually remain fully aware of the ‘strategic reality’ in the Middle East, and bin-Huwaidin’s additional charge that the glorification of China by some Arab leaders is nothing but rhetorical balancing might be justified, especially in the case of those Gulf countries that are highly dependent on Western military and political support:

“Maintaining this current alliance is a basic precondition for Arab economic and military relations with the United States and European countries, and therefore essential for the preservation of regional stability in the Middle East. Thus, any major strategic move in these countries’ interaction with China has to take into consideration both their special relationship with the United States and the nature of American relations with China. In addition, security concerns and the lack of stability within the Arab world obstruct the creation of a genuine Sino-Arab strategic relationship. The experience of Chinese-Iraqi relations offers an important example in this regard. While former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein succeeded in developing strong economic and military relations with China, this obviously did not save him.”⁶³⁸

It is debatable how important Arab public opinion about China actually is, as there is very little democratic control over foreign policy making in any Arab country and therefore it could be argued that elite opinions are all that matter. However al-Sudairi insists that public opinion on China matters because it is “indicative of a larger discourse that includes and influences the perceptions of the political elite who in turn respond to the discourse itself” and it “reflects

636 Zambelis & Gentry (2008) p.66

637 al-Sudairi (2013) p.2

638 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p. 74

the boundaries of what is, and what is not, strategically feasible, especially when concerning sensitive issues such as the Arab-Israeli peace process or Gulf security.”⁶³⁹ Public opinion about China is therefore far from unimportant when looking at Sino-Arab relations.

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Egypt	-	63 %	65 %	59 %	52 %	52 %	57 %	52 %	45 %
Jordan	43 %	49 %	46 %	44 %	50 %	53 %	44 %	47 %	40 %
Lebanon	66 %	-	46 %	50 %	53 %	56 %	59 %	59 %	56 %
Pal. Ter.	-	-	46 %	-	43 %	-	62 %	-	47 %
Tunisia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	69 %	63 %
Turkey	40 %	33 %	25 %	24 %	16 %	20 %	18 %	22 %	27 %

Figure 5 “Do you have a favourable Opinion of China?” Source: Pew Research Center⁶⁴⁰

In most opinion polls, Arab public opinion traditionally has been rather positive about China. This was especially true when respondents were asked about their Opinion vis-à-vis the US In formerly Arabist states like Egypt, this is often explained by nostalgia for the Third World solidarity of bygone days and perceptions of China are often similar to sympathies for the former Soviet Union. Connected to this is the widespread idea of China as a champion of the Palestinian cause. In this sense, contrary to the US, China is not seen as a ‘threat’ to the region. “Instead, they see an emerging China as a potential opportunity and a welcomed force that should be harnessed to the fullest extent possible.”⁶⁴¹

Public opinion in most Arab countries might however be less positive towards China than these polls suggest. As one GCC Diplomat put it: “Only the elite is interested in China. The normal people are not interested, and nobody really talks about China.”⁶⁴² As Zambelis and Gentry point out, the positive image shifts when people are asked where they would like to live or study: Most Arabs would chose the US as “Arabs still admire the American culture of personal and political freedom.”⁶⁴³ This might weigh heavier in the minds of most Arabs than China’s more ideological appeal.

639 al-Sudairi (2013) p.7-8
 640 Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/country/64/>
 641 Zambelis & Gentry (2008) p.69
 642 Interview with GCC diplomat, Beijing, December 2010
 643 Zambelis & Gentry (2008) p.67-8

In the same sense, al-Sudairi points out that even the perception that China is the new hegemon of choice for the Arabs might be misleading:

“[...] Indeed, Chinese gains [in regional opinion polls] appear less impressive when taking into account other countries, such as Japan, Turkey, Germany, France, and (at least prior to 2006), Iran that have managed to attract far larger pluralities in the Arab World than what China could muster. While these numbers do confirm that public opinion is largely lukewarm toward China, opinions are more complex than what first meets the eye and show that Arab expectations about the ‘rise of China’ do not necessarily conform to popular assumptions about strategic repositioning – they reveal rather that attitudes, despite overall positive perceptions - are largely guarded about the country in question.”⁶⁴⁴

We therefore have to be careful with transferring the frame of global ‘power shift’ directly to the regional level. That the US is unpopular does not mean that people automatically favour China, or even like it. It simply means that they cast it in a counter-role to the US and therefore in a direct comparison would favour China, while still preferring other countries if given the choice. For those respondents, China only plays the role of a ‘counter-US’ - in other words, as a way to balance the US rhetorically.

6.3.2. China as ‘Balancer’

Therefore, the one role expectation that permeates every Arab text and interview on China is the strong focus on China as a ‘balancer’ to the US. This is not surprising considering the strong tradition of balancing behaviour via external actors and the securitisation of roles available to external actors in the Middle East as described in chapter three. Interestingly, most Arab texts describing Sino-Arab relations start with a few paragraphs on international politics and the balancing role of China. Both Chinese and Western texts however, normally start with long debates about oil and other economic issues and then see security and politics as simple functionalist extensions of these economic issues. This can be seen as a strong indicator for the political role that Arabs would like to emphasise, as opposed to Western authors and especially Chinese authors. Bin-Huwaidin once again is a strong case in point here, and he clearly traces this behaviour to traditional foreign policy structures:

“Arab political interests regarding China revolve around employing Sino-Arab relations to balance American and Western influence in the region and in counteracting contentious issues with the United States.” [...] “Arab countries still view China through a Cold War lens and therefore expect China to form an international bloc against the United States and the West, seeing Sino-Russian

644 al-Sudairi (2013) p.6

rapprochement or the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as precursors to the formation of such a bloc.”⁶⁴⁵

These USSR -style role expectations towards China however, should not be seen only as a result of a historical structuring of role expectations towards external actors in the RSC. While it does not seem to be a role expectation deriving from some intrinsic characteristic of China, it should be more understood as a counter-role to the US. This counter-role assignment can be seen most of all as a reaction to the “destructive US regional hegemony”⁶⁴⁶ exemplified to many Arabs by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and less to pro-Chinese feelings, which, where they exist, might be less a result of genuine sympathy for China and more a result of anti-Western feelings.

At the same time, these opinion polls show that this urge to balance the West with China is not only an elite discourse but also a somehow ‘intuitive’ reaction of average Arabs to the perceived dominance of the US.⁶⁴⁷ For some time this feeling might have been answered with hopes that a united Europe or revitalised Russia might fill the void, but these hopes faded.⁶⁴⁸ One can also argue that China looked all the more credible in the role of ‘balancer’ as the US looked less and less credible in the roles of ‘honest broker’ and ‘security provider’. This especially applies to the Israeli-Arab conflict: “Until recently many Arab countries viewed Chinese relations with both the Arab world and Israel as a zero-sum game in which China had to choose a side.”⁶⁴⁹ While he attributes this role expectation to the knowledge gap of Arabs about Chinese foreign policy, al-Sudairi argues that China has not been entirely unhappy about these expectations and has in fact

“[...] sought to cultivate and reciprocate, but not necessarily fulfil these expectations and attitudes by way of echoing regional concerns over US involvement while emphasizing its own unique historical and religious links with the Arab world. It has also sustained an active campaign of cultural diplomacy aimed at enhancing its profile and propagating its narrative of a ‘peaceful rise.’ Chinese soft power therefore dynamically arises from an interaction between a relative shift in global power and a sub-system’s desire to escape from unipolar domination;”⁶⁵⁰

Al-Sudairi obviously refers to the Chinese tendency, as seen in the Chinese discourse on the Middle East, to support Arab positions rhetorically without investing resources in it. However,

645 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p.73

646 Zambelis & Gentry (2008) p.3

647 Compare chapter 6.3.1.

648 This might have changed with Russia’s more active regional policy after 2013.

649 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p.73

650 al-Sudairi (2013) p.2

this 'rhetorical balancing' contains the danger that it will only substantiate already existing regional role expectations towards China, which incorporate clear role demands: Supporting anti-hegemonial balancing against the US as well as supporting the Arab cause against Israel. China's disinterest to form any kind of anti-hegemonial alliance or stand up to Israel, its unwillingness to fulfil the demands of its assigned role, is in the best case seen as a sign of disinterest on the Arab side.⁶⁵¹ Accordingly Arabs often criticise China for focussing only on the economic side, and not on political or ideological issues.⁶⁵² Ironically while Chinese and Western commentators often see the decline of ideological rhetoric and the advent of economic 'rationality' in Chinese foreign policy thinking after Mao as a positive turn of events, Arab authors often regret this purely economic (or as they would argue, 'selfish') outlook by China:

"For one, oil is the greatest driving force behind Chinese policy toward the Arab world, making China selective in its ties; priority is given to the major oil exporters (the GCC countries and formerly Iraq) or those who are believed to have significant oil reserves waiting to be discovered (Sudan), while assigning less importance to the non-oil producers. Due to China's oil priority, Arab political and security issues – from the Arab-Israeli conflict to America's role in the region at large – have declined in importance on the Chinese foreign policy agenda."⁶⁵³

This notion that China's economic interests in the Gulf region do not actually strengthen the Arab hand was exemplified by one Gulf diplomat when he complained: "China could do more for us. The GCC wants China to be more of a balancer!"⁶⁵⁴

In a similar vein, Ezzat Shahrour questions the appropriateness of China for the role of a 'balancer' in the Middle East when he argues that China's relations with the Middle East are purely dominated by the energy question and that when it is forced to actually take a political stand, it tries to act as cautiously as possible. He sees China rather as a partner for the US in the region, because "China did not attempt in any given time to rival major players in the region and acknowledged the limitations of its role"⁶⁵⁵ only trying to block the dominance of other players, be it the Soviet Union or the US, whenever possible. Shahrour points to China's only partial resistance against the 2003 Iraq War and Beijing's following eagerness to legitimise and benefit from the American occupation. He also sees China's unwillingness to really

651 The same disappointment of role expectations happened in Iran see Garver 2006

652 Interviews Cairo & Dubai 2011/2012

653 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p. 75

654 Interview with GCC - Diplomat, Beijing, December 2010

655 Shahrour (2012) p.4

position itself in the Israeli-Arab conflict, for instance its refusal to acknowledge publicly East-Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state during the 2010 CASCF-meeting in Tianjin, or its refusal to recognise the Hamas government, as symbolic of Beijing's unwillingness to challenge the US in the region. Lastly, Shahrour even accuses Beijing of supporting US policies in the region in order to draw the US further into regional conflicts, and thus granting China time for its own rise in East Asia.⁶⁵⁶ However, while China is obviously not willing to play the role of 'balancer', some Arab observers still framed it as a new partner, to substitute for the declining American hegemon.

6.3.3. 'Decline', 'Rise' and a 'New Order'

Underlying many debates about China as a possible balancer against western hegemony is the idea that the West is in decline and the East is on the rise. This is supposed to bring about a new international order:

"Today's multi-polar world is increasingly tilting towards the burgeoning Chinese economy. [...] The growing international role of China spans trade, investment, foreign reserve accumulation and Sovereign Wealth Funds. [...] The Great Financial Crisis, which engulfed global markets in 2008, accelerated the shift of the global economy to emerging markets."⁶⁵⁷

And it is not only the abstract forces of the financial markets which are seen as signifying the turning of the global wheel of fortune: China's ability to stage international events on a scale so far only undertaken by developed countries is often interpreted as signalling a shift of power from the West to the East, as when Olimat lauds that China "hosted the most successful Olympic Games ever in 2008 and has managed to send a man into space."⁶⁵⁸ The description of these feats expresses open acknowledgment of China's successes in the last three and a half decades.

In two articles in the newspaper Dar al-Hayat, the Syrian commentator Mahmoud Said Rasas discusses his perception of the shift in the international system becoming more and more obvious, bringing about an end to the unipolar system.⁶⁵⁹ This shift is exemplified for him by the power that Teheran gained after the Iraq War 2003, Russia's success in Georgia in 2008,

656 Shahrour (2012) p.34-5,

657 Saidi, Nasser, Aathira Prasad and Sara Salomoni (2010): The Redback Cometh: Renminbi Internationalization & What to do about it, DIFC Economic Note No. 18

658 Olimat (2013) p.35-36

659 Rasas, Mahmoud Said (2013): The decline of the Unipolar System (al-muashshirat 'iilaa tadede nizam al-qutb al-wahid), in: Dar al-Hayat, 18. September 2013, <http://alhayat.com/Details/552384>

by the financial crisis of 2008, the founding of the BRICS group, the economic power shift away from the Atlantic, and lastly by the fact that the US was not able to push through its Syria policy against the “coalition of new voices”.⁶⁶⁰ For the author, this was the first time the US could not force its will since the end of the cold war, and served as a practical test for the power of new poles like China. He argues that unipolarity only existed until now because China had to bide its time, cooperating with the US in order to build up its economy and therefore the US was able to force its will on Beijing and Moscow in the wars in the Gulf and Bosnia during the 1990s. For Rasas, American power was sustained both by its own economic strength and because of the lack of a rival. While the US downturn after the Iraq War 2003 and the financial crisis might have been a result of unwise domestic policies “and the most ideological foreign policy in American history”.⁶⁶¹ the fact that President Obama’s return to “realist” and “isolationist” policies could not succeed in reestablishing American power, was mainly because of the rival poles of China and Russia, as exemplified by both countries’ UNSC vetos on Syria in 2012.⁶⁶²

Taking a view more focussed on the domestic political system, the Lebanese author Raghid al-Sulh also writing in *Dar al-Hayat*, argues that the strong tea-party results in the American elections of 2012 proved those right that predicted a decline of the US. He sees the nearly simultaneous “efficient” staging of the National Congress of the CPC in Beijing as a fitting symbol for this shift. As the Arab Spring gave Arabs the chance to decide about their future al-Sulh advises them to carefully observe these changes, because the events in the Middle East were connected to “what is happening these days in Beijing and Washington”. For him, Americans who highlight China’s difficulties with corruption and social injustice, hoping that China would collapse on its own, were fooling themselves; because not only does he see China’s leaders dealing with these problems, the power shift not as a result of China’s strength but of the illegitimacy of American power:

“Great powers do not lose their status because they lack power, but because they use this power illegitimately.” [...] “It is true that China occupied Tibet, but the United States, occupies almost the

660 Ibid.

661 Ibid.

662 Ibid.

entire Arab region, and encourages a policy of oppression, humiliation and the theft of natural resources. This occupation is the shortest route to the loss of the battle to win Arab minds.”⁶⁶³

It could be argued here again that China is just framed as the ‘other’ to criticise the US, and that this in the end might be more a symbol of the unimportance China actually has in the Arab discourse, but it should still be noted that China here is judged as less ‘immoral’ or ‘illegitimate’ than the US.

Coming back to the foreign policy aspect of the power shift debate, other authors focus on the Obama administration’s ‘pivot to Asia’ and its meaning for the Middle East.⁶⁶⁴ For Ezzat Shahrour it was President Obama’s declaration of the ‘pivot to Asia’ and the US retreat from Iraq that forced Beijing to get closer to Russia on Syria and to change its strategic outlook. This comes at a time when Beijing feels threatened both by territorial conflicts with its neighbours as well as internal instability. Beijing’s cooperation with Russia on the Middle East is therefore framed as purely a function of global geopolitics, an answer to Western policy blunders and a simple Chinese attempt to ‘balance’ Western aggressiveness.⁶⁶⁵

In another article Shahrour turns his focus on the territorial tensions in East Asia, which he frames as functions of both Japanese and Chinese domestic politics and nationalism. But he advises Arabs to pay more attention to these conflicts, due to their global repercussions, taking place in one of the most “dynamic” areas in the world. “Washington’s return to the region is an important turning point in American military strategy and an indicator of the growing strategic importance of the region in the long term.”⁶⁶⁶ Like most interviewed respondents in the Middle East, the author sees the growing economic and military capabilities of China and the idea of a ‘power shift’ as the main reason behind its changed, more aggressive diplomatic behaviour, which had been flexible in the past, and full of “peace and harmony rhetoric”. This change has led to its neighbours welcoming the American pivot to the East-Asian region, which

663 al-Sulh, Rajid: intichabat 'amrika wa al-sin wa kasab al-uqul al-arabia (American elections, China, and winning Arab minds), in: Dar-al-Hayat, 7. November 2012, <http://alhayat.com/OpinionsDetails/450861>

664 See for example: Saman, George: Obama’s strategy – China before Iran, in: Dar al-Hayat, 9. January 2012, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/348301>; and also Dar al-hayat: Obama’s Doctrin – America’s pacific century, 28 November 2011

665 Shahrour (2012) p.5-6

666 Shahrour, Ezzat (2013): al-sin wa nazaet al-muhit al-hady (China and the Disputes in the Pacific), al-Jazeera Studies Center, 01 October 2013, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ResourceGallery/media/Documents/2012/10/1/20121019178549734China%20and%20Pacific%20conflicts.pdf>

he sees as trying to “contain” China, thereby making a conflict between Beijing and Washington “inevitable”.⁶⁶⁷

When Saleh Suleiman Abdel-Azim, Professor at Cairo’s Ain-Shams University, discusses David Shambaugh’s book “China Goes Global - The Partial Power”, he asks if this power shift will lead to China being the next superpower:

“China is seen generally as elusive and uncertain in communicating globally and in dealing with the world, a problem that is linked to the Chinese personality and character. This is reflected in the global perception of China as a ‘threat’ disturbing the global order”⁶⁶⁸

While the author supports Shambaugh’s estimate about the partial nature of Chinese power, he is convinced that China will become a global power in the coming years due to economic growth, regardless of whether it wants to be a global power or not “[...] and we will see the impact of the yellow peoples on human civilization, and this will rival the current dominance of the US!”⁶⁶⁹

Ironically, the perception of the US trying to missionize the Middle East towards democracy after 2001 has led to the paradoxical situation, that China seems to be perceived more positively, exactly by the more democratically inspired parts of Arab society. Zambellis and Gentry argue that an expansion of Chinese influence in the Middle East might find a positive echo with those parts of the Islamist community that are generally seen as reform minded and pro-democratic, including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, who might welcome some balance to the overarching power of the US in the region.⁶⁷⁰ This was also mirrored five years after the publication of Zambellis’ and Gentry’s article, and after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, by a leading member of the ‘international Affairs’ community of the Brotherhood during a conversation in London in 2013, when he declared that “generally we support better ties with China, because we think that China is somehow more democratic than the US”⁶⁷¹ It should be noted here that the term ‘democratic’ might not refer to the domestic political system of the People’s Republic, but to the influence the US has on the states in the region.

667 Shahrour (2013) p 8-9,

668 Abdelazim, Saleh Suleiman: al-sin tatajih kunya: al-quwwat ghir al-muktamala (China goes global – the partial power), in: Al-Jazeera Studies Centre, 23. July 2013, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ResourceGallery/media/Documents/2013/7/23/201372372037767734China%20going%20global.pdf>

669 Abdelazim (2013)

670 Zambellis & Gentry (2008) p.63

671 Interview with Muslim Brotherhood foreign policy advisor, London, September 2013

The question would then be whether or not this role perception by leaders and the wider Arab public deviate from each other.

6.3.4. China as a 'Strategic Partner'

Even though the role expectation of 'balancer' is very common among Arab commentators, there seems to be a lack of thorough strategic debate about China. There is little doubt in the Arab discourse that China was one of the main beneficiaries of the American-led liberal international system with its trade promoting institutions: "China benefited from the existing American energy arrangements in the region and its needs were accommodated by the US as well as Western countries."⁶⁷² Mohammed Turki al-Sudairi cautions therefore, that Arab societies have so far failed to ask themselves, why China should challenge a system it actually benefits from:

"There are very few authors who have discussed the possibility of China emerging as a strategic 'alternative' to the United States, and those who have present an arguably circumscribed analysis: all of them, with the exception of one author, asserted the inevitability of an eastward shift, or the need for it, without any accompanying interpretation of the strategic implications, repercussions, structural forms, or issues of interest that the Saudi readership might be interested in. There is, in other words, an operating assumption about a natural convergence between the two states and a need to emulate Chinese success – with little else said beyond that."⁶⁷³

On a higher political advisory level, the Gulf Research Centre's Abdul-Aziz Sager tries to explore this issue through the question of how energy relations could lead to a more strategic relationship between the two sides. He sees the dependency as mutually binding:

"Beijing's efforts to meet the energy demand are also leading to strategic adjustments that raise several questions. While oil will certainly continue to be the most central aspect of China's relations with the Middle East, to see the Chinese relationship solely through such a prism will no longer be enough. Thus, there is sufficient reason to look beyond the more immediate energy security question. [...] If it is the need for energy that is forcing China to look toward the Gulf, it is oil that is also engaging the GCC countries with China. [...] To keep its economy growing at over nine percent, China needs secure, stable oil supplies. Similarly, the GCC countries need a secure long-term market for their hydrocarbons, which make up their main source of income."⁶⁷⁴

As Mohammed bin-Huwaidin cautions however, regional states know that China is reluctant to be too reliant on a regional market so dominated by US security concerns, and is therefore

672 Olimat (2013) p.29

673 al-Sudairi (2013) p.13

674 Sager (2005) p.3

interested in diversifying the sources of its oil imports.⁶⁷⁵ This raises the question of how China could become a strategic partner for the region if it is not willing to tie itself too closely to it.

Also, the frame of the US as the only reliable provider of security is still very much alive, as one GCC diplomat in Beijing expressed already in December 2010, before the outbreak of the Arab Spring:

“We don’t think there is any security or military role for China in the gulf, they can’t do it and they don’t want to do it. The only country that can really make a difference in the Gulf is the US.”⁶⁷⁶

While Arab leaders are normally eager to express their support for China, there is still a great reluctance to engage closer with Beijing, especially on security issues. The main reason for this reluctance is that China so far is not seen as having proven that it can and will play a regional role that will benefit the regional states strategically. In this way, the aforementioned GCC diplomat in Beijing was also eager to express his conviction that the relationship is still in its exploratory phase.

“The Sino-Arab Forum [CASCF] is basically just harmony talks, nothing really substantial. It is supposed to bridge the cultural gap, because we understand the West, and we understand India. But we don’t understand China. So it’s important that we talk to each other. But nobody feels there is the need to deepen the mechanism.”⁶⁷⁷

This frame of cultural differences and misunderstanding is frequently mentioned as soon as the discourse leaves the safety of the general ‘balancer’ role discussion. Shahrour jokes about the inability of Chinese government officials’ to understand the complex situation in the region, the differences between ‘Arabism’ and ‘Islamism’ or that Iran is not an Arab country. While he acknowledges the idea of centuries of Sino-Middle East relations through the ‘Silk Road’, he emphasises the low priority that the region had in China’s world view for a long time, and that there was no interest in China in the Middle East either.⁶⁷⁸ This ignorance of each other and the expressed disinterest in deepening exchange mechanisms means that the cultural affiliation and utility of the China Model for the Arab world also has to be critically questioned.

675 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p. 75

676 Interview with GCC Diplomat, Beijing, December 2010

677 Interview with GCC Diplomat, Beijing, December 2010

678 Shahrour (2012) p.3

6.3.5. The China Model and the Question of Culture

In the Western discourse, China is often seen as attractive as a development model to non-Western nations. While most of this debate might again belong on the domestic level, a closer look at the regional discourse shows that this claim might be questionable, as the above mentioned GCC diplomat expressed: “There is no political China model, just the economy. The Arabs only look to Europe and America. If at all, Saudi Arabia is a counter model, Malaysia or Turkey are a counter model for us.”⁶⁷⁹ There seem to be two ways that role models are framed: First there is the fact that Western or American culture remains popular with the Arab public and China is not seen as an alternative. American foreign policy is unpopular but only the Islamists should disagree with Western culture in general, even though many Muslims might see it as decadent. Secondly, Islamists have even less reason to find China’s ‘atheist’ culture attractive and therefore the Islamist model, focusses instead on Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Malaysia.

Mohamed Turki al-Sudairi highlights this cultural barrier that is emphasised by Arab, or in his case Saudi, authors. He discusses an article on Syria by al-Mahmud in a Saudi newspaper, where the writer frames the differences on Syria as culturally induced:

“The crux of the matter, al-Mahmud states, is not about politics but about stark differences in the ethical systems separating the East from the West embodied in the international reaction to Syria. The West, of course, seeks out its own interests but unlike the East, does not divorce its humanitarian principles from its political calculations.”⁶⁸⁰

This strong framing as culturally different makes it difficult for China to serve as a model of development. This feeling of difference is of course emphasised when China’s relationship with Islam is perceived as negative.

6.3.6. Islam in China and the Issue of Xinjiang

That China has a sizable Muslim population, in absolute if not in relative terms, matters surprisingly little in the eyes of the Arab audience, and Chinese Muslims in general seem to be of limited concern to Arab authors. It rarely surfaced in any interview with Arabs about China, except when explicitly brought-up by the interviewer. This limited role in the regional discourse

679 Interview with GCC Diplomat, Beijing, December 2010

680 “Populist pieces on the Syrian issue are markedly more numerous than those dealing with Xinjiang. It could be attributed to greater public concern over Syria – by virtue of proximity, sectarian sympathies, and more active government backing – than anything else.” al-Sudairi (2013) p.26

seems to be a post-Cold War development, as China's treatment of its Muslim minorities was often given as a reason why Arab states were slow to start diplomatic relations with the PRC. Olimat even stated that: "The status of Muslims in China was certainly a major concern to Muslims around the world after WWII, especially in the Middle East."⁶⁸¹ While this criticism during the Cold War had mostly reflected the persecution of Hui Muslims in the early decades of the PRC, the more violent relations with the Turkish Uighurs in China's Xinjiang province have been the main focus of the debate over the last two decades.

This perceived persecution of the Uighurs was a major concern to Turkish foreign policy and the Turkish public because of the Turks' perceived ethnic bonds with the Uighurs. In the Arab media however, there was very little awareness until a few years ago. This changed with the riots in Xinjiang's capital Urumqi in 2009, when hundreds of Han-Chinese and Uighurs died in communal violence and in the heavy-handed crackdown by the Chinese security forces that followed. The scale of the violence raised the awareness of the Arab media and provoked anger in the region. China was now clearly seen in the role of a 'persecutor' of Muslims.⁶⁸² The Chinese authorities and the embassies abroad were eager to sell their side of the story, of Uighur terrorists attacking innocent Chinese citizens, but most Arabs seemed to buy into the Uighur version: that Han Chinese and Chinese security forces were responsible for the bloodshed. Some Muslim countries like Iran, which were close to China and more able to control their press than others, were concerned with the possible effects of their relations with China and tried to prevent a discourse of 'China is anti-Muslim' from emerging.⁶⁸³

In other countries however, as al-Sudairi states for the Saudi case, the events in Xinjiang "helped generate a narrational aspect of 'other' against China" and "reinforced pre-existing fears and conceptions about China as a 'communist country,'" a term from Cold War terminology. Al-Sudairi sees these inherited frames as having had huge impact on the overall framing of the story as declaring China to be "atheist, communist and so on – easily invites public disgust in ways that function to undermine counter-narratives of comity and

681 Olimat (2013) p.16

682 al-Sudairi (2013) p.15

683 In an Interview with the author in June 2010, a journalist working for Iranian television stated that they were allowed to air footage of the violence in Xinjiang on Iranian TV but were not allowed to name the Uighurs as Muslims for fear by Iranian authorities of depicting China as 'anti-Muslim'.

friendship.”⁶⁸⁴ This marked an important turn as China at that point was being framed in very different terms than before. The anger over the treatment of Muslims

“[...] spills over to the larger coverage on China so that, for instance, while an author may praise China’s development model or the industriousness of its people, this is usually accompanied – particularly after 2009 – by remorseful or critical comments regarding China’s lack of a spiritual tradition or its continued assault against Muslim expressions of piety and faith.”⁶⁸⁵

This depiction of China as ‘anti-Muslim’ obviously makes its depiction as a ‘model’ or even just a ‘partner’ difficult. But the main impact on the Arab discourse on China comes from the debate about its economic role, and as mentioned above, the economic role might be the only one where China could really be a role model.

6.4. The Arab Discourse on China’s Economic Role

The discourse on China’s economic role is much more intense on the domestic level than on the regional level. However, the effects of China’s economic presence even if limited to a single country, are obviously debated among Arab states on the regional level. This discourse broadly follows the frame of ‘economic diversification’, which has dominated the economic discourse in the region for decades. The other frame of course is ‘energy’ and the question as to whether the relationship can move beyond the traditional strong emphasis on energy.

6.4.1. The Arab Discourse on China and Energy

The al-Masah consultancy from Dubai, in its analysis ‘China and India’s Growing Influence in the MENA Region: Their Legacy and Future Footprint’, compares the influence China and India already have in the Middle East. It points out that Western countries remain the main target for Chinese export policies and that the Middle East will remain mainly an oil supplier for the PRC, even if China might find a role as a supporter of Middle Eastern states’ economic diversification. It was probably the disappointment with China’s enactment of its political role that led the regional discourse to acknowledge that for China “the Middle East is only economically important.”⁶⁸⁶

684 al-Sudairi (2013) p.15

685 “It begins by providing readers with a mainstream account of Xinjiang’s history, starting with an early ‘golden age’ era of Muslim rule (marked by the first Arab conquests, of course), which then is abruptly put to an end by the Qing conquests of the late 18th century. According to the author, the Chinese occupation put into motion a long string of pogroms and attacks directed against the local community that only intensified with the Communist takeover in 1949.” al-Sudairi (2013) p.16-17

686 Interview with GCC Diplomat, Beijing, December 2010

That at the same time the economic importance of China is acknowledged by the Arab, was shown by the abolition of the “Asia premium” in the year 2009.⁶⁸⁷ This framing of China’s economic role as ‘strategic’ is also used when regional energy suppliers are willing to ignore Chinese actions on other fronts which would otherwise be seen as hostile; like the Chinese policy towards Iran, or Chinese investment in Iraqi-Kurdish oil (circumventing Baghdad’s control), or even the debate about China buying Israeli Natural Gas in the future.⁶⁸⁸ However, a scholar at the Al-Ahram Centre in Cairo argued that China’s rise was so far only beneficial for the Arab world in its role as an ‘energy consumer’ and thereby a ‘supplier of capital’, complaining that “as much as Arab diplomats and politicians might try, they cannot find an adequate political role for China so far.”⁶⁸⁹

That China’s energy engagement in the region entails competition with the West is openly acknowledged by Arab commentators, and is welcomed because it is seen as strengthening their bargaining position:

“Contrary to alarmist Western voices against China’s potential hegemony in the region, the Middle East is eager to diversify its consumer base and free itself from Western dominance, which has proven to be threatening to regional development, especially in the area of prices and vulnerability. Not only do Middle East countries greatly welcome Chinese involvement in oil exploration and refining, but also deem such presence vital in the creation of balance in international energy markets.”⁶⁹⁰

Similarly, the Western concern that China might lock in energy resources in a permanent way through the use of equity deals is seen as much less problematic by the Arab side, as Mohammed Olimat points out. He emphasises that from an Arab point of view, there is an understanding that China wants to use equity deals solely as “a shield from price fluctuations” and not as a way to lock-out Western consumers, as it is often depicted in the Western discourse. He acknowledges however, that this is the point where security concerns come into play:

“Equity shares also complicate the process of dealing with current security challenges in the Middle East in the sense that China shields its oil equity partners from international criticism. [...] However, the oil-producing countries see it in a prism closer to China than to the West. They view it as

687 For a discussion if the Asia Premium as such ever existed, and thereby could have been abolished, see Doshi, T. K. ad N. S. D’Souza (2011), ‘The ‘Asia Premium’ in Crude Oil Markets and Energy Market Integration’, in Kimura, F. and X. Shi (eds.), *Deepen Understanding and Move Forward: Energy Market Integration in East Asia*. ERIA Research Project Report 2010-25, Jakarta: ERIA. pp.152-190

688 Interview with Energy Analyst, Dubai, October 2011

689 Farahat, Mohammed Faiz (2008): *Al-Saut al- Sin wa al-Alam al Arabi: (China’s Rise and the Arab World)* in: *Seyasat*, Nr 4/2008

690 Olimat (2013) p.43-44

contributing to diversifying production efforts; this explains their eagerness to involve Chinese, Indian and Malaysian oil companies in oil exploration and production.⁶⁹¹

Olimat sees the reason for this divergence of views clearly in the expressed Arab wish for “freedom from Western dominance in oil markets.” Therefore ironically, while in the Western discourse, equity shares are seen as quintessentially infringing on another countries sovereignty, in the Middle Eastern discourse equity deals are framed as balancing and thereby reinforcing sovereignty:

“Oil producers do not see China as threatening to their national sovereignty, territorial integrity or exploitative of their national wealth in the same manner in which they view the United States, Britain, France or even Italy and the Netherlands. For instance, although the US resents China’s relations with Sudan and its current policy towards the uprising in Syria, it seems to be accommodating China’s oil needs. China is reciprocating by being sensitive to American interests in the Middle East.”⁶⁹²

However, the debate in the Middle East, including the oil rich Gulf, has long moved beyond only traditional forms of energy, like oil and gas. Interwoven with these debates is the bigger debate on climate change and renewable energies. Because of its own attempts to free itself from its dependence on coal, China is often perceived as the only possible provider of affordable renewable energy technology in the future.⁶⁹³ Similarly, but not as exclusively, this role for China in supporting energy independence is also seen in the area of nuclear energy. Nuclear energy has been a major topic in the region, highlighted by the high level nuclear deal between Abu Dhabi and South Korea in 2009. However, because of the military implication of nuclear energy, Arab authors assume that countries in the region that are interested in cooperating with China on nuclear energy will only do so “as long as they do not face technical or political obstacles from Western countries in carrying out these nuclear projects.”⁶⁹⁴ Therefore, the West and the overall security discourse dominated by the West’s role as a security provider is basically granted decision power on China’s energy role in the region, at least in the nuclear area. This shows again the constraining effect that the securitisation of certain economic debates has on the discourse on China’s role in the region.

691 Olimat (2013) p.46-47

692 Olimat (2013) p.49-50

693 al-Hayat (2013): China invests two billion USD in energy generation in Jordan, 21.10.2013, <http://alhayat.com/home/Print/558279?PrintPictures=0alhayat.com>

694 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p. 72-3

6.4.2. The Arab Discourse on China as a Trading Partner

Regarding non-energy trade, the fact that China is now the biggest trading partner of the Middle East is mostly seen as a significant step forward in the relationship.⁶⁹⁵ Even more important however, seems the very powerful frame of future expectations towards China and its rise:

“Growing China-MENA ties could serve as a platform for trade, which could include the supply of energy intensive goods from Saudi Arabia to China, while labour-intensive goods can be imported from China. Import of cheap Chinese labour for domestic labour-intensive industries is yet advantage of this growing trade relationship. [...] Partnerships between Chinese and Arab universities, improvements in language training could benefit cultural exchanges.”⁶⁹⁶

Because of this perspective of a growing interdependence between both sides on trade, there have been debates about establishing an FTA between the GCC and China since 2004:

“With this, China aims to gain secure oil imports from GCC countries as well as expand export of garments, fabrics, and electronics. Also, the country aims for additional GCC investment in water and electricity supply, energy and mineral industries, transportation, communication, and closer cooperation in scientific and technological research.”⁶⁹⁷

This aspect of Arab FDI to China has become prominent after 2001, when perceived islamophobia in the West drove some Arab investors to look elsewhere: “This development pushed many Gulf investors to reorient broadly towards the East.”⁶⁹⁸ Again this development is framed as having been caused by the West and not only by the allure of the Chinese market.

On the other hand, Chinese FDI to the Middle East has mostly been concentrated in oil-rich countries including Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and the UAE. The view of the al-Masah consultancy that so far China has not established strong links with domestic firms in the Middle East or added to the region’s production capacity is shared by many.⁶⁹⁹ In resource-poor countries especially, there is growing discontent about Chinese investment not actually

695 al-Masah (2010): China and India’s Growing Influence in the MENA Region: Their Legacy and Future Footprint, p.5
696 al-Masah (2010) p.18; There are several institutions that drive Chinese Arab economic relations. Olimat names the following: “The Arab Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Hong Kong has established the Hong Kong Islamic Index, a list of Shari’ah-compliant corporations, an international Islamic mediation and arbitration centre to resolve conflicts according to Islamic tenets of dispute resolution, in addition to an Institute of Islamic Studies, a Mosque Fund and the Amwal Credit Union. The Arab Business Club, China branch, is a ‘business network specialized to develop trade relations and investment between China and Arab countries.’ The China-Arab Co-operation Forum was established in 2004. The China-Gulf Co-operation Council was established in 2008. The Saudi-Chinese Business Council was founded in 2000. The Association of Chinese Companies in Saudi Arabia was established in March 2012 by the Chinese Embassy. The Kuwait-China Investment Company was founded in 2005 by the Kuwait Investment Authority. In addition to their membership of the China-Arab Forum, Sino-North African relations are managed through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, established in 2000.” Olimat (2013) p. 56-58
697 Al-Masah (2010) p.17
698 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p.72-3
699 al-Masah (2010) p.20-21

contributing to job creation or technology transfer. Many Arab commentators however seem fully aware of the technological deficiencies of China and believe that this impedes cooperation:

“Even with oil’s priority in Chinese policy toward the Arab world, the Chinese have had difficulty in making a quantum leap in this field: Chinese oil refineries are aging and need large-scale investments in order to handle the heavy crude oil produced in the Arab world. In order to combat China’s limited oil refining infrastructure, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have made large investments in the Chinese refining sector in hopes of upgrading China’s refineries so that they will be able to process heavy crude oil. Another important obstacle in the further development of strategic Sino-Arab relations is China’s inability to compete with the United States and European states in certain fields, such as education, health, training and development.”⁷⁰⁰

Connected to this debate about China’s technological level and its ability and willingness to export it, is the debate about the poor quality of products ‘Made in China’ which are entering Arab markets. Again, while this debate is more important on the domestic level than on the regional level, according to a Dubai energy analyst, the perception of Chinese technological inferiority seriously affects Arab decisions about doing deals with Chinese energy companies, which are included under the negative ‘made in China’ label. In this regard, Japan and Korea are unsurprisingly seen as playing a more important role in technology transfer. The regional view is, that the GCC doesn’t need Chinese investment itself, but that it wants to balance the Saudi petrochemical market against overreliance on imports.⁷⁰¹

Al-Masah frames the relationship with the title: “From ‘Arms for Oil’ to Economic Diversification” and argues that in this regard the relationship still has large potential and will change accordingly because a large amount of non-oil opportunities for China are yet left untouched:

“The remarkable economic growth in China is offering new market opportunities for countries in the MENA region. Historically, opportunities were abundant in energy; now potential opportunities exist in fertilizers, petrochemicals, agricultural products, and a number of manufactured goods (where MENA has strong comparative advantage).⁷⁰²

It is important to note that in these frames, China not only seems beneficial to the region but actually is assigned the role of ‘motor of regional economic development’. Especially the regional buzzword of ‘economic diversification’ serves as a frame where China is granted an immensely important role and role expectations on the regional level are very high. This

700 bin-Huwaitin (2008) p.75

701 Interview with Platts analyst, Dubai, October 2011

702 al-Masah (2010) p.16

diversification frame is strongest in driving the development of the service industries in the region, especially when it comes to the development of tourist economies in non-oil countries:

“China is the world’s largest importer of services, with over US \$100 billion of imports. [...] MENA, benefiting from its geographical position, is expected to become a major services hub and trade link between Asia, Europe and Africa.”

Although China is still seen as less technologically advanced than the West, there is also a view in the region that China has undertaken advances in science in the last decades that the Middle East has missed. China is thereby assigned the role of ‘know-how supplier’ to the region as Olimat claims: “Greater China-MENA cooperation, in the form of knowledge-sharing agreements, could therefore help the region become a knowledge-based economy.”⁷⁰³ Again China is assigned the more active role in the relationship, and the Middle East is mostly depicted as being on the receiving and benefitting end.



Figure 6 "People's China", Dar al-Hayat, 14.11.2012

Besides all these rather great expectations towards the role that China could play in the economy of the region, the omnipresence of China in the regional market often leads to China

703 al-Masah (2010) p.16

being framed in half-mocking/half-admiring terms: “As a result, the new China, Red Capitalist China and the Dragon invasion of the Middle East can be noticed in every corner of the region.”⁷⁰⁴ It is not always easy to decipher if these depictions are mostly negative or positive, as in the above caricature from Dar al-Hayat in which the People’s Republic is framed as purely business oriented.

How the Arab side perceives China’s economic role in the region and its interconnection with political expectations, can be understood when looking at the debates at the CASCF’s 4th Arab-China Business Conference held in Sharjah on 18 January 2012:

Already in their opening remarks Emirati delegates stressed as the main precondition for a working partnership that China can adapt to the Arab Spring. China would have to do so as the Arab Spring was the “will of the Arab people” and promised that if China would respect it, the revolutions would not affect the relationship. The following Arab speakers framed the European financial crisis as the main driver of the relationship over the preceding years, as it “forced the Arabs to look to the East”. The biggest problem persisting in the economic relationship was still that the Chinese government has strong reservations towards GCC investment.⁷⁰⁵

The ‘knowledge gap’ was mentioned frequently as when one Emirati academic argued that “Our biggest problem is that the Chinese don’t understand the Arab side, they simply don’t have enough information about us.” He however also highlighted that lack of colonial history, and that the Chinese should learn from OECD countries’ practice of development aid and technology transfer. He reiterated his point several times that “it is China that has to improve”, even though he acknowledged that the lack of interest in Arab culture is mirrored by Arab disinterest in China. Therefore, another speaker from Jordan asked that Arabs “should improve our cultural exchange, after all we have a deep historical relationship, and China has become a developed country.” A Kuwaiti Business representative however argued that this lack of interest was no real obstacle but framed the relationship as purely build on “business and investment”. The last speaker on the same panel however put a strongly political frame on the business relationship when he compared China’s trade behaviour to its policies in Africa where

704 Olimat (2013) p.54

705 CASCF 4th Arab-China Business Conference, Sharjah, 18 January 2012

“China can impose its conditions on the African countries because of the loans China gives to Africa. In the Middle East however they compete with westerners. So perhaps in Africa you can talk about China’s new colonialism, but this is not a problem for us.”⁷⁰⁶

Although he highlighted the hoped-for advantage of Arab balancing behaviour between China and the West, he still demanded that „Arabs should stop importing from the Chinese and force them to invest more.”⁷⁰⁷

At the next panel of the forum, the Arab speakers actually used the idea of a long shared trade history as a frame for the modern trade partnership. An Egyptian representative from the ministry of Agriculture argued that:

“The relationship between the Middle East and China is not new, but they have always been there through our history. This is different to the west, which started relations with China 200 years. Today unfortunately the relationship is mostly good for China and not so good for the Middle East. Therefore, the Chinese should open their markets for our goods so that both sides benefit. Still in 2011 China’s imports from China increased, which of course is good, however Chinese investment in Egypt is still very limited. [...] China should produce in Egypt!”⁷⁰⁸

A representative from the Arab League not only lauded the institutionalisation of the CASCF mechanism as a great success, pointing to the regular bi-annual foreign minister meetings and the quadrupling of trade since the first CASCF business conference in 2005, but framed this with the idea of some shared ‘oriental’ culture:

“The cooperation benefits from the similar culture in the Arab world and China, after all we are all Orientals. Our relationship is not built on reciprocity but on trade. This leads to mutual benefits which again leads to a strategic relationship between two sides. Therefore, I think the future lies in the east. Arab investment in the EU and Japan is declining but it is growing in China. In 2020 China will be the biggest buyer of Arab goods, most of all of course, oil. What we need now is a vision or a plan how we can integrate better with China. We need talk on standardisation, we need a mechanism for conflict resolution like when they flood the market, tourism should be emphasised for non-oil countries.”⁷⁰⁹

In this vein, he also called for the expansion of the multilateral mechanisms to facilitate technology transfer and training courses from China for Arab participants. He highlighted the promise of these by pointing at his own positive experience at one of the diplomatic training courses at the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s school the China Foreign Affairs University.⁷¹⁰

706 Ibid.

707 Ibid.

708 Ibid.

709 Ibid.

710 Ibid.

Another of these institutions established by China was highlighted by the Arab participants, when a speaker from the Bahrain government emphasised the discussions about establishing an office of Ningxia Province in Bahrain and connected the Ningxia Trade Forum to the cultural frame:

“I have just returned from the Ningxia meeting and I have learned a lot. China sees the Middle East through its long history and its economic relations with the region. We also should not forget that there are 30 million Muslims in China. The fact that the Chinese government has selected Ningxia as the venue for the China-Arab business forum is a clear signal that for the Chinese government it is not enough to build relations only on economy, but the culture is also important.”⁷¹¹

This shared culture, however did not keep him from criticising China’s political role:

“If Chinese policy would not be so egoistic, it would be accepted, China is the biggest supporter of just Arab causes and the fear of being pushed out of the market by Chinese competition should be diminished by technology transfer. The Europeans employ locals, the Chinese have to learn this.”⁷¹²

6.5. The Arab Discourse on China’s Political Role In The Middle East

While the general regional perceptions of China have now been discussed, it is important to look at how these Arab role expectations that the regional discourse produces -- and the associated role demands - measure up against China’s role performance, according to the perception of the regional audience. To illuminate this question, one has to look at the flashpoints of the regional security debate: Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Arab Spring.

6.5.1. Regional Perceptions of China’s Relationship with Iran

While Israel was mentioned relatively little in texts and interviews, China’s relationship with Iran dominates the regional discourses about China’s role, especially in the Gulf. It is telling that for Abdul-Aziz Sager of the GRC, the relationship between Iran and China seems to be more worrying than the relationship with Israel: “The two countries share a special affinity that is too close for the comfort of the GCC countries given the lack of confidence between them and Iran.”⁷¹³ Similarly, Sager argues that China’s energy deals with Iran, especially the planned pipelines through Central Asia, which would make Iran more independent from the sea-borne energy routes through the Gulf, are what the GCC countries need to monitor closely in order to protect their interests. But most worrying for him is China and Iran’s alleged military

711 Ibid.

712 Ibid.

713 Sager (2005) p.11

cooperation, arguing that “Chinese arms supply to Iran makes it an even greater threat to regional stability and security”.⁷¹⁴

Different from this securitised view of the relationship, Ezzat Shahrour picks up the Chinese narrative including both frames of China and Iran as ‘two ancient civilisations’ and the ‘Silk Road’ connection. He also mentions the good relations China has had with all different political systems Iran has had since World War II, and calls this a model that Beijing might now try to repeat after the Arab Spring. This common “anti-imperialist” frame, and the shared sensitivity about “intervention” and “conspiracies” from the West, serve as a strong connection between both countries in this narrative.⁷¹⁵ This however, doesn’t blind him to the fact that China has always balanced between Iran and Iraq and sold weapons to both, repeating the frame of China as a purely trade interested party. For Shahrour, both sides, Iran and China, profited from each other when they were both under Western sanctions in the early nineties and Iran needed help with its reconstruction after the devastating war with Iraq. This cooperation for him is the basis of a close relationship that led Beijing to shield Iran from international pressure over its nuclear programme, even if it halted direct nuclear support because of US pressure. This does not mean that Shahrour overlooks the disputes that broke out between China and Iran after China allowed the sanctioning of Iran’s central banks and the resulting disputes over oil payments, or China’s concerns over Iranian threats to close the Strait of Hormuz.⁷¹⁶

“The energy security in terms of the sources and methods of supply will continue to be the main driver of Chinese policy towards the region, and therefore it will not abandon Iranian oil and put all their eggs in the basket of the (Arab) Gulf States because they are aware that the Gulf countries will side more with the demands of the US when pulled to the task.”⁷¹⁷

Finally, he sees the relationship undergoing strains because of the “international power shift”, “the increasing rivalry between world powers” and the Arab spring. But Shahrour sees the Middle East as becoming increasingly important for China, and therefore China, while not fundamentally changing its regional policies, has to take over regional responsibilities, a fact according to him that is increasingly understood in Beijing.⁷¹⁸

714 Sager (2005) p.11

715 Shahrour (2012) p.6

716 Shahrour (2012) p.7

717 Shahrour (2012) p.8

718 Ibid.

Similarly, Mohammed Olimat views China's relationship with Iran mostly as part of the wider global struggle with the West and liberal hegemony.⁷¹⁹ However, in the triangle with Iran and the US, Olimat like other Arab experts, sees a chance for utilising China's close relationship with Teheran for the benefit of the GCC:

"The US is increasingly becoming a 'Middle East' state as it maintains a substantial military and non-military presence in the region. Recently, Saudi Arabia solicited China's assistance, which only highlights the importance of the role China is playing in balancing its interests with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, while simultaneously playing its role as a responsible country that seeks 'harmony', peace and prosperity in the Gulf region. China has been playing a pivotal role in bringing Iran to the negotiating table, and takes an active role in the ongoing P5+1 negotiations with Iran over its nuclear programme."⁷²⁰

The debate about how China could be brought to change its behaviour on Iran in a way that would fulfil Arab role expectations dominates even otherwise economic perspectives, as al-Masah's. It frames the relationship as purely built on 'energy dependence', not only because China can buy oil in Iran, but also because Iran is one of the few countries in the Middle East that allows Chinese energy companies to be active in its upstream sector.⁷²¹ However, while these are strong incentives for China to keep this relationship with Iran, al-Masah explains regional role expectations as a strong incentive for China to change its behaviour:

"China's growing involvement in Iran could jeopardize its international reputation. China's energy and overall economic interests in the wider Middle East are inseparable from the region's geopolitical issues, particularly Iran's nuclear drive. Although China continues to argue that its relations with Iran are devoid of economics, it cannot remain aloof to the region's most litigious issues due to its growing presence in the Middle East. [...] However, despite the united front (comprising the US, Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners, and Israel)'s efforts to win over China's support in isolating Tehran, these latest diplomatic initiatives failed to make any positive impact."⁷²²

The relationship between China and Iran therefore serves a double function in the role location process between China and the Arab states, especially the GCC. On the one hand it leads to estrangement between both sides and questions on the Arab side about China's commitment to its role as a 'friend' and 'strategic partner' of the Arab states. At the same time, it actually widens the role that China can play in the region as it is seen as the only state that can actually exert pressure on Teheran. With this potential capability however, the demands on China's role by the regional audience actually increase.

719 Olimat (2013) p.52

720 Olimat (2013) p.71

721 al-Masah (2010) p.15-16

722 Ibid.

6.5.2. Arab Expectations Towards a Balancing Role against Israel

The support that China has traditionally shown, at least on the rhetorical level, for the Palestinian cause is often referenced in the Arab discourse on China. Beijing's good relations with Israel since 1992 however, are less talked about. When they are, they are understood by the Arab audience as a delicate balancing act as Olimat puts it: "To strike a balance between Sino-Arab and Sino-Israeli affairs is one of the most challenging aspects of Chinese-Middle East relations."⁷²³ Some analysts even hope that out of this balancing act, a new role as 'mediator' could arise for China. This, similar to the general 'balancer' role talked about earlier, is understood as a counter role to the perceived Israel-bias by the traditional mediator, the US. China's involvement it is hoped, could tip the balance back from the perceived one-sidedness of the unipolar world: "China's active involvement in the Middle East is pivotal. Arabs believe that it would create a sort of balance in the peace process, which traditionally tilts in favour of Israel."⁷²⁴ However, as Olimat points out, "China neither wants to compete with the US or the EU, nor wants to be associated with the failed peace process. Rather, it wants to be viewed as a strategic partner for both sides."⁷²⁵ Mohammed Bin-Huwaidin emphasises this reluctance of China even more:

"As part of an evolving understanding of China's relationship with Israel, some Arab states now expect that China will undertake a pivotal role in managing the Arab-Israeli conflict. This expectation ignores the reality of Chinese-Israeli ties, particularly in the military domain, and fails to grasp the nature of the China's development as a rising power. Despite international appraisals of China's ascent, China still categorizes itself as a regional power out of fear that it will jeopardize its rise by alarming other international powers."⁷²⁶

While Iran might have been the only real, albeit limited, conflict between China and the Arab states before the Arab spring, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was, at least since Beijing opened an embassy in Tel Aviv in 1992, a source of certain tensions between both sides. At the 2010 CASCF the dispute came into the open, when China refused to take a stand on East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital in the official document. China reacted angrily at denouncements by the Arab press, as one GCC diplomat remembers:

"They did not understand why our media were so against them. They don't understand that we don't control the media as much as they do here. In the end we are more close to the West.⁷²⁷ [...] Palestine was the one question where China was always on our side, but that is changing. Now they

723 Olimat (2013) p.66

724 Olimat (2013) p.67

725 Olimat (2013) p.83

726 bin-Huwaidin (2008) p. 74

727 Interview with GCC Diplomat, Beijing, December 2010

are closer to Israel and they do whatever Israel tells them to do, but not like the West, they are more balancing, don't want to upset any side. Most people are dissatisfied with the Middle East Envoy, he is not doing anything, totally useless. We don't know why he is there. China could do more for us. The GCC wants China to be more of a balancer!"⁷²⁸

While China had seen its Middle East envoy as a way to placate the Arab side, as mentioned earlier, installing these envoys had actually raised the expectations towards a 'mediation' role, or what from the Arab perspective would be called 'balancing' against the strong pro-Israel bias in the West. When China refused to enact this role in the Arab perception, it was heavily criticised. This criticism in-turn violated both China's self-conception of its role, as well as its role expectations towards its Arab 'friends', resulting in a role conflict between Arab expectations and Chinese conceptions. That these role expectations were still held by the Arab side, after two decades of blossoming Sino-Israeli relations, might be a direct result of its lack of knowledge and interest in China's regional role conception, and its reliance on seeing China simply in a counter-role assignment to a pro-Israeli West. Only with the Arab spring did this Arab assessment of 'China being pro-Arab because it is non-Western' finally start to change:

"Given its strategic partnership with both Arabs and Israelis, China is in a much better position than the US, Russia, France, Britain or Germany to intervene in reviving the peace process, and to contribute to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, the region has been generating tremendous levels of resentment and unpopularity towards China ever since its vetoes against the UN's condemnation of the Syrian government and its close co-ordination with Russia in the Syrian Revolution."⁷²⁹

The role the US plays in this triangle with Israel and China is assessed in different ways. Mostly, Israel is seen as the most active part, as when Olimat states: "China has also masterminded manoeuvring its interests with Israel with minimum levels of American opposition."⁷³⁰ This certain disillusionment was the reason for the lack of Arab excitement at the 2013 Middle East peace initiative by China, as it was by now mostly perceived as a purely symbolic act, to mollify Arab criticism about China not fulfilling Arab role expectations as a balancer in the equation.⁷³¹

6.5.3. Expectations towards China's role In the Question Of Iraq

China's policy towards Iraq since the 1991 war has been "ambiguous from a GCC perspective", according to Abdul-Aziz Sager. He accuses Beijing of basically supporting Baghdad during the

728 Interview with GCC Diplomat, Beijing, December 2010

729 Olimat (2013) p.65

730 Olimat (2013) p.68-69

731 Interviews with Egyptian and Saudi diplomats, Beijing, April/May 2013

1991 war by calling for a diplomatic solution and by advocating the lifting of the economic sanctions imposed by the UN after its invasion of Kuwait, due to economic self-interest:

“China also opposed the American intervention in Iraq in 2003 partly because of its economic interests in Saddam Hussein’s regime. During the years before the war, Beijing actively pursued oil and construction contracts with Iraq under the United Nations’ Oil-for-Food Program. After the war, it jumped on the bandwagon of reconstruction. [...] In May 2004, China submitted to the United Nations Security Council an “unofficial document” offering revision of the US-UK draft resolution. Though its suggestion for the US-led multinational force to withdraw from Iraq by January 2005 was not adopted, the resolution and its emphasis on a larger UN role were very much in line with the region’s view.”⁷³²

While it is acknowledged that China had opposed the 2003 Iraq War, it was also noted by most Arab observers that China did not actually offer any substantial resistance to it, letting Russia and France take the counter-role to the US. Still, the years after 2003 could be called something of a Chinese-Arab honeymoon period because of the Arab perception that “[...] China showed its willingness to take an active role in dealing with Middle East affairs”⁷³³ and widened its activities in the region. A period of increasing political cooperation therefore was expected by many Arabs for the second decade of the 21st century; then came the Arab Spring.

6.5.4. China’s Arab Spring in Arab Eyes

The Arab Spring has so far obviously been the biggest test for Sino-Arab relations, and during its course China has lost much of its previous goodwill from Arab commentators, with Olimat describing China’s behaviour in reaction to the uprisings as “marked by confusion, inconsistency and, at times, total support for oppressive regimes in the region.”⁷³⁴ As the mainstream discourse in most Arab states had moved to support the Arab Spring to varying degrees in the years 2011 to 2013, China’s policy of ‘neutrality’ was seen as confusing by Arab commentators:

“China’s inconsistencies in its foreign policy stem from its repeated claims that it stands by the Arab people but, at the same time, it provides unlimited weaponry to their oppressors, the authoritarian Arab regimes across the region. This duplicity makes China the second most disliked country in the region after Russia. Its policy is reactive, as in the cases of Libya, Yemen and Egypt, and cautiously proactive and confrontational in the case of Syria, where China seems to have underestimated the reaction of the world towards its lack of support for UN efforts to protect Syrian civilians.”⁷³⁵

732 Sager (2005) p.12

733 Olimat (2013) p.29

734 Olimat (2013) p.86

735 Ibid.

In reaction to this behaviour by China, Arab authors were trying to understand the reasons for China's seemingly 'anti-Arab' turn in the years 2011-2013. For Hasan Haidar, China's fear of any kind of revolution was one of the main drivers as:

"[...] Beijing sees that the Arab countries that have witnessed successful uprisings, as well as those that are still witnessing attempts for change, have all adopted the "Chinese model", i.e. the mixture of economic openness and stringency at the security and social levels, and it fears that the infection will spread to its borders [...]"⁷³⁶

Mohammed Olimat on the other hand, explains China's policy, by its misjudgement about the stability of the regimes and the misguided belief that "authoritarian Arab regimes are immutable"⁷³⁷ if not destroyed by outside intervention. Olimat is convinced that Chinese officials have misjudged popular support for the Arab spring but brings up an interesting historical frame:

"The causes of Arab anger and revolution are much deeper than Chinese officials believe. It is much more than unemployment or housing opportunities it has to do with the collective Arab injured spirit and the systematic humiliation suffered at the hands of ruling elites that have traditionally been aligned more with external interests than with their own people's welfare. This process of humiliation began over 700 years ago and continues to the present day. China should relate and be sympathetic to this fact as it suffered from the same wave of Mongol destruction and dishonour."⁷³⁸

Ezzat Shahrour takes refuge in sarcasm lamenting how China has transitioned from Mao's support for revolutions to the point where they seem not to be "appropriate for today's China, or China's market economy".⁷³⁹ For him the rhetoric of non-interference is just a cover up for

"the withdrawal from playing any political role in regional issues, pursuing the position of trying to satisfy all the parties and not to inconvenience any of them, and only demand that all the parties should sit down to the negotiating table and resolve differences through diplomacy and dialogue."⁷⁴⁰

He notes China's media blackout during the Tunisian uprising, designed to prevent young Chinese "from yielding to calls for solidarity with the peoples in the face of repressive regimes." At the same time, he acknowledges that Beijing was quick to send vice-Foreign Minister Zhai Jun to Tunisia to start relations with the new interim government. Shahrour quips that Egypt's Vice-Foreign Minister was in Beijing in the beginning of the protests and must have misinformed the Chinese about the demonstrators just being

736 Haidar, Hassan (2011): Toppling the Chinese Model? In: dar al-hayat, 10 March 2011
<http://www.daralhayat.com/portalararticlendah/242908>

737 Olimat (2013) p.89

738 Olimat (2013) p.101

739 Shahrour, Ezzat (2011): China between Tahrir Square and Change, al-jazeera Studies Center, 27 June 2011,
<http://studies.aljazeera.net/reports/2011/201192117124203709.htm#2>

740 Shahrour (2011)

"[...] motivated by foreign hands, and that things are under control and not cause for concern. Indeed, China's position was supportive of the efforts of the Egyptian authorities to establish security and protect national sovereignty against any external interference."⁷⁴¹

He also gleefully explains the censoring of the word 'Egypt' on the Chinese internet with the fear of the Chinese government, that young Chinese might compare the behaviour of the Egyptian army in 2011 on Tahrir Square with that of the Chinese Army in 1989 on Tiananmen Square. It should be noted though, that while he outlines the similarities between the two countries, he also cautions about the differences; especially highlighting that China has actually made great advances in its economic development, while Egypt might even have gone backwards.⁷⁴²

Looking to the future, he judges China's government to be rather secure, and interprets the daily occurrences of instability in China as a normal phenomenon of "accelerated development" He also notes that the demands of Chinese citizens are generally particularistic and not aimed at "regime change", and he sarcastically compares the media-savvy surveillance of the Chinese security apparatus to the Egyptian government's use of camels in cracking down on the Tahrir protests.

That Beijing was still horrified with the events in Egypt is for him also a result of domestic Chinese foreign policy debates:

"[...] raging between intellectuals in China on the feasibility of continuing the basic principles of China's foreign policy and continue to refuse from playing any regional or international role commensurate with China's population, economy and culture. This policy is threatening China's interests abroad, and affects its image on the international stage as a rising power and a permanent member of the Security Council entrusted with carrying international responsibilities with courage and bravery. The Arab revolutions have raised the stakes in this debate, which slowly begins to echo in the corridors of decision-making of party and state."⁷⁴³

For Sharour this debate also stems from the fact that the Chinese authorities were still confused even after Vice-Minister Zhai's fact-finding-mission to the region in early 2011. The reluctance to take a role was also seen during the following trip to Cairo by Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, who met with the head of Egypt's transitional military government, Field Marschall

741 Ibid.

742 Ibid.

743 Ibid.

Tantawi, but who like other Chinese officials refrained from offering “congratulations on the victory of revolutions.”⁷⁴⁴

The view that China, and Russia, isolated themselves in the region due to their support for the authoritarian regimes is widespread in the regional media.⁷⁴⁵ While Mohammed Olimat understands China’s abhorrence of Western intervention as another important reason for China to oppose the uprisings, he still accuses China of ideological interference against the Arab people, something which he considers to be a new trend:

“China has always opposed Western intervention in the Arab world, but was never as aggressive as it has been over the past year with respect to the Syrian crisis. [...China’s] response reveals a deep fear of repercussions among Chinese leaders in the spread of revolutionary fervour from the Middle East to China and elsewhere.”⁷⁴⁶

Olimat frames this new-interventionism with Chinese characteristics as part of autocratic solidarity, comparing it to the liberal notion of democratic peace.⁷⁴⁷

“China clearly views the advancement of the cause of freedom and democracy in the Middle East as a policy of ‘regime change’, allegedly designed by American foreign policy circles and supported by Western allies and Qatar to rebuild a new Middle East that best suits Western interests.”⁷⁴⁸

Contrary to this explanation of China’s behaviour as insecure, Shahrour sees the Syrian veto as a clear indication of China’s increased confidence and its conviction that it does not need to consider the opinions of other countries anymore, because it no longer needs them in the UN “to make their voices heard against Taiwan-independence moves, or against criticism of its human rights record”,⁷⁴⁹ due to its increased economic power.:

“In other words, China is on the threshold of a new phase of geopolitical and strategic transformation and sets new rules in dealing with the major powers and to highlight its presence at the regional and international stage, particularly in the Middle East, which includes both the Arab region and Iran, according to the Chinese perspective.”⁷⁵⁰

In an early November 2012 edition of Dar al-Hayat, Adil Malik compares UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi’s attempts to garner international support for a solution to the Syrian civil war, with the famed medieval traveller Ibn-Batuta. He emphasises his wide travels by paraphrasing the

744 Shahrour (2011)

745 See for example Hroub, Khalid: Russia and China: The only friend are the Arab Dictators, in: Dar al-Hayar, 3 July 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/284084>

746 Olimat (2013) p.95

747 Olimat (2013), p.99

748 Olimat (2013) p.101

749 Shahrour (2012) p.3

750 Ibid.

idiom: "Seek the solution for Syria, even in China."⁷⁵¹ He sees China, and Russia, as the major stumbling blocks for Brahimi's attempts, as both emphasised that "all solutions must pass through Bashar al-Assad". However, he sees the US as similarly unhelpful in its attempts to keep a distance from the more radical members of the Syrian opposition - or "Western cowardice" as he calls it.⁷⁵²

Raghid as-Sulh looks at the role China played vis-à-vis Russia's Syria policy. While he, like most Arab observers, considers Russia to be in the role of "main opponent of the West", Beijing's support was crucial in emboldening Russia's in his perspective. "The leaders of the two countries realize that the conflict in the region is, in fact, a struggle for positions in the international system."⁷⁵³ According to as-Sulh, China is playing a different role than Russia, because of its geographical distance from the region. China's decision to make a stand on Syria was driven by its "opposition to Western military intervention in Syria", especially after Secretary of State Clinton described China and Russia's earlier veto as "deserving contempt".⁷⁵⁴ He sees this mirrored in the escalating Chinese diatribes against US Middle East Policy, wherein China accused the US of trying to dominate the region under humanitarian pretensions. But he also accuses China to simply use Syria as an opportunity to strengthen its relationship with Russia, casting the West into the role of common 'threat' to facilitate the development of a real alliance between the two.⁷⁵⁵ Interestingly, he sees the US - 'pivot to Asia' as another explanation for China's behaviour during the Arab Spring as for him it was provocation to China, a clear threat to its growing military capabilities in its own region. Al-Sulh therefore concludes that China simply had to accept the challenge and bring the global conflict between the two powers into the Middle East. The author states that the Middle East is now a vital interest for China, but that this simply means an even stronger emphasis on global geopolitics and that once again no external player will care about the interests of the Arabs.⁷⁵⁶

751 Malik, Adil: (Atlabu al-hal al-suri walaw fi... al-sin!) Seek Syrian solution even in... China! in: Dar al-Hayat, 3 November 2012, <http://alhayat.com/OpinionsDetails/449313>

752 Ibid.

753 as-Sulh, Raghid: The Syrian Problem in China's calculus, in Dar al-Hayat, 5 July 2012, <http://alhayat.com/OpinionsDetails/415959>

754 Ibid.

755 Ibid.

756 Ibid.

More negative feeling was produced during the Arab Spring by the tendency of Chinese authors and diplomats to frame the Arab spring as part of a global struggle with the West instead of a regional revolution. Olimat believes that China has been wrong-footed by the revolution because of its focus on state-to-state relationships, mirroring earlier mentioned comments by Chinese observers, and will therefore suffer in its dealings with the new governments:

“[...], dealing with the Syrian crisis as a Sino-Western power conflict reflects a clear Chinese detachment from the hardships of the Syrian people. [...] Clearly, the Islamic movement is the primary beneficiary of the Arab Spring, and China has no direct contact with it. [...] If the West has taken drastic measures to accommodate Islamists in politics, it is also incumbent upon China to do so if it seeks to promote its economic interests and play a vital role in Middle East politics. [...] China’s short sightedness became clear when it bid on the failure of the Arab Spring. Deficiency in grasping the depth of the Arab’s willingness to make sacrifices for their revolutions points to the fact that the region has not only been misunderstood by the West for so long, but also by China and the East.”⁷⁵⁷

He also noted that for the first-time Chinese flags joined the distinguished group of countries whose flags were publicly burned, a place of pride normally held by Israel or the US. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a Qatar-based cleric who is closely associated with Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, even went as far as to call for a Muslim boycott of Chinese goods, also an honour normally reserved for Western countries. Olimat however also points out that this has not led to any kind of coordinated position towards China, neither from the GCC or the Arab league.⁷⁵⁸

Olimat is by far not the only Arab commentator denouncing China’s policy towards Syria - but is rather part of the mainstream Arab discourse. Mohammed Turki al-Sudairi argues that this negative framing of China was not only born out of widespread Arab sympathies for the cause of the revolution, but also by the influence of Western narratives. For al-Sudairi, these led some Saudi authors even to call for a boycott of either energy sales to China or a boycott of Chinese made goods. In most articles, “the common narrational thread is that of disappointment with what was assumed to be an up and coming friend of the Arab and Muslim worlds.”⁷⁵⁹ Or, as Olimat puts it:

“The Arab people at this time do not believe or feel that China is truly a friend when China is acting irresponsibly towards a major event in the region. [...] Obviously, the overwhelming majority neither sees China as a friend nor feels its affection; Syrians feel that China is full on the side of the

757 Olimat (2013) p.101-103

758 Olimat (2013) p.115

759 Al-Sudairi (2013) p.21: “others casting China and Russia as downright immoral and Machiavellian in their actions (and a few absolving China of any responsibility by suggesting that its vetoes were influenced by Russia.) A realist (conventional) interpretation therefore pervades the discourse.”

government even though it claims that 'it neither shelters nor intentionally opposes anyone.' These statements carry no credibility among the Arab people. It also shows how China views the Syrian crisis as a power struggle against the US and the West rather than addressing the crisis as needing urgent attention."⁷⁶⁰

As was shown above, in the Arab analysis China's veto is often framed as simply a way to stand up to the West and challenge Western hegemony on global discourses. The assumed alliance between the Assad regime and China is therefore less seen as due to its non-democratic political system, a perspective that would inevitable raise questions about domestic order in Arab states and their foreign policy themselves, but more as a result of geopolitics. Al-Sudairi argues that because of this perceived failure to play its role according to regional expectations, China was framed as "infantile" and unable "to play 'adult games'" ⁷⁶¹ in the Arab media.

Two norms are seen clashing here: China's highest norm is sovereignty and non-intervention, while in the Arab world the normative frame of 'solidarity with fellow Muslims' outweighs the frame of 'non-intervention'. China is seen as overreacting because of its narrow-minded "'regime change' perspective, ignoring the humanitarian catastrophe."⁷⁶² Some Arab authors not only refuse to accept the concept of a neutral role, but on the contrary see China even as playing an active role in the Arab Spring "by slowing it down and attempting to break its momentum, as we see in the Syrian Revolution."⁷⁶³ As al-Sudairi points out, there is very little understanding in the Arab discourse for China's idea of non-intervention.⁷⁶⁴ On the contrary, China is even held directly responsible for the atrocities of the war by Olimat when he states that: "The double veto exercised by China and Russia is what escalated the conflict and complicated the situation in Syria."⁷⁶⁵ The anti-Western regional perspective that was very open towards a new entrant into the regional system in the years before the Arab Spring has now seemingly become suspicious of China's framing of regional conflicts as results of Western interference.

760 Olimat (2013) p.109-110

761 al-Sudairi (2013) p.22

762 Olimat (2013) p.111

763 Olimat (2013) p.63

764 al-Sudairi (2013) p.24

765 Olimat (2013) p.112-113



Figure 7 “China and Russia at the United Nations”, Dar al-Hayat, 02.02.2012

“Once again, it tacitly accuses Western countries in particular of being irresponsible in bringing the Syrian crisis to a veto at the Security Council, simultaneously responding to similar Western accusations that China is an irresponsible stakeholder in international affairs.”⁷⁶⁶

However, whatever the reasons for China’s behaviour, few Arab observers expect that the Arab displeasure will actually lead to any real negative effects on China.

“[...] Despite the tensions that will arise in Sino-Arab relations, both sides cannot afford to deepen these tensions. The Arabs need China and should therefore be selective in the issues they pressure Beijing for – otherwise, they risk blunting the effectiveness of their arguments and the capacity to persuade this rising power in the future.”⁷⁶⁷

6.6. The Arab Discourse On Asia’s Role

It is important to point out that the clear-cut Western emphasis that is put on China when thinking about Asia, is less articulate in the Arab discourse. Especially for the Gulf, the traditional relationship with India is very strong and China is sometimes interpreted through the same lens as India. As one Gulf diplomat in Beijing said: “We have been living with the Indians for two thousand years, and we understand each other well. Now China is new and we

766 Olimat (2013) p.114

767 al-Sudairi (2013) p.24

understand it less. We try to find out what the difference between the two states is. Then we know what China is.”⁷⁶⁸

Both China and India are often depicted simply as ‘non-Western’ outside powers, without a stronger differentiation of their political cultures. Accordingly, there seems to be a greater willingness in the Arab discourse, to see both states as sharing similar interests in the region, in contrast to the Western focus on China’s relationship with Iran: “Both India and China are major trade and energy partners with Iran, both are affected by sanctions imposed on it, and both are scrambling to find alternative energy providers.”⁷⁶⁹ While most experts and decision-makers which were interviewed, were well aware of the difference in political weight between India and the UNSC member China, regional role expectations were still very similar towards them, which further explains for Arab disappointment with China’s role enactment.

At the same time, India and China were also not really perceived as competitors in the region:

“Overall, although China and India are competing over trade opportunities, especially in the Gulf region, they seem to be accommodating each other’s interests. China follows the ‘all out’ approach in markets such as the UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia; India leads in the Omani and UAE markets. The UAE market is highly competitive, and China views it as a primary hub for its external trade. India’s advantage is in the labour sector. It is estimated that there are 1.5 million Indian workers compared with 200,000 Chinese expatriates in the UAE.”⁷⁷⁰

India is still seen as culturally closer to the Arab world than China. However the increased interaction between the Arab states and China has led to China being seen as culturally and politically closer than Japan is, even though the relationship with Japan dates back much longer.⁷⁷¹ It remains to be seen if China over time gains an identity of its own right in the Arab perception, or simply remains part of the wider ‘Asia’.

6.7. Conclusion – Regional Role Expectations towards China

Arab discourses on China are still relatively limited on the regional level because of the strong securitisation of the general regional discourse, which focuses on security issues and relegates economic issues to the domestic level. As far as China is a topic in regional discourses, the role expectations have been highly securitised, and so far China has mostly been a disappointment in the Arab perception; accordingly Arab analysts and politicians are more interested in the

768 Interview with GCC Diplomat, Beijing, January 2011

769 Olimat (2013) p.84

770 Olimat (2013) p.84-85

771 Interview with GCC Diplomat, Beijing, December 2010

West or Russia. The persistence of a strong knowledge gap on China, and the wider East Asian region, on the side of the Arabs seems to be both a cause and a result of these disappointed role expectations. More knowledge exists towards South- and South-East Asia, especially in the Gulf, because of the shared regional history and the expat labour force, but also because of more active and refined approaches to the region by governments like Malaysia's.

Diverging from the Chinese perspective, the Arabs see the Arab-Chinese relationship as rather recent. The emphasis China puts on the frames of 'ancient civilisation' and the 'Silk Road' is not shared in the Arab perspective. To a varying extent, Arabs might rather focus on China's anti-imperialist history and rhetoric, as this fits into the 'balancing' frame popular in the region. While traditionally Arabist republics like Egypt might see a longer common history stemming from the cold war, conservative Arab states like Saudi Arabia normally consider a common history starting only with China's pragmatic foreign policy turn and its increasing role as an arms provider from the eighties onwards. That China has always been a rhetorical champion of the Palestinian cause is appreciated by the Arabs though.

As at the regional level the discourse is highly securitized, China like other foreign players, is mainly judged according to its willingness or ability to take on a security role, namely that of a 'balancer'. There is very little discourse on economic issues at the regional level, which may be partly due to the very different economic situations in the Gulf States as compared to the Mediterranean states. The emphasis in the discourse is on political balancing and China is often interpreted according to its ability or willingness to take over the role of the former Soviet Union.

After the 2003 Iraq war, many Arabs expected China to take on the role of a 'balancer', in large parts because of the failure of the EU to fulfil this Arab role expectation. After the start of the Arab Spring, disillusionment on the Arab side set in. Disillusionment is also strong in the economic field due to the feeling that China is not interested in investing in regional economies and that it is not making good on the messages of solidarity that it spreads in the region. The frame of the 'China model' or a general interest in Chinese culture, often found in the West, play only a very limited role in regional Arab discourses, but might be found more often on the domestic level.

The topics of the Uighurs and Islam in China take a much less prominent position in Arab discourses than in the Turkish discourse. However, since the riots of 2009 in Xinjiang, Arab attention has risen and China has again been assigned the role of an 'enemy of Islam', sometimes with references to regional stereotypes about communists. That China has had good relations with Israel over the last two decades is irritating for most Arabs, but many still see this as different from the position taken by the West. In this case, China might even profit from the cliché of being 'unprincipled and pragmatic' compared to the West, which in Arab eyes plays the role of a whole-hearted 'supporter of Israel', while China is seen as an opportunistic 'supporter of Israel'.

China's relationship with Iran has always been an irritation for the Arab side, but also opened up the opportunity for China taking on the role of a 'balancer' against the Western policies after the Iraq War 2003 in Arab expectations. After the disappointment over China's unwillingness to take on this role, and China's unwillingness to put pressure on Iran over its nuclear program, China's perceived role enactment post-2011 as supporter of Bashar al-Assad infuriated many Arab countries supporting the Syrian opposition, even more. While Russia was seen by most as the main culprit, the disappointed expectations of the Arab Spring have made the heavily securitised regional discourse less favourable to China than before.

7. Perceptions of China's Role in the Middle East by Regional States'

*"[...] while there are 'positive' elements involved in the perception of Chinese – industrious being a key element here – negative imagery frames much of this perception. These include the notions that the Chinese lack proper hygiene habits, think in a hive-like mentality (Yajuj wa Majuj,) adhere to no religion or moral code [...], and place wealth at the center of their existence."*⁷⁷²

Mohammed Turki al-Sudairi, Saudi Researcher

As discussed in the last chapter, when dealing with external powers, the states of the Middle Eastern RSC often try to transfer thorny issues of transnational concern like Syria or Palestine to the regional level and keep the bilateral level "for more important needs to the government."⁷⁷³ This is not unique to the Arab states, European states tend to do similar things when transferring human right issues to the EU level, nor is it only done in the case of the relations with China. This practice allows the relevant government to focus on issues that might be of more immediate concern for its own regime survival. It is also worth remembering that on their domestic level, governments have much more ability to influence the discourse as can be seen below in the case of Saudi Arabia and the positive reporting on China in the first years of the 'strategic energy partnership'. The three chosen cases, Egypt and the GCC states of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia have very different material and

772 Al-Sudairi (2013) p.33

773 Interview with Egyptian diplomat, Beijing, April 2013: "We have meetings with all the Arab ambassadors where we talk about regional issues like Syria or Palestine."

ideological settings, which should have strong impacts on their role expectations on the domestic level.

7.1. Saudi Arabia's discourse on China's role

Saudi Arabia might be China's most important partner in the Middle East, but it is also one of the most difficult to deal with. It is the one country in the region that China has a 'strategic energy partnership' with and the Saudis are obviously aware of the leverage that their homeland's resources give them. The big question that analysts like Abdul-Aziz Sager discussed in the research period of 2003-2013 was, if the relationship is more than just 'energy'. Is it also a long-term partnership as the word 'strategic' implies? Or does Saudi Arabia only have the role of an 'energy provider' and China just the role of an 'energy customer'? Does the word 'strategic' also frame the two countries into the role of overall 'strategic partners', similar to the roles that Saudi Arabia and the US have been enacting towards each other for the last seven decades?

Beyond energy, the other factor that makes the kingdom special in the mind of its rulers and citizens is the prominent position that it has as the home of the two most holy sites of Islam, Makkah and Medina. As was discussed in chapter three, in the self-perception of Saudi Arabia this role of 'custodian of the two holy shrines' gives it in its own perception also the role of 'custodian of Islam'. Inconveniently, China's relationship to at least a big part of its Muslim population, the Uighurs, is tenuous at best, and repeatedly marked by violence. Paradoxically, the problem of China's relationship with its own Muslims can be both a constraint and an enabler of the relationship as Abdul-Aziz Sager argues when talking about ethnic strife in China:

"This kind of instability has necessitated improved relations with Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, which houses Islam's two holiest shrines. Were the unrest to increase or the situation of the Muslim to deteriorate significantly, Saudi Arabia would find it difficult to turn a blind eye and maintain the emphasis purely on the commercial aspects."⁷⁷⁴

In this Saudi framing, China is the one who is to benefit most from Saudi Arabia, while the kingdom is in the role of 'benefactor'. Besides emphasising the perceived importance of Saudi Arabia, this framing also has another advantage: As China is seen as being in the role of friendship-seeker, the historical changes in the relationship can be explained by changes on

774 Sager (2005) p.37

the Chinese side. This explanatory variable seems necessary for the Saudi narrative, because changes, especially when they are as dramatic as the change from Saudi condemnation of ‘godless’ China to ‘strategic partner’, need to be explained by a change of mind of the other side to prevent charges of being weak on ‘enemies of Islam’.

7.1.1. The Incoherence of Saudi Elite Discourse and Public Discourse on China

In his research on the Saudi media-perspective on China, Mohamed Turki al-Sudairi points to the wide gap between elite perception of and expectations for China, and the wider Saudi public opinion. He states that the significance of this gap lies especially in the fact that the Saudi government has been actively trying to improve public perception of the relationship and that it also contradicts the trend found in the wider Arab public.⁷⁷⁵ For him the representations of China in the Saudi media are “reductionist” reproductions of Western discourses on China, due to a lack of knowledge about China and the persistence of Cold War frames in the Saudi public discourse.

Al-Sudairi identifies two main sources for the Saudi apprehension about China. First the clash between the kingdom’s self-identification as a devout Muslim country and the officially atheist China, whose perceived mistreatment of Muslims gained notoriety in the Saudi press in 2009.⁷⁷⁶ The second is the huge gap between government produced expectation and the perception of China by the Saudi public:

“The meta-narrative espoused by the media rests on the assumption that China is or will become a close ally of the Arabs. Accordingly, when long-term Chinese policy approaches – such as its opposition to foreign interference – or its decades long friendly relations with Iran or Syria come under the media limelight, there is an immediate clash with such expectations, breeding in turn a sense of cynicism and pessimism about a country that seemingly does not pay any attention to principles and morality (since Saudi positions are identified as such in the public mind) except in so far as it facilitates or impedes its ability to make more profits.”⁷⁷⁷

The knowledge gap, and the overly enthusiastic propagation of China in the media, combined with a binary conception of ‘friend and foe’, stemming from the Cold War, lead to this

775 See: al-Sudairi (2013) p.7: “More unsettling is the fact that the last poll covered Saudi public opinion attitudes in the first half of 2011 – well before the eruption of the Syrian uprising, the condemnation of Russia’s and China’s Roles in the UN, and the mobilization of Saudi society over this issue. We are confronted thus with two parallel but contradictory trends unfolding within the context of Sino-Saudi relations over the last decade: on the one hand, we have an intensifying political and economic engagement between Saudi Arabia and China, and on the other, a sustained negative perception about China among the wider Saudi public.”

776 al-Sudairi (2013) p.32

777 al-Sudairi (2013) p.33

disappointment with the 'other'. This is combined as al-Sudairi argues with "orientalist and even racist perceptions" of those Chinese who live in Saudi Arabia, including the clichés of the Chinese as lacking hygiene, being conformist and only interested in money.⁷⁷⁸ However, as al-Sudairi points out, this Saudi orientalism" has both negative and positive strands, where sincere admiration of the Chinese economic success and image of Napoleon's "slumbering giant" are often related to specific practices like copycat products, the somehow derogatory term of "Yajuj Majuj",⁷⁷⁹ product quality problems and so on. In this way, the acknowledgment of China's success easily turns into an explanation of this success through immoral behaviour, with the added benefit of justifying the failure of the Arabs in areas like industrial development where the Chinese succeeded.

Mohammed Turki al-Sudairi generally decries what he calls the "limited nature and even superficiality common to the Saudi discourse" on China. He divides the Saudi newspapers into two broad strands: The first is what could be called the "power shift" faction that is convinced that China is a new future for Saudi Arabia. In articles like "The place of Saudi is in Asia and not the Middle East", East-Asia is framed not only as a strategic alternative for the kingdom but also as a development model.⁷⁸⁰ The second strand is taking on a somewhat pro-Western perspective. To show this, al-Sudairi cites Mohammed Hassan Alwan's al-Watan article "Is China the alternative we want?", in which the author argues for a community of values between Saudi Arabia and the West:

„[...] Despite our misgivings about Washington, its humanistic values remain far superior to those of Beijing. [Alwan] dismisses the 'momentary' love experienced by China in the Arab World as based on nothing more than "spite and hatred for United States and a desire to see the latter's clout in the region curtailed as soon as possible."⁷⁸¹

This sentiment that seems to imply that China can never be a strategic partner due to cultural factors, is very widespread among Arab commentators who discuss the prospects of this role. Chief among the reasons for this reluctance toward China, are Beijing's policies during the Arab

778 al-Sudairi (2013) p.33

779 "The term 'Yajuj Majuj' - or Gog and Magog - comes from the Quran and Islamic sacred texts, referring specifically in the Islamic context to a tribal horde (or two tribal hordes) characterized by their numerousness and savagery. In popular usage, the term is used in connection with Asian countries, and particularly China, which are populous, industrializing, and about to 'overwhelm' the world as it were." al-Sudairi (2013) p.27

780 al-Sudairi, Mazen: The place of Saudi is in Asia and not the Middle East, in: 'al-Riyadh', trans. al-Sudairi (2013) p.13

781 Alwan, Mohammed Hassan: Is China the alternative we want?, in: al-Watan, trans. al-Sudairi (2013) p.13

spring, and the economic behaviour towards developing countries, where China is seen as interested only in raw materials, while destroying nascent local industries. Also in opposition to the 'power shift faction', Saudi commentators do point out, that exchanging one hegemon for the other might bring no benefit to the Arabs and it would be better for a country to rely on its own resources instead of "some imagined 'salvational' power, and especially when the said Messiah in question is China."⁷⁸²

7.1.2. The Saudi Perception of the Historical Relationship with China

Unlike most Chinese analysts, but like most of his Arab colleagues, Saudi political analyst Nasser al-Tamimi, frames the relationship less cultural and more focussed on nation state history and, skipping the Chinese 'Silk Road' frame, starts his history of Sino-Saudi relations with the recent past. It is noteworthy that China here includes, and until the 1970s solely means, nationalist China:

"In recent history Saudi Arabia's diplomatic relations with China span back to 1939, when the Kingdom was the first Arab country to normalise its political ties with China. [...] The relations continued until the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seized power in China in 1949, and the diplomatic relations between the two countries was broken off. However, after China's opening up to the outside world in 1979, despite the absence of diplomatic relations, unofficial ties between the two countries have been developed in three directions. At the beginning came resuming the Chinese Muslims Hajj (pilgrims) to Makkah at the end of the seventies, then economically through the entry of Chinese goods to the Saudi market at the beginning of the eighties, and finally militarily by providing Saudi Arabia with long-term missiles in the second half of the eighties. Relations later developed further to peak in 1990 after the resumption of formal diplomatic relations."⁷⁸³

The frame of China as the friendship-seeking part is continuously applied here and was also mirrored in talks with Saudi diplomats and analysts. Again, this frame implies that the political change in China is responsible for the decision of the 'guardian of the two holy shrines' to talk to 'atheist' China - and not, as critics could accuse the kingdom of, a weakening of its will to stand up for the rights of Muslims inside China, or the geopolitical changes between the US and China that influenced.

"The Saudis also viewed China in a negative light as a communist, 'godless' country, therefore, it was deemed un-Islamic to extend a hand of friendship. Relations between China and Saudi Arabia developed gradually and culminated in an arms deal in the 1980s. However, after the tragic events of 11 September 2001, the Saudi-Chinese partnership grew at a much faster pace proportional to the deterioration in American-Saudi relations. In one way or another, the US was responsible for the Saudi-Chinese strategic partnership."⁷⁸⁴

782 al-Sudairi (2013) p.14-15

783 Tamimi (2012) p.4

784 Olimat (2013) p.72-73

Similar to the Chinese preoccupation with its relationship with the US, the Saudi perspective on China is also always framed by its relationship with the United States:

“[China] has also shown sensitivity towards US interests in Saudi Arabia and continues to avoid any potential confrontation with the giant, but proceeds undisturbed with its own agenda especially after the warm Saudi welcome.”⁷⁸⁵

In the Saudi-Sino relationship, two dates are often given as pivotal, both are visits of state leaders. In this, commentators follow the Arab and Chinese fashion of emphasising state visits, due to the strong role leaders are supposed to play in shaping the country’s future. The first date that is often given by Saudi commentators is 1999, when China’s President Jiang Zemin visited Saudi Arabia for the first time. Like their Chinese counterparts, Saudi commentators see the declaration of a “strategic oil partnership” between China and the kingdom during this visit as an event of high historical significance.⁷⁸⁶ Even more emphasis is put on the year 2006:

“The year of 2006 was a turning point. King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz al-Saud visited China in what was the first visit by a Saudi monarch to the People’s Republic. Three months later, Hu Jintao made a diplomatic visit to Saudi Arabia further highlighting the seriousness of Sino-Saudi relations. Hu was only the second visiting head of state to address the Saudi Consultative Council, after former French President Jacques Chirac.”⁷⁸⁷

The historical view of the relationship doesn’t seem to vary too much between the regional and the domestic level, but the emphasis on the communist and atheist background of China’s political system seems to be stronger in the Saudi case, obviously because of the self-role-conception of Saudi Arabia as the ‘guardian’ of Sunni Islam. The other pillar of Saudi international identity, is its energy wealth.

7.1.3. Energy Security as ‘Demand Security’

For Saudi Arabia, energy is at the heart of its foreign policy and the Kingdom is fully aware that for China, energy security lies at the heart of the bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia.⁷⁸⁸

This is one of the examples where a role can only be taken on by a single player. No other oil

785 Olimat (2013) p.76

786 Tamimi (2012) p.5

787 Ibid.

788 Tamimi cites the Chinese ex-ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Song Wei: “Energy cooperation has gone far beyond a buy-and-sell relation...when I was an ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia suggested that we build a strategic cooperation, which means Saudi Arabia needs a stable market, and China needs a stable supply.” According to Tamimi, “China recognises Saudi Arabia’s uniquely dominant role among the world’s oil producers” and is also aware that itself will benefit if it takes on the role of “a desirable long-term customer for the Kingdom’s oil exports.” See Tamimi (2012) p.6

company except Saudi Aramco has the capacity to increase its production significantly on short notice; and if Saudi Arabia doesn't fulfil the role expectations that the rest of the world has towards this role taker, than nobody else will be able to do it. Saudi commentators are obviously aware that the importance of their country stems from its oil wealth and emphasise the tough negotiating style of their country towards China. As one Saudi analyst said:

“Opposite to the early days with European and American companies, we are now experienced and in a strong position. We have to protect the wealth of our country for our children. So when the Chinese appeared in the market in the 1990s we were well prepared and they did not get anything for free.”⁷⁸⁹

While Chinese companies were allowed to invest in upstream activities of the Saudi oil industry, Saudi Arabia was allowed to invest in parts of China's upstream industry, especially refining. The Saudis are obviously aware that while China might be the bigger country, they are the more experienced partner in international oil partnerships and this status of equals seems to be very important in the dialogue.⁷⁹⁰

“Saudi Investments in China are a strategic choice, less a profit oriented one: Arab oil interests top Arabs' economic interests regarding China. The oil-producing Arab countries regard China as a promising market for Arab oil, especially considering the consistently high growth rates in the Chinese economy [...] The Chinese market not only presents an opportunity to diversify into foreign markets, it also lessens Arab dependence on Western markets to sell Arab oil.”⁷⁹¹

At the same time Saudi Arabia, as was mentioned earlier, is itself heavily reliant on energy exports and therefore 'energy security' and even 'regime survival' are reliant on 'security of demand'. In this way energy exports are heavily securitised in the Saudi discourse and the relationship with China is not framed in economic, but in 'security' terms. Highlighting the important role that the Kingdom has in China's expectations, is therefore an important part in defining Saudi self-role conceptions:

“Additionally, a closer economic relationship with Saudi Arabia should be absent of the possible political consequences and image concerns that occur in Sino-Iranian relations. In China's eyes, stable relations with Saudi Arabia is the best possible approach to avoid being shut-off from vital oil resources in the case that the Sino-American relationship should take a turn for the worse, or/and in the event of political turmoil in the region – as it has been demonstrated in Libya in 2011 and the sanctions on Iran oil in 2012.”⁷⁹²

789 Interview with Saudi analyst, Dubai, November 2011

790 Sager (2005) p.36

791 Tamimi (2012) p.6

792 Ibid.

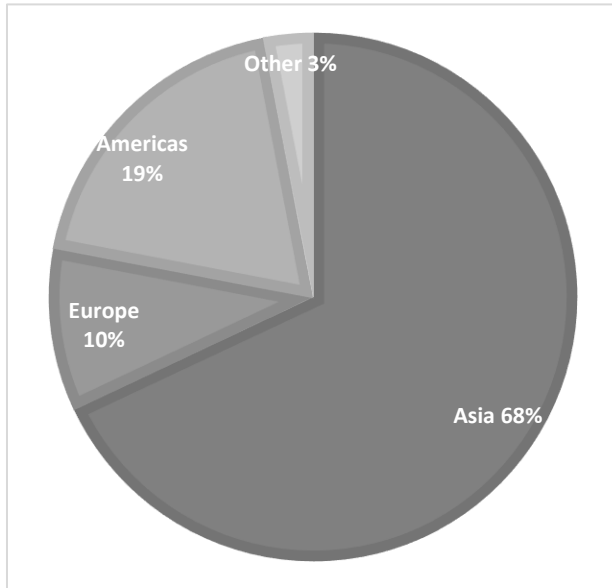


Figure 8 Saudi crude exports by region (source: EIA)

However, the Saudi Arabian discourse on the relationship is quite aware of China's attempts to diversify its hydrocarbon imports in an effort to limit its dependence on certain countries, including the Kingdom, and its exposure to regional upheaval. The Saudi side reacts to this by framing its own energy policy as a process of diversification: Saudi Aramco is also investing in other Asian markets like India, Japan and Korea, and the Saudi's prefer to frame Asia as the "future of energy consumption" not only China.⁷⁹³

There is also a clear understanding that both states are very reluctant to liberalise their energy markets and thereby put limits on future investment in the others energy industry.⁷⁹⁴ China can only be a long term reliable partner therefore in the Saudi eyes, if it will be dependent on the kingdom for the foreseeable future. In this frame, the Saudis point to the size of the Saudi consumer market compared to the other Arab markets as a sign of China's dependence on the Kingdom:

"Within this context, China is seeking to not only improve its energy security but also to expand its trade. Saudi Arabia has emerged as a major Middle Eastern trading partner for China and it is looking to further expand this relationship." [China] "has become the primary beneficiary of OPEC's rising trade expenditure. The latest IEA research shows that for each dollar that the US spent on oil imports from OPEC countries in 2011, only 34 cents came back by way of exported goods. [...] In short, China cannot ignore its economic interests in the Kingdom's growing economy."⁷⁹⁵

This reiterates the narrative that China cannot live without Saudi Arabia, while for Saudi Arabia China is an option. This doesn't keep Tamimi from still framing the relationship as part of a wider historic shift, equating oil and geopolitics as Asia has become the most important destination for Gulf oil with two thirds of Saudi oil already going to the East:

793 Interview with Saudi analyst, Dubai, November 2011

794 Tamimi (2012) p.12-13

795 Tamimi (2012) p.7

“The growing importance of Asia represents a fundamental shift in the geopolitics of oil. Saudi officials increasingly see the writing on the Great Wall: China will soon become the biggest purchaser of Saudi oil.”⁷⁹⁶

As mentioned before, this is framed as a win-win situation in the discourse, as one side is eager to import, and the other side is eager to export more oil. From the Saudi perspective, this is the main reason to build up a more encompassing relationship with China, and other East Asian nations. At the same time, and while the ‘energy’ frame remains on top of the discursive hierarchisation of policy objectives, Saudi Arabia sees itself in a period of economic diversification. Therefore, external players are also framed in the role that is expected of them in supporting this diversification process. While it might not be as pivotal in the securitisation mechanism as ‘energy’, ‘economic diversification’ is still seen as important for regime survival after oil, and an important way to employ a growing youth population. In this way, external players’ roles are heavily securitised. The Saudis therefore expect China to play the role of ‘catalyst’ of ‘economic’ diversification and thereby aid a change in the Kingdoms geopolitical role:

“Saudi Arabia would like to become the newest plastics hub. [For this] Saudi Arabia needs to find expanding markets for petrochemicals over the next decades. The Kingdom also needs to build its market knowledge in Asia. Currently, over 50 percent of the country’s petrochemical production is exported to Asian economies with China being the largest destination. [...] China benefits Saudi Arabia with its domestic market being open for export and outward investment opportunities, but its inward investments to Saudi Arabia are limited and also competition is emerging over the Chinese market.”⁷⁹⁷

7.1.4. The Saudi Strategy towards China - Pivot but Hedge

Therefore, in the mid- and long- term Saudi strategy of regime survival through economic diversification, China plays an important role for the Saudi state. This role for Saudi regime survival also has an impact on how Saudi Arabia perceives global geopolitical realities and China’s future role in the world, and therefore Tamimi sees most of the Saudi investment in China as political:

“[T]he Kingdom, already the largest supplier of oil to China, is building new refineries and increasing exports with the aim of strengthening political and economic ties with Asia’s growing economic giant. These petro political partnerships are a key to Saudi Arabia’s efforts to contain Iran’s political influence and military growth, especially its nuclear program.”⁷⁹⁸

796 Tamimi (2012) p.11

797 Tamimi (2012) p.11-12

798 Ibid.

The 'oil for security' frame and the ensuing division of roles for both partners, 'energy provider' for the Kingdom, 'security provider' for the US, seem widely accepted among Saudi analysts.⁷⁹⁹ However they also acknowledge, that this bargain and thereby the implicit roles, have been challenged by the events of 11 September. Therefore Saudi Arabia has started a "hedging strategy" by "courting an Asian alternative".⁸⁰⁰ Due to the strong interconnection of energy and security in the Saudi discourse, getting rid of its heavy reliance on the American market is seen as having both economic and political benefits; not only because of the changed regional security role that the US has played under the Bush administration, from 'protector' to 'destabiliser', but also because the Asian economies now have the scale to take on the role as major customers.

"Furthermore, by distancing itself from a disproportionate reliance on the US energy market, Saudi Arabia will be in a better position to extricate itself from the political costs of a close relationship with the United States." [...] "At this point, Saudi Arabia is eager to liberate itself from Western hegemony in the oil sector by enhancing its trade relations with China and increasing its arms imports."⁸⁰¹

This hedging strategy is also conditioned by Saudi Arabia's threat perception, in which the Islamic Republic of Iran is the greatest security 'threat'. The kingdom frames its foreign policy mostly through this 'Iran-threat' prism, especially the relationship with its closest and most important ally:

"From the Saudi point of view, the inability to coerce Iran looks like American weakness. Add to this the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, which is seen in Riyadh as a terrible error, and the result is that the United States appears in fact to be abandoning the arena to Iran. Within the backdrop of these strategic dynamics; do the Saudis have a viable alternative to relying exclusively on an American defence umbrella?"⁸⁰²

It is fair to say however, that there is a wide consensus among the Saudi foreign policy elite, that there is simply no substitute for the US, as no alternative role taker is available, and that the division of roles between the two partners should stay like this for the foreseeable future.⁸⁰³ These roles are stabilised by the shared interests that the US and the kingdom have. While the Arab Spring has been seen as another heavy burden on the Saudi-US relationship, Tamimi points out Riyadh's anger at the Obama administration abandoning Hosni Mubarak as

799 Interview with Saudi analyst, Dubai, November 2011, see also Olimat (2013) p.76

800 Tamimi (2012) p.8-9

801 Olimat (2013) p.48

802 Tamimi (2012) p.8-9

803 Interview with Saudi Diplomat, Beijing, May 2013

a case in point, he asks if the “Chinese alternative” could be an option in the strategic calculations in Riyadh:

„From Riyadh’s perspective, China does not have the same capability to project power globally, as the United States does, and therefore cannot provide the same security assurances against the international threats Saudi Arabia faces, particularly against Iran or/and the internal dangers of terrorism. Even if the Chinese had the capability to project power globally, the Saudis may question the reliability of the country’s security assurances due to the long relations it has with Iran. Although Saudi Arabia believes that China is not an alternative to the United States militarily in the short and medium terms, however, the Saudis are seeking to leave most of their options open.”⁸⁰⁴

Terrorism remains very high on the Kingdoms agenda, as does instability in Yemen. The perception of Iran as the strongest threat to the Saudi regime is seen by most Saudis as the clearest indication that the Kingdom still needs the US:

„Security and stability of the Saudi regime remains of the utmost importance and, in that regard, US military might in the Gulf is Saudi Arabia’s final guarantor. Given Iran’s constraints and limited options, Saudi Arabia is more likely to stay committed to the US security framework in the region -- for lack of better options. Here China (and the other Asian powers) still lags far behind America, which remains the Saudis’ military mainstay.”⁸⁰⁵

While for the Saudi decision makers, China might not be a shield against Iranian threats, there are still two more roles available to China in this US-Saudi-China triangle. The first is as a lever to put pressure on Iran: “We want China to facilitate talks between the P5 + Germany and Iran, to put pressure on Teheran to compromise or at least not to support Iran directly against us!”⁸⁰⁶ In case this should fail, and Saudi Arabia should need to shield itself against an Iranian nuclear weapon, Tamimi even argues that China could either help Saudi Arabia directly to develop nuclear weapons or facilitate Saudi-Pakistani deals in this regard.⁸⁰⁷

The more likely, and not unprecedented, role of China as a supplier of conventional weapons to Saudi Arabia might be in general the more feasible security role that China could play. But this is seen as hampered by, despite all recent advances of the Chinese arms industry, inferior quality of Chinese products compared to Western suppliers, as one Saudi analyst emphasised:

“I just went to the Dubai Air Show, and you see a lot of Chinese weapon systems there. But nobody really looks at them, their stalls are always empty. It is really bad quality. You know, the US buys our

804 Tamimi (2012) p.9

805 Ibid.

806 Interview with Saudi Diplomat, Dubai, February 2012

807 Tamimi (2012) p.11

oil and gives us F-16 for it. I don't know what the Chinese want to give to us; upgraded Soviet planes that have never been tested in war?"⁸⁰⁸

Of all these proposed roles, only the one in negotiations with Iran was seen as really promising. The Saudi discourse leaves not much space for a full-scale reorientation towards the East in the near future:

"The Saudis and the Chinese recognise that, for at least the next decade, the United States will remain the only country in the world capable of projecting substantial amounts of conventional military power into the Middle East. That makes the United States a strategically indispensable partner to Saudi Arabia for years to come. [...] But should the United States put some distance between itself and the region, Riyadh is likely, in the longer term to seriously consider parallel political and security arrangements which would inevitably include China."⁸⁰⁹

While the current US dominated structure is perceived as without alternative for the foreseeable future, Saudi Arabia, as the biggest and most important regional player, is debating ways to include China into a future regional security structure. However, beyond the question of Chinese capability, a closer aligning with China was also perceived as ethically problematic in the Saudi discourse.

7.1.5. Chinese Islam, Xinjiang and the role of Saudi Arabia in the Saudi perspective

As mentioned in the last chapter, the situation of China's Uighurs re-emerged in the Saudi press during the Xinjiang riots of 2009. Since then, the Saudi public concern both with Xinjiang and the situation of Islam in China has grown. Still the Saudi elite has tried to counter this in an attempt to legitimise its economic and political relationship with China:

"For instance, while all Saudi newspapers reported on the Xinjiang riots in 2009, only elite newspapers chose to publish analytical pieces on "Islam in China" emphasizing the rebirth of traditional Muslim culture throughout the country. Another example includes routine attempts on the part of elite newspapers to relate the experiences of Saudi students or tourists in China. [...] Since King Abdullah's endorsement of a "Going East" strategy in 2006, the Saudi media has employed and maintained, when superficially read, a largely positive-neutral tone in its coverage about China. Editorials and major articles, towing the official narrative, have constantly sought to emphasize the significance and importance of Sino-Saudi ties. Accordingly, many of these pieces are coloured by a positive Orientalist (or reverse Occidental) undertone."⁸¹⁰

This "positive orientalist undertone" is understood as the attempt to frame China as the example of a non-Western culture managing 'modernity', which al-Sudairi ascribes to

808 Interview with Saudi Analyst, Dubai, October 2011

809 Tamimi (2012) p.14

810 al-Sudairi (2013) p.10-11

imported Western frames, “more as a projection of an imagined China than anything else.” Beyond this orientalist framing of China as ‘non-Western’, the ‘Muslim’ frame is as important when Saudi media reproduce the Chinese official narrative of Muslims blossoming under communist rule. Al-Sudairi points out that this is also accompanied by hierarchisation practices in which China is framed as “in need of, and susceptible to, Saudi religious guidance” exemplified by “stories of mass conversion among the Chinese workers in Saudi Arabia.”⁸¹¹

The non-elite press however, frames China more in the role it plays in Xinjiang, and here the framing of China is gloomier. As al-Sudairi points out, Saudi authors even compared the situation of the Uighurs to the plight of the Palestinians. In the textual examples presented by him, the depiction of the violence in Xinjiang often framed China in the role of the ‘persecutor’ and Turkey in the role of the ‘defender’ of Muslims, sometimes even implicitly altercasting Saudi Arabia in the role of the ‘appeaser’ because of its silence on the issue compared to Turkish outspokenness. For al-Sudairi this negative perception of China is reinforced when China legitimises its policy in Xinjian by using ‘modernisation’ frames “eerily similar to Western justifications for Imperialism – the so-called “white-man’s burden” for its role of moderniser of Xinjiang.” He concludes that:

“These pieces have contributed to the emergence of a persuasive and powerful narrative that inexplicably links China to the persecution of Muslims. While initially limited to Xinjiang, the narrative quickly pervades across the discourse [...]”⁸¹²

Inspired by this frame of China as a ‘persecutor’, and once again borrowing from Western orientalism, though this time the negative version, China is depicted as immoral, juxtaposing it to Christianity as a religion of the book, because of which the West at least “possesses a core religious identity. The same cannot be said about China which is anti- Muslim by virtue of its communist system and atheistic/immoral culture.”⁸¹³

For Tamimi, China’s problems in Xinjiang and the role Saudi Arabia plays as a protector of Muslim feelings, makes Saudi Arabia simply more important for China:

“China cannot ignore the existence and influence of the Muslim states and cannot ignore their sympathy and support in international affairs.” [...] “States such as Saudi Arabia and Iran have been most active in propagating their version of Islam across the globe by providing resources and training to various organisations, and China feels that it is necessary to have their support if it wants

811 Ibid.

812 al-Sudairi (2013) p.20

813 al-Sudairi (2013) p.15-16

to successfully tackle Uyghur insurgency even though it is primarily the Central and Southern Asian states from where Uyghur militants have found support.”⁸¹⁴

Tamimi also highlights, how interested China has to be in the stability in the Middle East because of its oil dependency. Accordingly, the peace and stability of the Middle East is seen as of strategic importance to Chinese political calculations.

7.1.6. The Saudi Discourse on China as a Trading Partner

As mentioned before, the economic relationship between China and the Kingdom has to be viewed not only in light of China’s energy needs, but also in the context of Saudi Arabia’s industrialisation programme. Their trade relationship is seen as increasingly important for both sides. China has become the kingdom’s biggest trading partner and Saudi Arabia China’s most important market in the Middle East.⁸¹⁵ In this regard, the Saudi perception so far seems rather positive:

“In assessing the Saudi media’s discourse overall, it appears that the representation of China as an economic entity is largely positive in both elitist and populist works if only by virtue of the speed with which the ‘Chinese miracle’ has unfolded and its proximity, in public imagination at least, to the modern successes of Japan, South Korea, and the ‘Asian Tigers.’ This success is continuously compared to the failing economies of the West (after 2008) which had long been presented as a model for imitation.”⁸¹⁶

China is often framed as a huge ‘market’ for Saudi investment. The rapid growth of Saudi-Sino trade, it grew by almost 5000% between 1990 and 2011, obviously features prominently. However, it is the fact that China is now Saudi Arabia’s largest trading partner, since overtaking the US in 2011, which frames the discourse on power shift.⁸¹⁷ While this massive imbalance in the non-energy trade is perceived as a problem by many, Tamimi points to the fact that Chinese exports to Saudi Arabia are still mostly low tech and therefore actually won’t interfere with the Saudi industrialisation strategy:

“It’s largely low-price products, including textiles, garments and toys, which have a ready market among migrant workers and the low and middle-income workers in Saudi Arabia, where they do not compete with local products as they do in Africa and some other Arab countries.”⁸¹⁸

814 Tamimi (2012) p.7

815 al-Masah (2010) p.19

816 al-Sudairi (2013) p.28

817 Olimat (2013) p.75

818 Tamimi (2012) p.12-13

However, due to the industrialisation attempts of the Saudi Government, the threat to new Saudi industries is seen as far more pressing by other commentators. For example, Salim bin-Ahmad Sahab sees the solar industry threatened by people who “work, work, and then work some more”.⁸¹⁹ This time the government should simply fulfil its protectionist role and support industrial growth more whole heartedly. However, not only Saudi Arabia is endangered in the eyes of its commentators, when the Chinese are not only “burying other countries with cheap goods and buying failing companies wholesale,” but are embracing a copycat approach to everything. For the author, this could even lead to “the downfall of the West and relegate it to the fate of its former colonies.”⁸²⁰

Al-Sudairi points out that this “notion of China as an ‘economic power’ assumes a place of importance in the Saudi discourse – whether as a model of success or an entity to guard against.”⁸²¹

PRODUCT / YEAR	1995	2000	2005	2010	2012
Total all products	734	1145	3824	10336	18453
Primary commodities	80	62	137	434	753
All food items	77	54	88	226	260
Manufactured goods	654	1083	3687	9930	17699
Chemical products	13	30	177	469	808
Machinery and transport equipment	123	157	857	3258	6048
Electronic excluding parts and components	47	56	234	706	987
electrical and electronic parts and components	5	16	153	608	1209
Other manufactured goods	518	896	2653	6204	10843
Iron and Steel	15	13	127	681	1198
Textile fibres, yarn, fabrics and clothing	273	484	1213	2235	2904

Figure 9 China-Saudi Trade in Billion USD (source: UNCTAD⁸²²)

The discourse on product quality problems “made in China” is a distinct feature in most of the Arab domestic discourses, and also features prominently in Saudi Arabia. Like in many other Arab states, resentment against China, especially before the Arab Spring, stems from the debate about the quality of Chinese products „but also seem to draw on an indigenous

819 Sahab, Salim bin Ahmed: Caution about China in: al-Watan, trans. al-Sudairi (2013) p.30
 820 al-Faraj, Abdullah bin Muhsin: This is the [naught] of China, in: al-Riyadh, Trans. al-Sudairi (2013) p.30
 821 al-Sudairi (2013) p.27
 822 UNCTAD <http://unctadstat.unctad.org/EN/>, author’s selection

repertoire of anti-Chinese sentiment that dates to the early years of the Cold War [...].”⁸²³ While there is no lack of demand for Chinese products, they are often seen as on the cheaper end of the market, as one Saudi commentator puts it: “Chinese products have been well-received in the Saudi domestic market, and particularly in the so-called 2 riyal stores.”⁸²⁴ The commentator cites “electronic prayer-beads” as an example for the quick adaptability of Chinese producers to local markets and he calls on Saudi businessmen to learn from the Chinese. While the Chinese might not be exactly seen as role models, in this they still take the role of a mirror for criticising the perceived shortcomings of Saudi society.

“‘Low quality’ in fact is widely presented as a Chinese trademark, with many Saudi commentators (and some authors) questioning the moral integrity of businessmen who keep importing and dumping the market with cheap but dangerous goods [...] Chinese infrastructure projects in the kingdom also get criticised for their lack of quality and are negatively compared to their Korean counterparts.”⁸²⁵

Al-Sudairi points out that the debate about Chinese products is nothing particularly new, but that concerns have been raised in recent years due both to food scandals in China and quality problems worldwide, but also frequently in connection to political issues like the violence in Xinjiang or the Chinese vetoes on Syria. The frames used in these negative depictions often predate the Arab Spring; they mostly stem from the Cold War and have only been suppressed by the positive attitude of the Saudi government for some time. The disappointment over China’s role in the Arab spring has simply convinced the Saudi government and media industry to allow them to resurface.⁸²⁶

7.1.7. China Model or Atheist Anathema?

As pointed out earlier, the framing of China in the Saudi media as analysed by al-Sudairi is not always negative. The ubiquitous debate about the ‘China Model’ also takes place in Saudi Arabia, albeit due to religious sensitivities perhaps, more as a model that the Saudis should only partially emulate. One compelling argument for China as a model to other aspiring developing countries is often the perception that the US, the perceived source of much of the humiliation felt by developing countries, now has to pay respect to China, as shown by al-

823 al-Sudairi (2013) p.12

824 al-Ghawi, Ahmed: China...Studying the Market is the Key to Success, in: al-Riyadh, Trans. al-Sudairi (2013) p.29

825 Abdullah Abdul’ Samh: Has the Chinese [Quality] Fallen? in: Okaz, Trans. al-Sudairi (2013) p.31

826 al-Sudairi (2013) p.12

Sudairi in his analysis of an al-Watan article of Salah ad-Deen Kashugi.⁸²⁷ However, China is also frequently admired for its developmental achievements like the elimination of illiteracy, and with the (official-) unemployment in China so much lower than in the US perhaps “something could be learned from China’s experiences?”⁸²⁸ Tamimi argues that the attraction of the China model also extends to the Saudi leaders, who perceive it as a validation of their own gradualist reform approaches.

“It promises rapid growth without regime change. From a Saudi perspective, on one hand the Saudi public sees Asian powers as a counter balance to the United States; on the other hand China’s conservative approach to political and economic development and modernisation appears to be a model worth adopting and a viable alternative to Western-inspired reform models.”⁸²⁹

However, al-Sudairi points out that the framing of the ‘China Model’ in Saudi newspaper articles goes beyond the simple political frame of ‘economic reform without political reform’ and transcends into the social or cultural realm:

“As the reasons for the achievements are prominently the “work ethic” of the local people, “influence of Deng Xiaoping” which led to China emerging as “an economic superpower [...]” “worthy of Western respect.”⁸³⁰

In these depictions however, the framing of China, its people and its leaders, often serves more as an opening salvo of criticism of Saudi circumstances. In his case, the similarities of the colonial experience are juxtaposed to the divergence in the embrace of Western investment and industry. Especially in the case of infrastructure projects the unfavourable comparison of China and the Saudis serves to whip the Saudi government.⁸³¹ Another important aspect is that:

“The West is attempting to monopolize the claim to ‘modernity’ (which seems to be an outcome of economic progress, according to the author) but China presents, by virtue of its success, a real model for other non- Western societies seeking their own ‘modernities with non-Western characteristics.’ The Arabs must follow the path already taken by their Chinese brothers if they wish to define modernity on their own terms.”⁸³²

While some authors reviewed by al-Sudairi do point at the negative experiences of the Chinese development model, like widespread corruption, and call for a more critical review of the

827 Khashugshi, Salah al-Deen: How Has China Reached the Top? in: al-Watan, trans. al-Sudairi (2013) p.31

828 al-Amru, Yassir: The Chinese Experiment, in: Okaz, trans. al-Sudairi (2013) p.30

829 Tamimi (2012) p.10

830 al-Hamad Ayman: A ‘Developing Country’ called China, in: al-Riyadh, trans. al-Sudairi (2013) p.28

831 al-Harbi, Mohammed in: Okaz, al-Sudairi (2013), p.31

832 al-Sudairi (2013) p.28

China model,⁸³³ it is rather surprising after all the criticism 'atheist' China received on its relationship with to Islam and its perceived lack of morale, that it still received so much praise for its development and political leadership which after all have to act without the moral certainties of a religious society. This alteration between positive and negative frames however, is not unique to Saudi Arabia, but a pattern repeated in the discourses in the other two regional states analysed here.

7.2. The Emirati Discourse on China's Role

The United Arab Emirates are seven sovereign emirates, but only two of them will feature prominently in this chapter, due to their importance inside the federal state and the wider region. The first is the capital Abu Dhabi and the second the vibrant trading centre and travel hub of Dubai. Both emirates have very different political and economic set-ups and identities and therefore they obviously can have very different perspectives on China.

Abu Dhabi is the financial backbone of the country and heavily relies on its oil reserves. Dubai on the other hand now mostly relies on its income as a trading and travel destination. Due to this difference in their economic structure, both emirates have a different outlook to the world. Abu Dhabi, as seat of the foreign ministry, is focused on security policy and in a territorial dispute with Iran over a number of islands that it sees as occupied by the Islamic republic. Dubai tries to stay clear of international conflicts and keep a neutral position as best as it can. As home to a large Persian community and trading post to Iran it is also often seen as more positive towards its northern neighbour. Still the discourses in both emirates are so intertwined that they might be looked at together. It is notable however, that in the discussions about the UAE and China, politics play a much smaller role compared to economic issues, than for example in Saudi Arabia.

7.2.1. Political Expectations

As in Saudi Arabia, the major foreign policy issue for most Emirati analysts is the conflict with Iran. For the UAE this is two-pronged. First there is the international conflict around Iran's nuclear program. For the UAE however, a connected but perhaps more important issue is the

833 al-Uqayshiq, Abdul Aziz Hamad, in: al-Watan "China, Corruption and the Price of Fast Growth" al-Sudairi (2013), p.31

territorial dispute over the lesser Tunb islands. From an Emirati perspective, China could play a role here that is very different from the role the US could play. While the US plays the role of the 'military enforcer' towards Iran, China is supposed to make use of its close relationship with Iran for the benefit of the UAE by playing the role of a 'mediator'.⁸³⁴

Generally however, there seem to be rather subdued political expectations towards China among Emiratis. One of the leading analysts on security policy in the Gulf in Dubai argued, that real meaningful security cooperation between the GCC governments and China is so far impossible, because "Nobody really knows what the Chinese want here in this region."⁸³⁵ Another Dubai consultant recounted his experience when the British Institute of International and Strategic Studies (IISS) organised a workshop on Asia-Gulf relations in Bahrain in 2012; the discussants spent most of their time discussing cultural and economic ties and Middle Eastern and Western participants were surprised that the Chinese were absolutely unwilling to move away from their script and discuss a stronger political role for China in the region, although both Western and Arab participants were actively trying to provoke a statement on one of these issues.⁸³⁶ This feeling of disappointment towards China's political role in the region is often expressed, as when one of Abu Dhabi's foreign policy analysts pointed out that:

"The Asians are not involved in Gulf security; they are only interested in oil. However the GCC does not see itself only as a shop to sell oil. They should be more concerned with a war with Iran. I'm tired of telling the Asians they have to be more involved in our politics. For us China is only important in economy, but if they want to be in the Gulf for the long term, they have to be involved in security. But whenever we want to talk with them about it, they change the topic because they don't want to talk about it. [...] The GCC is more important now for Asia, and we are talking more with Chinese diplomats but I think China could do much more. The problem is they simply don't understand the Gulf and to be honest, we don't understand them. Part of the problem is that they don't come over here, they are not interested in us because they are only worried about their own problems."⁸³⁷

This lack of political commitment by China was emphasised for him by China's behaviour during the debates on Syria: "I think it's unlikely that anything good comes out of China on Syria or the Arab Spring. They are simply not interested in anything that we need from them or to help us."⁸³⁸ At the same time, China is rarely assigned the role of the main culprit for the

834 Olimat (2013) p.81

835 Interview with Military Analyst, Dubai, November 2011

836 Interview with Consultant, Dubai, November 2011

837 Interview with UAE Foreign Policy Advisor, Abu Dhabi, March 2012

838 Ibid.

political impasse in the Syrian crisis, a role that is normally reserved for Russia. As another Emirati analyst pointed out, China is often seen as just hiding behind Russia:

“So there is no bad blood between us and China because we know, China does not have its own opinion, it’s only following Russia. As far as I remember, when Al-Jazeera reports about Syria they only talk about Russia. I’ve never heard them talking about China.”⁸³⁹

In the Emirati perception, China refused to fulfil the role that is expected of her. After Wen Jiabao’s 2012 visit and his lack of commitment to the UAE’s demands on Syria and the Iranian nuclear problem, Emirati analysts showed their disappointment. They unfavourably compared China’s behaviour to the US’s and blamed a lack of understanding of the region, Arab culture and the UAE’s security interests for this crisis:

“As I said, we simply don’t understand each other. This is different with the Americans or the Europeans. We have been together for a very long time and the Americans and the Europeans have always been very interested in our history, culture and politics. At the same time most of us in the Gulf have studied in the US or Europe, we do our holidays there, and have many American or European friends. Of course there are many problems, especially between America and us, you know, we hate their foreign policy regarding Iraq and Israel, and many of their politicians and media don’t understand Islam. So we are often angry at them and they are often angry at us, but still we are old friends and we can go through many troubles.”⁸⁴⁰

This institutionalised friendship is seen as having assigned clear roles to the other, something the relationship with China so far has not produced:

“Britain and the US have given us security in exchange for oil and this deal has always been good for both sides. Now the problem is that the Chinese, but also the Indians and the Japanese buy most of our oil, but they don’t want to give us security for this. Therefore, China for us is only a business partner and not a friend like the US or Europe.”⁸⁴¹

At the same time the view prevailed, that China is neither a threat to the US position nor willing to take over their role as security provider in the Gulf, even as China was generally seen as aggressive in its own region.

“They are simply not interested; I think they have enough problems with Japan. I don’t know what the problem with Japan is really about, but I think now that they have more power, they want to have more land from their neighbours.”⁸⁴²

In a similar way, Mohammed Olimat tries to explain the reluctance of China to take sides in the territorial issue between the UAE and Iran, with Beijing prioritising its own neighbourhood

839 Interview with UAE Analyst, Abu Dhabi, March 2012

840 Interview with UAE Foreign Policy Advisor, Abu Dhabi, March 2012

841 Ibid.

842 Ibid.

over the Gulf and fearing that involvement in Gulf disputes could be used as legitimisation of external involvement in its own disputes. China was seen as being willing to invest efforts only when its own interests are endangered, as for example through a closure of the Gulf shipping lanes by Iran:

“China has warned Iran about taking such a step as the bulk of its oil imports pass through the Strait, but China also wants to keep good relations with the UAE and Iran. If it decides to use its growing leverage towards ending the conflicts in the Gulf region, namely Iran’s occupation of the UAE’s three islands and Iran’s nuclear standoff with the international community, then China will be making its greatest ever diplomatic accomplishment in the Middle East. However, should it refrain from providing any diplomatic initiative, continue its ties and maintain a balance without antagonizing either side, then China’s diplomacy will score another accomplishment by navigating its own interests among contending forces in the Middle East.”⁸⁴³

An Emirati analyst saw it similarly when asked which Asian countries had some importance for the UAE:

“If at all then only China is important because of Iran and the UN Security Council. But I don’t think Iran is a problem between us and China because for China, Iran is only about business, not about ideology. So I think it’s no problem. I think China doesn’t want to do politics in the Middle East, it’s only interested in money. One thing we don’t like is that Israel is putting a lot of pressure on China concerning Iran. This is why China has to be very careful now. It will only do politics if it has to.”⁸⁴⁴

While the UAE and China signed a defence and co-operation pact in 2008, the UAE has done so with many countries and Emirati observers highlight that other countries like France are seen as more of an ‘alternative option’ for UAE defence:

“If we should come to this point that we need a new security guarantee, we would definitely look to somebody we know, and whom we know can do this. So France for example, perhaps even Russia is possible. But at the moment, there is no reason for us to because we have the US, then comes the UK, then France than Russia. We don’t trust the Chinese, and you cannot work with people you don’t trust.”⁸⁴⁵

In the same frame, analysts point out that there has been no arms deal between the UAE and China since 1994. The US, France and Britain remain the biggest suppliers of weapons to the UAE. However, Olimat still sees some interest in “the forging of a strategic partnership in military co-operation” by both Chinese and Emirati officials, even going as far as to suggest

843 Olimat (2013) p.82

844 Interview with UAE Analyst, Abu Dhabi, March 2012

845 Interview with UAE Foreign Policy Advisor, Abu Dhabi, March 2012

that arms sales could become a binding cord over time as “the Gulf and the Middle East are great markets for Chinese fighter jets and training aircraft.”⁸⁴⁶

7.2.2. Energy trade and Investments

The energy relationship between China and the UAE does not play the same role in the discourse as it did in neighbouring countries, especially Saudi Arabia, as the UAE’s oil and gas exports to China are comparatively modest. This also applies to other energy technologies like the strategically important competition for the construction contract for Abu Dhabi’s first nuclear power plant, which was played out between the US, France and South Korea - not China:

“Energy security is a new issue for the UAE. Obviously, we want to export more of our oil instead of using it ourselves. The problem is that we use more and more energy and it’s very difficult for use to be energy efficient, you know the climate here. That’s why we built the nuclear power plant and develop renewable energies in al-Masdar. This of course is driven by that fact that China is buying so much oil, that makes it expensive and we know that we can sell them a lot of oil for the next 20 years, so why use it up ourselves.”⁸⁴⁷

It is important to note, that the analyst in this case used a purely economic frame, insisting that South Korea only won the contract for the nuclear power plant because of a lower price and not for some ‘strategic’ reason. “Korea is not important for us in politics, no Asian country is really important in politics for us.”⁸⁴⁸ But at least, Korea was perceived as the most important Asian player in the field of energy, not China, or as the Emirati analyst put it: “You know opposite to other parts of the world, there is absolutely no China- hype here anymore. In the end, I think Korea is the much more important topic for us.”⁸⁴⁹

7.2.3. Non-Energy-Trade

Due to Dubai’s role as the major trading centre of the Arab Gulf, non-energy trade plays a huge role in the perspective that the UAE has on China. This compelled the al-Masah consultancy to frame it as “a significant trading relationship over the years with both economies going through a quick economic development phase.”⁸⁵⁰ As often the quick expansion of this trading relationship is dominant in the discourse about non-energy trade as is the diversification frame:

846 Olimat (2013) p.170-171

847 Interview with UAE Analyst, Abu Dhabi, March 2012

848 Ibid.

849 Interview with consultant, Dubai, November 2011

850 al-Masah: China and India’s Growing Influence in the MENA Region: Their Legacy and Future Footprint, p.6

“The UAE is also keen on strengthening its relationship by diversifying ties with the growing Chinese economy by investing in finance, real estate and construction sectors. Until now, trade between both sides was mostly centred on base metals and related materials exported from the UAE and cheap Chinese consumer goods imported to the UAE.”⁸⁵¹

Another recurring frame in the debate about China-Gulf trade, is the rapid shift of trade flows from the West, framed as forcing Gulf countries to reorient themselves:

“Given the shift in global economic geography towards emerging market economies and Asia/China and the accompanying shift in trade patterns, the GCC countries need to restructure and re-orient their banking, trade & investment strategies and policies accordingly.”⁸⁵²

This frame is used to strengthen the recurring narrative about Dubai as a ‘global’ city that relies on globalisation and Asian economies. One of the advisors to the Dubai government made it clear that the city is relying on adjusting to global trends and therefore has no choice:

“It’s not only about China, but all of Asia. Dubai is built on globalisation and we don’t prioritise. But in the end globalisation is a question of survival for Dubai. So we have to balance with all sides, but we will not choose, and the West remains the most important relationship on nearly all sides. There is no debate about shifting towards China. But our big chance is that we are between the West and China and that is basically our business model, it is our model of survival.”⁸⁵³

The then chief economist of the Dubai International Financial Center Nasir Saidi even argued in 2011 that there are actually great similarities in the economic culture between China and the Middle East, which separate them culturally from the West:

PRODUCT / YEAR	1995	2000	2005	2010	2012
Total all products	1101	2078	8730	21235	29568
Primary commodities	43	78	450	1201	1199
All food items	39	50	201	440	408
Manufactured goods	1058	2000	8280	20021	28325
Chemical products	30	58	235	623	907
Machinery and transport equipment	182	551	3166	8555	11079
Electronic excluding parts and components	74	199	1008	3620	4784
Electrical and electronic parts and components	13	65	517	1767	2040
Other manufactured goods	845	1391	4880	10843	16339
Iron and Steel	21	18	163	813	1054
Textile fibres, yarn, fabrics and clothing	385	684	2390	4477	6966

Figure 10 China-UAE Trade in Billion USD (source: UNCTAD)

851 al-Masah: China and India’s Growing Influence in the MENA Region: Their Legacy and Future Footprint, p.6

852 Saidi (2010) 22-23

853 Interview with Dubai Government Advisor, Dubai, December 2011

“The Chinese are very similar to us, they also have state companies” [...] “You know the China model means state driven development, that is somehow similar to our Dubai model”⁸⁵⁴

The interconnection with trade with India leads analysts to claim that “China, India and the UAE inadvertently form a trade triangle.”⁸⁵⁵ Around 3000 Chinese companies operate in the UAE and around 200000 Chinese nationals live in Dubai alone, which led on UAE government advisor to conclude:

“The Chinese might have a bad reputation, compared to the Japanese, Koreans and Hong Kong people, but as they are undercutting the market, their role becomes more and more important and the Emirati families depend on them more and more for business.”⁸⁵⁶

One result of this growing presence has been that parts of Dubai’s traditional souk streets have been transformed into Chinese streets and the free trade port of Jebel Ali is home to hundreds more Chinese companies:

“Since the UAE is within easy reach of two billion potential consumers in the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, Russian Federation and Africa, Chinese firms are being encouraged to use the UAE to penetrate this vast market. As a result, the Jebel Ali Free Zone already has over 500 Chinese companies. One of the pioneering joint projects in the UAE was the Dragon Mart.”⁸⁵⁷

Because of this increasing importance, the Dubai Chamber of Commerce has opened an office in China and its Director General Hamad Buamim sees the chambers activities in China as to “help Chinese companies expand into the Middle East market, using Dubai as a base.”⁸⁵⁸ Therefore, frames like ‘strategic partnership’ are very common in this discourse and are actually widening in the geographical sphere that is included in this ‘strategic partnership’:

“Given the UAE’s central geographic position halfway between Africa and China with good logistics and communications, it is seen as a gateway into Africa, leading to a large number of Chinese companies being based in the UAE, but catering to Africa.”⁸⁵⁹

The roles that Dubai and China play for each other are normally described as complimentary “making the Gulf country one of the Asian powerhouse’s most crucial partners and the UAE one of the greatest beneficiaries of the rise and rise of China.”⁸⁶⁰ This frames China not only in

854 Interview of Chief Economist of Dubai International Financial Center, Dubai, December 2011

855 Olimat (2013) p.166

856 Interview with Chinese (HK) advisor to UAE government, Dubai, March 2012

857 Sager, Abdulaziz: ‘GCC-China relations-Looking beyond oil: Risks and rewards’, 2005, p.37

858 Trenwith, Courtney: Enter the Dragon, in: Arabian Business, Vol.14, Issue 10, 10 March 2013

859 Saidi (2010) p.23

860 Trenwith, Courtney (2013): Enter the Dragon, in: Arabian Business, Vol.14, Issue 10, 10 March 2013

the role of the ‘catalyst’ of a new global role for the UAE, but also as the harbinger of a future where the West plays little role.

7.2.4. Financial Services, RMB Internationalisation and Investments

Driven by this imperative frame, Dubai as the financial hub of the Gulf was obviously also interested in reinventing itself in the role of a financial ‘service provider’ to Chinese traders in the whole region. Chinese Banks started moving into Dubai in 2008 with the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) being the first. In 2011 the UAE’s Mashreq Bank started hosting the Bank of China in Abu Dhabi with the Chinese community of over 200,000 and 3,900 Chinese businesses as the target customers of this cooperation. While it could be argued that regional banks found it often difficult to offer adequate services to Chinese customers, Emirati analysts framed the move as aimed at “direct access to the UAE and regional markets through the establishment of Chinese banks in the UAE.”⁸⁶¹ In Dubai’s financial sector many are convinced that “[...] the power of global economies shifting from West to the East and China and India will play very large roles.”⁸⁶² This has even led to changes in the HR-policies of Dubai’s financial institutions:

“The situation with China has really changed here in Dubai after 2008. Before the crisis nobody cared about China. They were just small traders and big construction companies that have their own financing. Nothing really for an international bank. But now, every bank has a China desk. Really, everybody jumped on the train after Citibank started. It was absolutely this China hype about ‘China being the market of the Future’ and ‘the west is dead’ etc.”⁸⁶³

The growth of trade and financial services also raised the question of the convertibility of the RMB as a new business opportunity for Dubai. This internationalisation of the RMB was seen as another opportunity for Dubai to establish itself in the role of the service hub for China’s regional economic activities. In a report by the chief economist of the Dubai International Financial Centre, Nasr Saidi, China is framed in the role of ‘vehicle for another evolving business model’ of Dubai:

„As the RMB goes international, the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) can become an overseas hub for trading RMB in a time zone that completes and complements Hong Kong. [...] A similar role could be envisaged for Dubai and the DIFC, given the growing MENA/GCC-China trade and investment links and Dubai’s locational advantage midway between Europe and Asia.⁸⁶⁴ [...] It

861 Saidi (2010) p.23

862 Trenwith (2013)

863 Interview with Financial Analyst, Dubai, October 2011

864 Saidi (2010) p.23

is in the GCC's strategic interest to move towards greater economic & financial integration with China. This should include developing and facilitating trade finance and moving towards using the Renminbi for the settlement of trade with China."⁸⁶⁵

The Director General of the Dubai Chamber of Commerce Hamad Buamim framed the position as a clearing center for China's currency in an interview as strategically important for the trading hub Dubai. "Securing this position would be a boost for Dubai's economy and would facilitate improvements in trade, tourism, banking and financial services retails and leisure."

⁸⁶⁶ Nasir Saidi and his co-authors also emphasise that they see a continuing reliance on the traditional currencies like USD and Euro as more risky than also accepting new ones due to the perceived fragility of the Western financial system and its inability to finance emerging markets. This repeats the frame of a declining West and the financial crisis leading to stronger emerging markets cooperation.

"A multi-polar world requires a new financial and monetary infrastructure. The post-WWII Bretton Woods period has been one where the US dollar was dominant in international monetary and financial transactions [...] The world needs the Renminbi to become a global currency in order to deal with global imbalances, to wean the US away from its addiction to debt and external deficits that were allowed it as an exorbitant privilege and for China to play a stabilising role in the world economy and new financial architecture."⁸⁶⁷

In this perspective the growing interlinkage between the two regions is framed as both a phenomenon of the global 'power shift' and also as driving the institutionalisation of this process. The institutions then would be just reflections of global financial movements like the flow on investments, from the West to the East. Mohammed Olimat even finds a historical frame for this growth of investment flows from the Gulf to China:

"Historically speaking, between the eighth and tenth centuries, ports management was entrusted to Arab immigrants in China. Dubai Port World is no different: it wants to infiltrate Chinese markets just as in India's ports where the company handles 70 percent of container movements. While penetrating Chinese ports might not be an easy task on account of national sovereignty concerns, it is conceivable that DP World, with its established credibility, will manage China's ports in the near future. [...] Sino-Emirati trade relations are only expected to increase at an even faster pace."⁸⁶⁸

At the same time, UAE companies are investing in China, and that many of them like Dubai Internet City, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority and Dubai Holdings have established offices in China already in the first half of the last decade is framed by Sager as part of the

865 Ibid.

866 Trenwith (2013)

867 Saidi (2010) p.25

868 Olimat (2013) p.166

“diversification of their investment portfolios.”⁸⁶⁹ He reconnects this to the earlier frames of global power shift, economic diversification and diversification of risk by Arab investors as a fallout of perceived post-11 September islamophobia in the West. Similarly, according to al-Masah, UAE investments in China also rose and by 2010 had become the highest among Arab countries with over 650 projects in China reinforcing the framing of the UAE in the role of regional hub of financial transactions with China.⁸⁷⁰

7.2.5. Tourism & Culture

While the UAE have never been a cultural hub for the region, tourism plays a tremendous role especially in Dubai’s economic model. Therefore, tourism serves as another frame where China is seen as the ‘market of the future’. Again, this is no phenomenon unique to the UAE, and most major tourist destinations in the world have obviously started to see Chinese tourists as part of their future economic survival. For a place that is as dependent on tourism as Dubai, especially ‘shopping-tourism’ and the income it generates in its shopping malls and souks, the number of tourists can easily be framed as a part of ‘regime survival’. As one Dubai tourism official was adamant in January 2011 however, there is a new dimension to Chinese visits to the emirates: “Chinese tourist were the saviours of the Dubai tourist market after 2009, perhaps together with the Russians!”⁸⁷¹

Chinese tourism, which rapidly increased after the UAE abolished their visa requirements for Chinese nationals in 2009 in an effort to save Dubai’s economy after the financial crisis, is seen as changing the way the trading hub Dubai is doing business. Most malls and hotels have employed mandarin speaking staff and changed the appearance of the Dubai service industry. As Dubai Duty Free executive vice-chairman Colm Mc Loughlin put it: “Improving Services for Chinese customers became one of the key priorities for Dubai Duty Free to maximise the potentials an opportunities brought about by the impact of the Chinese consumers.”⁸⁷²

This at least touristic interest however, was not fully reciprocated by Emiratis. The perceived interest towards China stemmed very much from the elite’s business interest. “[...] but when

869 Sager (2005) p.37

870 al-Masah (2010) p.19

871 Interview with Dubai tourist official, Sharjah, January 2011

872 Trenwith (2013)

you ask even the people in the [Emirati] elite where they want to study or work or go on holiday, it will still be America or Europe. For us Europe is still the centre of the modern world, and China is a far away country.”⁸⁷³ Indeed, the interest in Chinese culture per-se seems to be very limited, as it is in other Arab countries. The Confucius Institutes in both Abu Dhabi and Dubai complained that most of the students were non-Emiratis mostly South Asians. They also both outlined that the interest in East Asian culture was focussed on Korean soap operas. One foreign teacher in Abu Dhabi, who taught East Asian culture in his classes due to his own background, mentioned that, if at all, his students, mostly female, were more interested in learning Korean than Chinese, due to Korea’s cultural influence in the Gulf. An Emirati analyst at a think tank agreed: “Nobody cares about China. I think in general our people are not interested in Asia, perhaps only in Korean series and Japanese cars and perhaps Samsung, but otherwise nobody cares about Asia.”⁸⁷⁴

In cultural terms, China seems to not only lag behind the attractiveness of the West but even other Asian nations. Even the mediocre amount of interest in China in the Arab world was relativised by some analysts:

“It is true you will meet many Arabs now who are interested in China, but this is because it’s new, while we already know the US and Europe. We have no historical connection to China, opposite to Europe, you know, our religion is very similar, but China’s religion is very different [laughs], actually they don’t really have a religion. I don’t think we share the same strategic goals with China as we do with the US and Europe.”⁸⁷⁵

With so little cultural interest, it seems interesting to understand the general perception of China in the Emirates.

7.2.6. Emirati Perceptions of China

There is so far very limited material about how this lack of interest influences what Emiratis think about China. Therefore, students of two Emirati Universities, one in Dubai and one in Abu Dhabi, were asked about their opinions about China. Only those 124 respondents with Emirati nationality were counted.

873 Interview with UAE Analyst, Abu Dhabi, March 2012

874 Ibid.

875 Interview with UAE Foreign Policy Advisor, Abu Dhabi, March 2012

Overall it can be stated that Emirati students' opinion on China was rather lukewarm. When asked which countries they had sympathies for, their two neighbours Qatar and Saudi Arabia were the clear front runners, with Qatar getting 74 and Saudi Arabia getting 58 votes. Turkey came third, followed by the US and Germany. After these regional and Western powers came the four Asian countries with China and India shared the sixth place with 14 votes each compared to Japan and South Korea with 12 votes. While Britain and Egypt and Malaysia had at least some sympathisers, the revisionist states of Iran with six and Russia with only one sympathiser, were much less popular, overall substantiating the conservative outlook among Gulf Arabs. Surprisingly unpopular perhaps was France with only two votes, although it was just to open a navy base in Abu Dhabi in 2012. However, when it came to the favourite place to study and work, the US was the clear frontrunner, before Britain, France and Germany, reflecting the traditional lifestyle of the Gulf's upper and Middle classes of studying in the West. However at least Qatar's investment in education facilities seemed to have paid off, as 20 were interested in studying in Doha, beating Turkey and Japan to the places six and seven. Only six students wanted to study in China, which was still the same number as for Saudi Arabia, India, Russia and Malaysia. These results substantiate the aforementioned assumption about Arab disinterest in China and the continuing allure of the West as the center of global modernity.

When the students were asked which countries played a negative role during the Arab Spring clearly most votes were given to Russia (56 votes) and to Iran (48 votes). Only 18 respondents considered the role of the US to have been negative, while China was seen as negative by the same amount of people as were Britain and Egypt. Interestingly, four students saw South Korea, normally not known for its political activism in the Middle East, as having played a negative role. An explanation for this rather unexpected finding was given by one Emirati teacher, who was not involved in the survey, by pointing at the conservative outlook by some students, and the popularity of Korean Pop-culture with the Gulf youth: "They think that Korean soap operas perverted the youth, and thereby made them rebel".⁸⁷⁶

When asked, which country might pose a political threat to the Emirates, two thirds of the students saw Iran as the main threat, while still a third thought there was no threat at all. Third

876 Interview with Emirati University Lecturer, March 2013

came the US, followed in clear distance by Russia and China.⁸⁷⁷ While not even half the Students saw US power in decline, only a fourth wished China to be the next superpower, followed by the EU. More than a third each wished however that the UAE should have closer relations with the US and the EU each, again followed by China, India and a very distant Russia.⁸⁷⁸

In the economic area, a third saw the US as the biggest threat and a quarter none. While this time China and Japan came third and fourth.⁸⁷⁹ Japan followed by China were also seen as the two countries that could best serve as a model for the Emirates followed by the US and Germany.⁸⁸⁰ When the students were asked to write down the words which come to their minds when thinking about China 40 answered with the words “made in China”, and “industry an economy”, while a tenth made racial comments like “little eyes” or “yellow skin”.⁸⁸¹ The ‘economy’ and ‘hard work’ were also seen as the topics where the Emirates could learn from China, although half thought there was nothing to learn from China at all. Lastly, roughly half the respondents thought that China should play a stronger role in Middle East politics, most without giving a specific reason for this, while only a sixth of all respondents saw China as a threat to the Emirati economy.

While China was not seen as overly negative and was neither seen as a economic nor a political threat by the Emirati students the lack of interest in, and sympathy for China was clearly palpable from the answers, and mirrors the views of Emirati analysts and decision makers. One of the explanations by an Emirati teacher for this phenomenon was, that as a young country with little popular participation in politics, Emirati students were not taught to be interested either in the political rise of China nor in the cultural heritage of the country, the two frames that he thought explain the China-hype in the West.⁸⁸² Following this assumption, the discourse on China in a country with a long tradition of statehood like Egypt should be more curious about the ‘Middle Kingdom’.

877 86 Iran, 32 none, 22 USA, 08 Russia, 06 China, 04 France

878 48 USA, 44 EU, 32 China, 20 India, 06 Russia

879 48 USA, 32 None, 22 China, 18 Japan, 16Iran, 06 Saudi Arabia & Russia

880 36 Japan, 28 China, 26 USA & None, 14 Germany, 10 Turkey & Britain & South Korea

881 Others were: 16 Jacky Chan, 14 big population, 10 creative, 08 copy, 06 nothing, food, 04 Great Wall, 02 culture, cars

882 Interview with Emirati University lecturer, March 2013

7.3. Egypt's Discourse on China's Role

As was discussed in Chapter three, since the presidency of Anwar al-Sadat, Egypt is eager to balance its close relationship with the US by diversifying its foreign policy through closer relations with other actors. While it is careful not to position itself against Washington, it mostly expects outside powers to soft-balance against the US: However, due to the fact that the biggest 'threat' in Egypt's perception is the US ally Israel, it is more decisive than the Gulf States in its balancing behaviour. The Cold War is even more present in the Egyptian foreign policy discourse than in other domestic discourses in the region. It is also noteworthy that, regardless of its declining standing in the Arab world, Egypt still views itself as both the rightful heir to an ancient civilisation and a great power, and is eager to distance itself in status from other Arab and especially African states.

7.3.1. The Egyptian Perception of China

Egypt had been the first country in the Arab world to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1956. This, however does not seem to have led to a deeper interest in China or a better knowledge about the Middle Kingdom. The knowledge gap that has been attested many times before is also visible in Egypt. As one Cairo University professor put it: "Basically everything we Egyptians know about China is from a Mohamed Hamadi film a few years ago, but this is all."⁸⁸³ Nor has the fact that Egypt still considers itself as the center of Arab intellectual life led to a livelier interest in China. While institutions like the al-Ahram Centre for Strategic Studies and Cairo University's Department of Political and Economic Studies are still a place of pivotal intellectual exchange about regional politics, neither center does specialised research on China. Instead, former experts on the USSR, might be seen as qualified to comment on China, due to the perceived strong similarity between China and the Soviet Union.⁸⁸⁴

That the "field of Asian studies is not interesting for young researchers" as one Egyptian scholar put it, was attributed by him to the fact that "Asia doesn't encourage our research in itself, opposite to Western countries."⁸⁸⁵ While this complaint was voiced multiple times it should be added that at the same time both Egyptian scholars, and even Egyptian media

883 Interview with Egyptian academic, Cairo University, Cairo, February 2012

884 Interview with Egyptian Academic, Cairo University, February 2012

885 Interview with Egyptian Analyst, al-Ahram centre, March 2012

reports lamented the fact that China's offers of scholarships for Egyptian students to study in China (even in English) were often left untouched by Egyptian students, due to a lack of interest.⁸⁸⁶ What the scholar, and some of his colleagues, were referring to however, was the fact that Chinese scholars and institutions rarely invite foreigners, especially from developing countries, to take part in research projects and publications and make funding available for this. This Egyptian expectation of receiving attention from the other side also highlights the difference to the very engaging, and successful, approach that Israel has towards China, as discussed in chapter five. This attitude was pervasive through-out the statements of disinterest towards China by Egyptian academics:

"Nobody at our university really does research on China. With China I would first of all connect the word 'cheap'. To my knowledge unlike Europe or Russia or India, China has no think tanks and no real soft power, and I think nobody really likes China. I have heard of the 'China model' but I guess in Egypt it plays no role. If you would look for a role model, we would rather look to Turkey, because they are also Muslims. China is simply too far away. I think the only good thing I could say about China is that they are not as ideological about Iran as the US is. I think we can't even speak of Egyptian-Chinese relations, there's simply no common ground between our two countries. China takes its chances when it can, but it doesn't create them themselves unlike US. Generally Japan and Korea are much more active, and India even has a cultural centre that invites a lot of our researchers. I think after Bandung China-Egypt had close relations, but this time it's far away."⁸⁸⁷

To test this level of disinterest attested by Egyptian researchers, dissertation papers in the library system of the Institute of Economic and Political Studies, were accessed and searched for thesis papers on 'China'. Of the 54 dissertations from 1964 to 2011 on China, more than half (29) were written after the year 2000, while there had been a rather slow but steady increase from the 1960s (5) to the 1990s (10). The period of opening-up the Egyptian economy to the West of the 1970s seems to have been the time of lowest interest in the then still very much closed-off China. A more in-depth content study of these dissertations might give an interesting, albeit perhaps anecdotal, look at the changing perspective of Egyptian students on China.⁸⁸⁸ So while the interest seems to grow in-step with the growing international importance of China, it is still low compared to the hundreds of dissertation papers written in political science and economics at Cairo University every year.

886 Interview at Cairo University February 2012; see also al-Masri al-Yaum (02 October 2013): China grants 400 scholarships for Egyptian students,

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/chinagrants400scholarshipsegyptianstudents>

887 Interview with Egyptian academic, Cairo University, Cairo, February 2012

888 See Cairo University Library Catalogue, accessed 5 March 2012

This lack of interest in China as a cultural or political entity also showed when 110 Cairo University students were asked to write down the words that came to their mind when they heard the word 'China'. Roughly a third answered with the words "economy and industry" followed by "made in China" and "big population", while only one wrote the word "future super power". China as a place of "civilisation", "technology" or "development" played no role while less than a handful used the orientalist frames of "collective thinking" and "work ethics". It is therefore not surprising that when students were asked what Egypt could learn from China, most mentioned "how to run the economy" and "how to work hard".⁸⁸⁹ In the Egyptian discourse, as in the Emirati discourse, the Chinese again were supposed to be difficult to understand for Egyptians and juxtaposed to the well-known Europeans, as one of the employees of the Egyptian-Chinese Business Council (ECBC) put it:

"You know, we know the Europeans, we are nearly alike, Europeans are very straight, they say what they want, the Chinese not, they are very special, they don't have the word 'no' in their dictionary, everything is very indirect, they are very manipulative, I hear a lot of complains"⁸⁹⁰

Of course this feeling of alienation does not necessarily have to be reflected in the political expectations towards China's future role in the region.

7.3.2. Political Expectations

While very little interest in China as a political entity was expressed in the interviews, the glorious past was present with many Egyptian analysts. This however does not refer to the 'Silk Road' frame, which was basically absent from the Egyptian discourse. Instead, the topic of historic solidarity symbolised by the working relationship between Nasser and Mao, was highlighted frequently and this was obviously seen as a time when Egypt played the global role that most Egyptians would think it deserves.⁸⁹¹ Looking at today's world however, most Egyptian analysts, were rather apprehensive about China and its political behaviour. In 2012 there seemed to be only one Egyptian analyst in all of Cairo that had worked on China in any depth, and he framed the relationship in purely economic terms and also saw it as a relationship that was not well understood by Egyptians:

889 Some students also thought about the fact that China proves that over-population must not block a country's development, how to organize, how to keep one's independence and to "see young people as important for society".

890 Interview with ECBC, Cairo, February 2012

891 Abdelrahman (2011)

“Egyptian diplomats are so far not clear on how China could be beneficial to us. When they meet they only publish very vague and general statements. The Chinese always shy away when Egyptians want to talk about real political issues. So far China’s rise is not useful for us because, we can’t rely on China politically. We get the feeling that China only takes and never gives”⁸⁹²

These negative feelings seemed to deepen the more specific the talk about China’s behaviour in the region became.

“China is trading with pariah states and emboldens them. But when it comes to conflict, China leaves! It’s strange for Arabs that the Chinese always say that China only sees itself as a regional power. We would like to see it as a superpower like the Soviet Union. They try not to be dependent on Middle East oil, so we can’t be dependent on them politically! They don’t want to be a political actor in the Middle East, they only became a political actor during the Syria crisis. [...] Israel is one problem and Iran another we have with them. We want China to be more active on these.”⁸⁹³

At the same time, Egyptians are receptive to at least rhetorical support from China. Many Egyptians saw the negative reaction of Western governments to the 2013 military coup as a let-down and the travel warnings given out by many countries for Egypt as politically motivated. Therefore, Egyptian newspapers saw it as a clear sign of support when China lifted the ‘travel ban’ just before the visit of Foreign Minister Fahmy to Beijing in December 2013. They also noted that China went even further when Vice-President Li Yuanchao after meeting the Minister not only called on Chinese tourists to visit Egypt, but also “encouraged Chinese companies to pump more investments into Egypt, especially in an environment of improved political stability and security.”⁸⁹⁴ This was at a time when most Western countries still emphasised the insecure situation in Egypt and condemned the ending of the democratic experiment by the military. That China, opposite to the West, emphasised “stability and security”, the main promise and claim to legitimacy by the post-2013 Egyptian military government, was framed as support for the al-Sisi government, especially after Li Yuanchao expressed China’s “support for the will and choice of the Egyptian people, and the full rejection of his country of any external intervention in the domestic matters of Egypt.”⁸⁹⁵

In this way China is framed as a ‘friend’ of Egypt, with the counter-role clearly assigned to the US and Europe that remained at a distance from the al-Sisi government for a long time. It is

892 Interview with Egyptian Analyst, al-Ahram centre, March 2012

893 Ibid.

894 al-Masry al-Yaum (16 December 2013): China wishes to develop relations, grants EgyptmUS\$24.7 mil, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/chinawishesdeveloprelationsgrantsegyptus247mil>

895 al-Masri al-Yaum (16 December 2013)

noteworthy in this regard that the words of Li Yuanchao reported in the Egyptian press were not actually reported from a live press briefing, but through the mouth of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Badr Abdel Aatty; this was clearly a narrative that the Egyptian government wanted to have reported. China also made a point by supporting the military's narrative of 'restoring order' on other occasions and describing it as implementing the popular will.⁸⁹⁶ Similarly, the Chinese approach of giving face to state visitors, or 'tributary missions' as they are more likely seen in China as discussed in chapter four, was appreciated by Egyptian diplomats on another occasion: "The last time our Foreign Minister was in Beijing, he met with Xi Jinping. The meeting was scheduled for 30 minutes, but Xi Jinping gave him one hour! This was extreme courtesy and shows that China is looking to Egypt as a real friend!"⁸⁹⁷ Again, this enthusiasm might also emphasise the Egyptian elite's wish for a balancing role for the new external player in the region or as the same diplomat put it:

"Egypt sees China as taking a stronger role now in the Middle East. They wanted to tell the US, 'stop here!' over Syria and they did. We want China to play a role in the region as strong as the West. But this is not a shift in Egyptian policy, we always wanted a more balanced system."⁸⁹⁸

In this way it is important to ask if the Egyptians frame this relationship as part of the bigger narrative of 'decline of the West' and 'rise of the rest' or believe in the continuing strength of the little loved old US-hegemon. When the students were asked in the questionnaire, it was telling that nearly everybody believed in American 'decline'. However, most thought that it should be Russia, and only in the second place China, that should be the next superpower.⁸⁹⁹ It was obvious that the 'rise of China' had not overtaken the old-style Cold War bipolarity of roles from Nasser's time. Similarly, when the students were asked about which country they would want Egypt to have closer relations with, nearly two thirds said Russia, and only ten percent China, with the US, EU and India again in the lower single digits.

Two things are important about this last finding. First that about half of the Egyptians asked, did not seem to see the need for any close alliance with other countries, similar to their reluctance to accept foreign role models. But even more important here is the fact that China

896 al-Masri al-Yaum (16 December 2013)

897 Interview with Egyptian Diplomat, Cairo, April 2012

898 Ibid.

899 50 students saw the U.S. decline and other states rising, while 41 agreed on the decline but saw nobody else rising; only 2 students disagreed on the decline. When asked which country should be the next super power, the old ally Russia made the first place with 50 votes, followed by China with 39 votes, India and the EU being in the single digits.

was clearly only Nr. 2 behind Russia as a political player. The dichotomy between the US and China, which dominates the Western discourse was definitely absent in the Arab discourse. Rather, the perceived alternative to the US is still Russia - and this sentiment should be even stronger after the events in Ukraine in 2014.

While China was not perceived as a beacon of hope in Egypt, it was also not uniformly perceived as a threat. Strong divergence emerged when students were asked about political and economic threat perception separately. This is important when we look the hierarchisation of threats in the economic and security fields. For the ECBC, the hierarchy in the relationship had changed over the last years. They complained for example, that the Chinese Minister of Trade had stopped coming to Egypt, and seemingly the country had been downgraded to a point where Beijing would only send a vice minister to meet a Egyptian minister. Leading the ECBC to conclude that “[...] over the last ten years, the relations have gotten worse because China has grown, now they have other chances and we are not in their plan anymore.”⁹⁰⁰

When asked about political threats, the biggest perceived threat by the Egyptian students was the United States. With nearly nobody being afraid of Iran or Qatar, Malaysia and Turkey.⁹⁰¹ Considering that all the last four states had been actively propagating their own sometimes controversial Islamic models in Egypt, the difference to the front runner US was even more telling. China, together with Saudi Arabia and Russia was considered a political ‘threat’ by no one. However, when the students were asked about economic threats, China was the clear number one, followed distantly by the US, Turkey and Japan. This clearly shows that the students separated political and economic threats. It is also telling, though perhaps not surprising, that these economic threats were seen as emanating mostly from “cheap products”, while more expensive producers like the US, Japan or Germany were considered less of a threat.⁹⁰²

900 Interview with ECBC-officer, Cairo, February 2012

901 A clear second with 26 votes came Israel, which was not given as a choice in the questionnaire but has to be named separately, and if it would have been given, would have most likely to be no.1 Only 6 votes went to Iran with 2 going to Qatar, Malaysia and Turkey each.

902 with a proud lead of 39 votes to the No.2 U.S. with 11 votes followed by Turkey with 06 and Japan with 02.

As these findings with the students mirror the comments of analysts and decision makers, they bring up the question, how China can be seen as a prospective ‘balancer’ to the US, and as an ‘economic threat’ at the same time.

7.3.3. Egypt’s Expectation of China as a ‘Balancer’ and the Long Shadow of the Cold War

So while China was not seen as a real political alternative to the US, it was also still seen as important in the balancing role, and the frame for this role attribution was the Cold War as one Cairo University political science professor explained:

“Politically China is important for us because we Egyptians still think like in the Cold War. Where you always had two super powers balancing each other. Today only China and Russia could balance against the US”⁹⁰³

In this, it is important that the frame of China as a ‘rising’ and the US as a ‘declining power’ appears again. So while there might be more trust in the US and the economic role of China is seen as problematic in Egypt, its ‘rise’ still makes China look suitable for the role of ‘balancer’. But another scholar pointed at the problems this role expectation brought with it in Egypt opposite to the Gulf:

“There is a difference between the Gulf and the Mediterranean. They think better of China, because they can sell their oil and they have no problem with unemployment. So for them the economic relationship is enough and the US can protect them against Iran. But for us, we need a political balancer. In North Africa, the political role is more in demand, this is perhaps because the Americans play such a big role here and we therefore want the Chinese to play a bigger role; but they refuse and always tell us that they are only an East Asian regional power”⁹⁰⁴

Still, when one of Egypt’s top diplomats on East Asia was asked, he showed himself strongly convinced of Egypt’s future direction: “I believe moving towards the East is the future for Egypt” and clearly framed the relationship in balancing terms when he argued that “it’s easier for us to build a future together with China than with US-friendly Korea or Japan”⁹⁰⁵.

These scholarly statements about the need of a ‘balancer’ were repeated when students were asked if they wanted China to play a stronger regional role in the future - and why? Nearly two thirds thought China should play a stronger role, and of those, nearly half argued that because China could ‘balance the US’ and nearly another half because it was “big” or “important”, while

903 Interview with Egyptian academic, Cairo University, Cairo, February 2012

904 Interview with Analyst at the al-Ahram Center, Cairo, March 2012

905 Interview with Egyptian Diplomat, Cairo, April 2012

only one out of 110 students thought so because China was a “good” country.⁹⁰⁶ The fact that a bigger role for China seemed purely a function of regional dislike for the US could be seen by the fact that when the same students were asked, if they liked the political system of China, there was a strongly negative tone. Nearly half the respondents said they didn’t like the political system because it was a “dictatorship” or “communist”, “breeds poverty” and creates a country with no “morale”, with one of those saying simply: “I hate it”. With those few that liked the political system, none wanted to give a reason why. Telling about these last four questions was also that most students actually choose not to answer, sometimes saying they didn’t know anything about China or didn’t care, pointing again at the limited Egyptian interest in China.

When asked how this perceived hostility towards China could be combined with public opinion polls where the majority of Egyptians had stated that they would prefer Egypt to be allied with China, than with the US, was explained by one Egyptian analyst with the simple fact that:

“When they have to choose between the US and China, Egyptians always balance against the US, because they dislike the US so much. While we get much aid form the West, and basically nothing from China, the government always claims the successes for itself. So people don’t know about the support from the US, and they simply say ‘China’ because it is not the US. That’s why the elites like the US and the people ‘like’ China. But when you give them other options, they will not like China either.”⁹⁰⁷

Generally, most analyst would argue that the lack of interest or understanding for China was not necessarily an obstacle to China playing the role of a ‘balancer’. It was even seen as a good reason to improve the understanding:

“We should make more effort to understand China. Our people don’t understand China, there is no interest in China in the academia, and students are not encouraged to be interested in China. However, because they are now the only country that can stand against the US, some people get interested, because nobody else can stand against US. If we want to have good relationship with US, we need to balance.”⁹⁰⁸

7.3.4. Egypt’s Perception of China as an ‘Economic Threat’

906 There were much less opponents of a stronger regional role for China with some saying that China was purely an “economic player”, “anti-Arab” and too “alien” or “foreign” to the region. One respondent opted against a bigger role for China because he saw it as too “pro-Israel” and others simply stated that they “don’t like China”.

907 Interview with Analyst at the al-Ahram Center, Cairo, March 2012

908 Interview with ECBC, Cairo, February 2012

The role expectation of being a political ‘balancer’ seems to be rivalled only by the nearly unanimous perception that China is an ‘economic threat’ to Egypt. These two sentiments seem to be the most pervasive among Egyptian scholars, students and the overall public including the business community. Both in the questionnaire for students and in interviews with the business community, China was framed as a ‘threat’ to the Egyptian economy because of its “cheap products that flood the Egyptian market”. Only a handful saw China as no threat as the Egyptian economy is “so good” or even “the best in the world”.

PRODUCT / YEAR	1995	2000	2005	2010	2012
Total all products	440	805	193	604	822
Primary commodities	62	52	81	289	390
All food items	53	43	40	151	238
Manufactured goods	378	752	1827	5750	7832
Chemical products	55	67	213	494	709
Machinery and transport equipment	104	165	619	2226	2374
Electronic excluding parts and components	10	26	84	210	224
Electrical and electronic Parts and components	20	34	120	49021	398
Other manufactured goods	219	520	994	3030	4750
Iron and Steel	13	8	35	219	372
Textile fibres, yarn, fabrics and clothing	54	249	484	1488	2577

Figure 11 China-Egypt trade in Billion USD (source: UNCTAD)

To understand, why China’s economic presence is perceived as such a ‘threat’, one has to look at Egypt’s economic discourse on China. The most prominent frame that is put on the relationship is ‘trade’. Egypt has been one of the main targets of China’s bilateral trade diplomacy over the last years, and trade and investment agreements have been signed including discussions about “the establishment of a joint committee on trade and economic cooperation.”⁹⁰⁹ However, Egypt’s press is full of criticism of the trade structure as when Kotb Mesbah in al-Masry al-Yaum stated that “Egyptian parliamentarians were unhappy with what they described as China's "commercial attack" on Egypt's domestic market.”⁹¹⁰

909 Al-Masah (2010) p.8; There are several institutions dedicated to promote Sino- Egyptian trade. The Egyptian-Chinese Business Council was founded in 2002 during a visit of then President Mubarak to the PRC it was seen as a sign for the increasing trade ties between Egypt and China. It is a cooperation project between the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) and the Federation of Egyptian Chambers of Commerce (FECC). Its membership shows the difference in economic settings of the two countries. The Egyptian side is organized along the exporter clubs of leather, citrus, Food, Marble and Textile & Flax, while most of the Chinese members are from the electronics or construction industries. See <http://www.ecbcouncil.com/aintro.htm>

910 Kotb, Mesbah (27 January 2010): Egypt seeks China investment to offset trade Deficit, in al-Masri al-Yaum <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egyptseekschinainvestmentoffsettradedeficit>

“Our feeling about this cooperation is not good, we know that Egypt cannot export to China except natural gas, and natural products like marble, citrus and linen, etc. So we export a very small amount, but import all those consumer goods. We want to replace that with factories, this is the main purpose of our council. We import school bags from China, why? We do our best to have a good business relationship with China, but they are not interested.”⁹¹¹

Connected to this issue of trade imbalance, the lack of technology transfer was also a major issue between Egypt and China. The ECBC complained, that while the Egyptian authorities were often able to convince Chinese companies to transfer technology as part of business deals, MOFCOM, China’s trade ministry, would intervene and stop the transfer.⁹¹²

China in the role of an investor in the struggling Egyptian economy has been the second dominant frame that is put on China in the Egyptian discourse. This topic had already surfaced in 2010, before the economic slump of the revolution, but at a time when FDI had been hit by the global financial crisis.

“The 1,079 Chinese companies operating in Egypt are believed to have invested approximately USD. 323.9 million in the country. (...) According to the new agreements, China and Egypt will cooperate in tourism, agricultural and power projects. The agreements also include the establishment of manufacturing plants for cars, spare parts, home appliances and electronics in Egypt.”⁹¹³

It is perhaps interesting to note that in the Egyptian perception, investment is normally not framed as something that Egypt should attract by investment-friendly conditions, but something that is demanded from China. Kotb Mesbah for example frames it as China’s morale obligation to invest “to offset the bilateral trade deficit, especially in the field of tourism given that less than 100,000 Chinese tourists visit Egypt every year.”⁹¹⁴ Generally the feeling on the Egyptian side was that there was not enough investment in factories in Egypt: “this is good for Gulf countries, but not for Egypt, we want them to improve our industries”⁹¹⁵

One way to guide Chinese investment into Egypt was the establishment of free trade zones. The Suez Economic and Trading Cooperation Zone in Ain Sukhna, normally referred to by the acronym of the managing company TEDA (Tianjin Economic Development Agency), south of

911 Interview with ECBC-officer, Cairo, February 2012

912 Interview with ECBC-officer, Cairo, February 2012

913 Al-Masah (2010) p.19

914 Kotb (2010)

915 Interview with ECBC-officer, Cairo, February 2012

the Suez Canal, is the show piece of Sino - Egyptian economic exchanges. The ECBC estimated that most of the 350 Million USD investments by China into Egypt in 2011 went into TEDA.⁹¹⁶

Accordingly, TEDA was described as a great success by an Egyptian diplomat who framed it as “a base for China to balance its economy by exports to Africa and Europe.” The main problem for him with the zone was that “the Chinese are so stingy, they always want to renegotiate lower fees.” Similarly, he argued that the high level relationship between Egypt and China was basically problem-free, but that problems existed more on the economic implementation level.⁹¹⁷ For a country that needs to employ an ever increasing workforce, the relocation of Chinese factories to Egypt is obviously an important drawing card that plays prominently in the Egyptian discourse on China. Egypt perceived of itself, and this is partly acknowledged both by Western and Chinese experts, as producing better quality than China and to understand European standards better, besides being closer to the European market, thereby offering incentives for Chinese investors.⁹¹⁸

Still, even if Egyptians are convinced of their comparative advantage as an FDI destination, at a time when Western investment had nearly dried up after the financial crisis and the instability in Egypt, China was often put into the role of ‘saviour’ through its investment. Therefore, it was obvious that the search for Chinese investment was the main topic of the first visit of Egypt’s new president Mohammed Morsi in 2012. The 200 Million USD loan, given to Egypt during Morsi’s visit was framed in the Egyptian media as symbolic as “Sharif Elwi, vice-president of the National Bank, said that the loan marks the beginning of Egyptian cooperation with Asian markets in light of worsening economic conditions in Europe.”⁹¹⁹ Elwi also highlighted that Chinese-Egyptian trade expanded during the revolution, contrary to other countries where trade declined during those years. This had an effect on Egyptian politics:

“Morsi is traveling with an 80 member delegation of businessmen headed by Muslim Brotherhood member and businessman Hassan Malek. Much of the delegation includes businessmen affiliated

916 Interview with ECBC-officer, Cairo, February 2012

917 Interview with Egyptian Diplomat, Cairo, April 2012

918 Interview with Egyptian Economist, Abu Dhabi, December 2011, for a similar reasoning see also: Simpfendorfer, Ben (2010): China isn’t the only game in town - Egypt is catching attention, <http://www.silkroadassoc.com/blog/2010/02/14/china-isnt-the-only-game-in-town-egypt-is-catching-attention/>

919 Hussein, Abdel Rahman (03 September 2012): Multimillion dollar loan from China due to arrive in National Bank, in al-Masri al-Yaum <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/multi-million-dollar-loan-china-due-arrive-national-bank>

with the Mubarak regime and the defunct National Democratic Party because of their pre-existing ties in the area of Chinese trade cooperation.”⁹²⁰

While Ambassadors obviously tend to highlight the positive side of the relationship with the country they are stationed-in, but when President Morsi decided to make China his first visit outside the region, most Egyptian media reported the framing of Morsi’s visit to China as “significant and historic, and will reflect the special relationship between the countries” as Egyptian Ambassador to China Ahmed Rizk called it when he emphasised that the then president “was anxious to put China at the forefront of his foreign tours despite his busy schedule.”⁹²¹ Similarly presidential spokesman Yasser Ali promised this visit to be the start to a new “boom in investment between the two countries, as the current volume of Chinese investments in Egypt does not exceed \$500 million.” In a dire economic situation, as Egypt found itself in after the revolution, it was obvious in the domestic discourse, that the president travelled “to China in order to attract Chinese investment in Egypt.”⁹²²

The third economic framing of China was as a source of tourism. Perhaps even more than for Dubai, tourism is, together with the Suez Canal, the main economic lifeline of the country. Like in Dubai, Chinese tourists are perceived as a guarantee of future, or to paraphrase, ‘security of demand’. The ‘Arab Spring’ wrecked Egypt’s tourism industry, especially after the military took - over in summer 2013 most foreign countries initiated travel warnings. As mentioned before, in Egypt this was often seen as an unfriendly act and the term used by many Egyptian newspapers was not ‘travel warning’ but ‘travel ban’, framing it as an act of foreign governments keeping their citizens from coming, hurting the Egyptian economy. The lifting of the travel warning to Egypt by the Chinese government was therefore noted in the Egyptian press.⁹²³

920 On a side-note, when it comes to business with China, the Egyptian press gloated, there seems to be no difference between pre- and post-revolutionary politics. See: al-Masri al-Yaum (30 August 2012): Morsy’s visit to China reinforces old regime’s economic ties,

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/morsyvisitichinareinforcesoldregimeseconomicities>

921 al-Masri al-Yaum (21 August 2012)

922 al-Masri al-Yaum (29 August 2012): Morsy scores US\$4.9 bn in investments on China Trip,

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/morsyscoresus49bninvestmentschinatrip>

923 al-Masri al-Yaum (13 December 2013): China mitigates warning level against travelling to Egypt,

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/chinamitigateswarninglevelagainsttravellingegypt>

However the Egyptian media also discussed the cliché of the uncivilised Chinese tourist and when asked, tour operators often framed Chinese tourists as “uncivilised”, “chaotic” or even “nearly as bad as the Russians, but without the tips”.⁹²⁴ While these sentiments are obviously highly subjective and their significance should not be overemphasised, there still seemed to be a conviction among many Egyptians that Chinese tourists know and understand less about Egypt’s history and culture than Europeans would, which is probably true due to the shorter exposure. It was also mentioned frequently that the Chinese and the Russian tourists did not stay away as much as the Europeans did after the Arab Spring. While most Egyptians seemed to be quite happy that Chinese tourists were still coming after the revolution, there seemed to be a long-term fear of being overrun by all “those masses” and stereotypes, often bordering on the racist, about Chinese tourists were rather frequent. However, while it was reported widely when a Chinese teenager defaced a pharaonic temple in Luxor in spring 2013, the reporting seemed to be more intense in China than in Egypt, and it was also reported in the Egyptian media that in the end, the perpetrator was hunted down by Chinese online vigilantes.⁹²⁵

Besides this three main roles, a rather new role, that of an ‘international cooperation partner in Africa’, was highlighted by Al-Masry al-Yaum, when it discussed irrigation minister Nasr Allam’s trip to China in 2010 “to discuss bilateral cooperation in irrigation projects in Africa.”⁹²⁶

Overall, while these debates have included both positive and negative assessments, it is perhaps important to look at opinion pieces in the Egyptian newspapers to understand why China is perceived as an ‘economic threat’. That the growing economic interaction and the perceived dependence on China is seen as something threatening, was outlined in an opinion piece called “Never say no to the panda” by media scholar and columnist Adel Iskandar. It deserves closer observation as it seems to encapsulate the differing feeling that many Egyptians gave when asked about China:

“Behind the headlines, however, another superpower has risen to take America’s place as the new global hegemon. Despite its abhorrent human rights record, its notorious inability to communicate

924 Interviews with Egyptian tour operators, Cairo & Luxor, January to March 2012

925 The family of the teenager had to apologise publicly for damaging the „national image” of China. Al-Masri al-Yaum (27 May 2013): China Nile relic vandal hunted down, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/chinanilerelicvandalhunteddownreport>

926 Kotb (2010)

across cultural divides, its bloated bureaucracy, its muted public sphere, its insular propagandizing, its weak “public diplomacy,” and its limited appeal to the world at large, China has gone global. Today, no one in their right mind can ignore China’s competitiveness in every global economic and political sector and their firm grip on international markets.”⁹²⁷

He argues that through its free zone experiments, China now offers an “alternative model for modernization” [...] “to postcolonial nations that are wary of Western style neoliberalism. Instead, the Chinese can utilize another discourse of “socialist anti-imperialist solidarity” with countries in the Middle East, Africa, and South America.” However, he also argues that Chinese exports are as dangerous to local markets as are IMF-style neoliberal reforms, once again citing the aforementioned “Ramadan lanterns” from China, even arguing that China is a major beneficiary of the liberalisation programs forced on third world markets like Egypt by the IMF. “They have essentially beaten America and Western Europe at their own game.” For him China is clever in flying under the radar, because of the bad image of “made in China”. While ‘Chinese-ness’ is seen as either a sign of “shoddily made, short lived, inferior and perhaps even dangerous products” or of “efficient, affordable, and lean products such as the omnipresent Speranza car”, what is more important than this perception is the fact that the economic situation of many Egyptians makes them reliant on affordable Chinese products and he emphasises this metaphor with an Egyptian TV spot:

“A seemingly sarcastic and ironic metaphor of Egypt’s growing dependence on Chinese products, the Egyptian cheese company, Panda, uses China’s iconic endangered mammal to advertise its faux Italian dairies. In a series of commercials that have gone viral on youtube, a serene looking panda stands before all those who refuse to eat his brand of cheese to the soothing background tune of Buddy Holly’s “True Love Ways”. The bear punishes the offenders by erupting in fits of violence where he destroys desk computers, knocks over shopping carts, ruins a cheese less pizza, and even unplugs a sick person’s intravenous drip. After the panda has exacted its revenge on all those who refuse the cheese, the ads close with the blatant warning “Never say no to the Panda.” Whether seen as cute, appealing, and delicious or ominous, creepy, and insidious, Egyptians are well on their way to accepting the Panda’s hegemony.”⁹²⁸

This framing of China as something ‘creeping’ on the Egyptians is also often used when Egyptians debate the growing presence of Chinese workers and traders in Egypt. To be sure, there are far from as many Chinese workers in Egypt as for example in Algeria, due to government restrictions.⁹²⁹ Still their presence is increasingly felt, especially as traders. An

927 Iskandar, Adel (14 October 2010): Never say no to the panda, in: al-Masri al-Yaum <http://www.egyptindependent.com/opinion/neversaynopanda>

928 Adel (14 October 2010), for the panda commercial in question see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_nAAwID3bk

929 Simpfendorfer, Ben (2010): Limiting a flood to a trickle,

Egyptian lawyer who serviced Chinese companies in Egypt since 2003 explained the difficulties arising from the Chinese presence:

“Before, I started working for this company I had no interest in China. However, Business is good now, despite all the economic problems of the revolution. The Chinese are the only ones who are not afraid. The Americans and Europeans often have already left Egypt. So therefore, I like the Chinese. But there are many problems between the Egyptians and the Chinese, so it’s good business for us. We also help Egyptian companies when they have problems with the Chinese embassy. You know the problem is Egyptians and Chinese don’t understand each other, and many Egyptians, and the government, don’t like the Chinese.” [...] “The best would be, if the Chinese would employ more Egyptians. But they don’t trust us. I think, most of the jobs they offer are easy and Egyptians could do them. If they would employ more Egyptians, the Chinese companies would be more welcome because Egypt needs jobs.”⁹³⁰

Ironically, it was exactly the government’s protectionist policy that tried to shield the market from Chinese mobile phone imports, making their sale illegal, which kept Egyptians from taking part in the trade, leaving it to Chinese traders.⁹³¹

“Chinese products have a negative effect on traditional products, in the end, the only thing people care about are cheap Chinese phones and the Chinese immigrants taking away our jobs.”⁹³²

Lastly, and connected to the topic about Chinese workers, is the debate about the quality of products “made in China”. The quality issue remained one of the major issues of contention and often served to frame the Chinese as not being trustworthy. It is important to note that China is not framed as a country that cannot produce high standard quality, but one that can produce all different levels of quality:

„On the trade issue they don’t respect the ethics of trade business. Big companies are no problem, but you know, Chinese people are very special and Egyptian people don’t understand them. Before the revolution we made an agreement with China [’s quality control authority] to produce a certificate, that small companies cannot get, to reduce the bad quality. But still, [small Chinese companies now] use other ways; you know Chinese people can do anything!”⁹³³

Al-Masry al-Yaum reported that a special emphasis was on fake cigarettes smuggled into Egypt with Atef Yacoub, chairman of the Consumer Protection Agency, claiming that “some 18,000

<http://www.silkroadassoc.com/blog/2010/11/24/limiting-a-flood-to-a-trickle/#more-3508>

930 “In 2010 alone my company worked with 100 Chinese companies mostly on visa issues. This is really their biggest issue. The government just does not give them enough visas and they have to bring their people in illegally, I think by now there are around 30000 Chinese illegally in Egypt, but nobody knows. So when the police catches Chinese, we have to help getting them out of the police station.” Interview with Egyptian lawyer, Cairo, January 2012

931 Interview with ECBC, Cairo, February 2012

932 Interview with Egyptian Analyst at al-Ahram Centre, March 2012

933 Interview with ECBC, Cairo, February 2012

Chinese factories import counterfeit cigarettes to Egypt."⁹³⁴ He had therefore asked his counterparts at the Forum on Anti-Commercial Fraud in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, to clamp down on it. Similar Egyptian requests for the Chinese authorities to clamp down on counterfeiting and shoddy products has been a recurring topic in the Egyptian media.⁹³⁵ The question therefore remains, if all this negative reporting still leaves a 'China model' for Egypt as a possible role for China.

7.3.5. A China Model or a Muslim Model?

Unlike in the Emirates, China could be interesting as an economic model to Egypt, as Egypt is an economy, that is based on labour intensive production and therefore the concerns towards economic interaction with China are very different. One frequent theme of the debate about China, is the framing of 'the Chinese' as industrious and adventurous compared to 'the Arabs'. This debate also exists in other Arab countries, like the Gulf countries, but obviously in a labour focussed economy like Egypt it is even more prominent.

The China model, or the chance to learn something from China, was seen rather pessimistically by the ECBC. They were doubtful about Egypt having the resources to really learn from China and argued that China anyway was not willing to give anything to others for free. The Sino-Egyptian interaction was interpreted as a pure power game, where China's growing capabilities had shifted the balance to Egypt disadvantage and it was now too late to change that dynamic. "It's not a chance for other developing countries, it's a one-way benefit, if you give them something, they will take everything."⁹³⁶ For the ECBC the biggest strength of Chinese companies was the strong support from the Chinese government, perhaps betraying a rather statist idea towards development. But it was also acknowledged that the very limited understanding of China by Egypt's government and business elite was a disadvantage for Egypt and that Egyptians would have to make up for this lack of government and societal support with the help of their superior morale: "The main difference is we have virtue (Rahman) and

934 al-Masri al-Yaum (14 March 2013): Egypt asks China to crackdown on counterfeiting, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egyptaskschinacrackdowncounterfeiting>

935 Simpfendorfer, Ben (2010): Vroom, vroom, cough, sputter, <http://www.silkroadassoc.com/blog/2010/09/18/vroom-vroom-cough-sputter/>

936 Interview with ECBC, Cairo, February 2012

the Chinese don't, that's why they only care about money; but Egyptians are more intelligent!"

937

When in spring 2012, students in Cairo University were asked about their perception of China they clearly stated their sympathies for Turkey and Malaysia instead. This might not be surprising, considering the strong model character Turkey has played over the last years for both secular modernisers and Islamists alike. The same can be said about Malaysia, which was the second most popular country with 32 votes, and which had not only played a similar role in combining Islamic politics with economic modernization, but had also been active in promoting itself in other Muslim countries as mentioned before.⁹³⁸ In third place came India and it is telling that the first three places went to three non-Western democracies, even if ones with more or less faults. The conservative champion Saudi Arabia and Russia, traditionally the champion of secularist Egyptians, came fourth and fifth. The first Western country was Germany, which in interviews was mostly given a character, more connected with cars and football than foreign policy, followed by Iran and China. While this clearly shows that China is not among the big favourites and only as popular as the rather controversial Islamic Republic, it was still ahead of France, and had twice as many sympathizers as Britain, the US and Japan. Last came the UAE and Qatar which the Egyptians with their five thousand years of history often consider 'upstarts'. However, when the students were asked which country they would like to work or study in, the politically rather unpopular states of France and the US, were the two favourites, closely followed by Turkey and Germany.⁹³⁹ Political sympathies do not necessarily determine personal career plans, with only Turkey being a desirable place among the regional states. While Russia was still No. 6, popular Malaysia had to share the 7th place with China followed by Japan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE. Nobody wanted to go to India, Iran or South Korea.

While a clear preference for studying in the West was visible, even more telling were the answers when the students were asked directly about a possible role model for their own

937 Ibid.

938 Turkey (65), Malaysia (32), it should also be mentioned that the Malaysian government especially under Prime Minister Mohamed Mahathir had done a lot of overseas propaganda including the financing of the Asian studies centre at the institute for Politics and Economics at Cairo university where the questionnaire was undertaken.

939 France (70) and the U.S. (50), Turkey (46) and Germany (42), Britain (26), Malaysia & China (both 14 votes)

country. Most students seemed to be convinced that Egypt doesn't need a foreign model. Only a quarter of the students considered Turkey to play this role and half this number seemed to take the idea of a China model seriously. Even more telling might be that neither Islamist Malaysia nor Islamist Iran were considered alternatives and the old role models of the US or India came to distant places with France and Britain barely visible. It might be too simple to conclude that the Western model of modernization has been totally eliminated from the minds of Egyptian students, but seemingly Western policies, or the trust in Egyptian ingenuity, gave the students confidence in their country's ability to chart its own way, without the need for foreign models. Most importantly, the 'China model' did not come to mind as an alternative for the majority of students.

In addition, when scholars were asked about their perception, China was not seen as the only Asian country that should be interesting for Egypt, as one academic put it:

"Like everybody I believe this will be the Asian century but it's not only China but also Korea and especially Malaysia and Indonesia. I think for us the last two more important, because they are also Muslim."⁹⁴⁰

He added that the Islamic parties would be more interested in Malaysia as a model, while the secularists are more fascinated with Ataturk, but that nobody really saw China as a model.⁹⁴¹ This alternative Asian model in the form of Asian Muslim states could also explain the limited interest in China and lack of soft power.

The 'China model' debate also takes place in the Egyptian media, especially on the question of efficiency of governance. For example in an opinion piece in Al-Masry al-Yaum by Egypt's former Ambassador to China Mohammed Galaal, he compared China's successful investment zones with Egypt's Suez Economic Zone project and criticised the inability of Egyptian authorities to follow through on agreements. Here, like in the Saudi debate, China again plays the role of a 'counter model' of effective government planning and implementation to criticise Egypt's own government. Galal also suggests that, because of the lack of understanding towards China in the Egyptian business community, Egypt should not only focus on investment

940 Interview with Egyptian academic, Cairo University, Cairo, February 2012 Here it should also be mentioned that the Asia Centre at the Institute of Economic and politics at Cairo University was funded by the Malaysian government.

941 Interview with Egyptian Analyst (al-Ahram centre), March 2012

from China, but even develop an extra office just focussing on it. He highlighted this lack of understanding of China by comparing it with the understanding that exists towards the West and its behaviour.⁹⁴²

In an opinion piece for the daily al-Masry al-Yaum, commentator Soliman Gouda asked why China has been so successful and why this could happen with a one-party system. “The answer lies in the establishment of special industrial zones.” He goes on to juxtapose the zones and the economic success with the political order: “China's industrial zones are able to compete against Singapore itself. In fact, when you visit these zones, you don't feel like you are in a communist country.” For him the zones “are almost disconnected from the rest of the country, in this case, a purely totalitarian one?” His emphasis is to juxtapose China’s investment friendly climate to Egypt’s: “China is aware of the importance of investment, while in Egypt investors are viewed with a suspicious eye.”⁹⁴³

This view of China as a model that Egypt could learn from economically was sometimes also proposed by government officials. During an economic delegation’s visit to China, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Badr Abdel Aatty “added that the delegation will urge Chinese officials and organizations to share their experience of economic renaissance with Egypt and build strategic ties in fields of industry, energy, agriculture, economy and trade exchange.”⁹⁴⁴

7.3.6. The Arab Spring – the Revolution that never took Place

Different to the other two Arab countries that were reviewed, Egypt has gone through the turbulence of the Arab Spring. When the interviews were undertaken in Cairo in the spring of 2012 and the spring of 2013 the enthusiasm for the revolution had not yet totally subsided. When the students were asked which of the states played a negative role during the Arab spring, the roles were clear-cut. Conservative Saudi Arabia with its support for the Salafists and the military were seen as the most negative with Qatar, the main backer of the brotherhood, closely behind. Russia and China, which had been seen as extremely negative in

942 Simpfendorfer, Ben (2009): Ex-Egyptian Ambassador to China offers up a harsh critique of Egypt November 11th, 2009 <http://www.silkroadassoc.com/blog/2009/11/11/ex-egyptian-ambassador-to-china-offers-up-harsh-critique-of-egypt/> I'm indebted to Ben Simpfendorfer for collecting sources on this debate!

943 Gouda, Soliman (26 April 2010): Lesson from China, in al-Masri al-Yaum, <http://www.egyptindependent.com//opinion/lessonchina>

944 al-Masri al-Yaum (16 December 2013)

the wider Arab spring regarding their obstructionism in Libya and especially Syria, came third and fourth. Only 5% considered the US as negative, rather surprising considering the general threat perception, with Iran and everybody else being seen as unimportant.

Like in the Emirates, the feeling that “They don’t understand us”⁹⁴⁵ was typical for the Egyptians that had been dealing with Chinese counterparts during the ‘Arab Spring’. The lack of knowledge and understanding that every Egyptian seemed to sense from the Chinese side was a continuous source of anger. Especially the Chinese attempt to diminish and downgrade the “revolution” to a mere “upheaval” caused consternation among Egyptians. One Egyptian foreign policy expert remembered a meeting with a Chinese delegation in spring 2011, two month after the fall of Mubarak, during which the Chinese were trying to convince the Egyptian participants that in reality no revolution had actually taken place.⁹⁴⁶ The continuing perceived support for Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad was another contentious issue, especially because the Chinese side declared that China did

“[...] not support Assad, but is neutral. But everybody thinks they support everybody who is against democracy. Generally we Arabs accept the concept of non-intervention and sovereignty like they do. But when it comes to democracy, it is different. Supporting freedom is more important than sovereignty that is the same for all humans.”⁹⁴⁷

These disagreements highlighted the feeling of being misunderstood and thereby disappointed the role expectations many Egyptians had had about China. They culminated in the the perception that China was not a supporter of Egypt, a role expectation that had been nourished by China’s rhetoric about third world solidarity and support for the cause of the Palestinians.

“In the last ten years we got three [Chinese] visits, two of them from the CPC. They only focus on official exchange. Our director told the embassy recently that now [during the Arab spring] is the best time to become more active in the region. Our people will remember who supported them and who didn’t. Especially on Syria, but they don’t want to listen. That they do no political actions becomes more of a problem now. They always tell us about strategic partnership, but there is never any follow up.”⁹⁴⁸

China played a perhaps more important role in the Egyptian discourse when it came to refuting Western criticism of the 2013 military coup. In this case, China seemed to be the easier partner

945 Interview with Egyptian analyst at al-Ahram Center, Cairo, March 2012

946 Ibid.

947 Ibid.

948 Ibid.

to talk to and more willing to accept that the event that was criticised so heavily in the West were actually a popular revolution. This was not special to China but had to be seen as a part of a larger series of “foreign tours to explain the “truth” of what happened on 30 June, which was a revolution by people that was supported by the armed forces.”⁹⁴⁹ So finally and despite all the protestations of political and cultural differences with China, it seemed to be perceived as one of those countries easier to deal with for the new Egyptian government after the end of the Arab Spring.

7.4. Conclusion - Regional States’ Role Expectations towards China

The discourses on China vary greatly in the different states and one should be careful to keep these differences in mind. In the Saudi political discourse, ‘oil’ equals ‘security’, as the future survival of the kingdom is perceived to be depending on reinvesting the oil wealth of the country into economic development as a measure for regime stability. Here, energy security does not mean “security of supply”, but “security of demand”. In this way, the strategy of “going east” is a question of survival for the kingdom. Asia and especially the biggest buyer China is seen in the role of a ‘life Insurance’ due to the prediction of strong demand in East Asia, but also due to America’s attempt at reaching energy independence. While otherwise the Saudi role expectation towards China follows the regional model of an external ‘balancer’, the definition of this role is less confrontational than in other Arab countries. It is less understood as balancing against the US, than as balancing against the over-dependence of the kingdom on the US. In the Saudi discourse it is well understood that China can’t supply the external and internal security services to the kingdom that its close alliance with the US provides. The Saudi elites seem to be more convinced than the public about the benefits of the relationship with China, but the knowledge gap about China exists on all levels. In the Saudi media discourse, the Chinese are often ‘othered’ by being portrayed as incomprehensible to Arabs. The reproduced image of China differs from the Saudi image of the West, which, while often portrayed as hostile to Arabs and Muslims, is still seen as familiar. As Saudi Arabia sees itself in the role of a ‘leader’ of the Islamic World, China is often portrayed in the counter-role of an ‘atheist’ or even ‘enemy of Islam’, namely after the riots in Xinjiang in 2009. A similar

949 al-Masry al-Yaum (03 December 2013): Egyptian delegation heads to China to stress 30 June was a popular revolution, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egyptiandelegationheadschinastress30junewaspopularrevolution>

role, perhaps emanating from the Xinjiang frame, is used when depicting its support for the Assad government in Syria, which is seen as attacking Sunni Muslims. On the economic level, and besides the strategic role that China plays in buying oil and supplying a market for Saudi downstream oil investment, China plays a dual role of both 'enabler' and 'constrainer' of Saudi industrialization policy, mostly because of imports of goods 'made in China'. That Chinese companies are perceived as unwilling to invest in Saudi industrial development is heavily criticized by the Saudis.

In the Emirati discourse, China is seen as taking something of a complementary counter-role to the UAE, especially Dubai. The rise of the Gulf emirates is seen as closely connected to the rise of the 'East'. The expectations towards China are mostly economic due to the rise of the smaller Gulf States being reliant of investment and trade. However the importance transcends the purely economic role and becomes important for the future of the state. In strictly foreign policy terms however, there is a wide gap between the heavily securitised expectations of the Emiratis towards the role that foreigners are meant to play in the Gulf and China's actual role enactment. The expectations here are not that China takes over the security provider role of the US. The UAE is benefiting immensely from this role enactment of the US and for soft-balancing the UAE seems to look rather to European countries like France than to the East. However, the UAE expects China to take the role of a 'friend' and to support their interests, be it towards Iran or in Syria.

Egypt's role expectations are much more influenced by Cold War frames than in other regional states, and the conflict with Israel plays a more important role. It therefore expects a much harder version of soft-balancing than the Gulf States would do. The expectations towards China still stem heavily from the experience with the Soviet Union. China's perceived failure to live-up to these role expectations and their demands leads to a continuing Egyptian focus on Russia, and to a lesser degree on France. The role of development model which plays a big role in the Western discourse on China's rise, is accepted by other Muslim states, most importantly by the Islamist governments of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. If any Asian state serves the role of a model it would be Malaysia, due to its moderate Islamist concept. Another reason why China does not serve as a model is that in an economy like Egypt that at its current development stage has to focus on low-tech production, the low-tech imports of China are

seen as a threat. Accordingly China is seen in Egyptian public opinion as an economic threat, but not as a political threat as the US is. The impact of the end of the 'democratic experiment' after the Arab Spring on relations with both the West and China where the first tried to keep a distance from the new military government, while the second seemed to show more understanding for Egyptians longing for political stability, will have to be seen.

Over all it can be said that in all three cases, the personal interest in China was very limited and the 'rise of China' has not really shaken the cultural hegemony of the West. Again, interest towards China seems to be much bigger in the elites, than on the popular level, both for reasons of political balancing against the West and for business interests. But even here the cultural hegemony of the West seems to be unshaken and China's unwillingness or inability to confront the US or take over some parts of its role as a 'security provider' need to be grudgingly accepted. Lastly, cultural differences seem to make the parallel Western and Chinese claims about the success of China as a role model problematic for Middle Eastern states.

8. International Perceptions of China's Role in the Middle East

"They know that they can't divorce us, even if they wished to do so. They are as addicted to our money as we are to their oil. We are locked in a Catholic marriage. But they are Muslims and they don't have to divorce us to take a second wife. Hence their romances with China and India."

Ambassador Chas W. Freeman⁹⁵⁰

As has been mentioned in earlier chapters, the perspective of both Arabs and Chinese on the Middle East and China's role in it, is heavily influenced by Western discourses. It is therefore important to also include the international level, which in our case should be limited to the US and Asian discourses. The Western discourse is obviously dominated by American voices, and Europe seems to generally follow suit. After the Chinese discourse on the Middle East, this one is the richest in volume and perhaps overshadows the Chinese, in terms of diversity. This greater diversity might be explained by the fact that the Western/American discourse on China in the Middle East actually benefits from being more of a side product of other discourses, like the discourse on the US role in the Middle East, and is therefore influenced by many different debates about the region and global politics. Therefore, a strong selection has been undertaken, mostly focussing on the frames of 'power shift', 'energy' and the 'Arab Spring' with the idea of the 'responsible stakeholder' as the overarching frame. Most of this chapter

950 Freeman, Chas (2006): The Arabs Take a Chinese Wife: Sino-Arab Relations in the Decade to Come, Remarks to the World Affairs Council of Northern California Asilomar, California, May 7, 2006, <http://chasfreeman.net/the-arabs-take-a-chinese-wife-sino-arab-relations-in-the-decade-to-come/>

will be dedicated to the Western/American discourse although the international perspective obviously comprises many other perspectives. Western perspective is by far the most dominant, including when it comes to being referenced by the other discourses, but it is also worth examining Indian, Korean and Japanese perspectives briefly at the end of this chapter.

8.1. The Development of the Western Discourse on China in the Middle East

The Cold War and with it the global level perspective overshadowed the early debate on China's role in the region. Accordingly Western academic literature on the topic in the 1970s had a strong focus on China's revolutionary role in the regional system, exemplified by its support for irredentist movements like the Dhofari rebels in Oman.⁹⁵¹ After the pragmatic turn in Chinese foreign policy in the late seventies, the West saw China as taking the global role of 'balancer' between the two superpowers.⁹⁵² The main expression of this was that China became one of the major suppliers of military hardware to all sides in the region.⁹⁵³ Besides the arms trade, China played a role in regional politics in the Western discourse as a permanent member of the UNSC, wielding veto-power over UN decisions in the Middle East, like the authorisation of the US-led coalition's liberation of Kuwait in 1991.⁹⁵⁴

After the end of the Cold War, most Western interest on China in the Middle East focussed on China's challenge, or lack thereof, to the US dominated liberal system, through 'irresponsible behaviour' like selling arms to enemies of the West.⁹⁵⁵ However, as China became a net oil importer in 1993, the economic role and the country's energy needs became a prominent topic in the Western debate.⁹⁵⁶ In the new millennium, new debates about the interconnectedness of China's now sizable economic role and its future political role in the region emerged. These debates were often dominated by functionalist assumptions about the relationship between economic interdependence and security activism. At the same time, the discussion became dominated by the narrative of 'China's rise'. One important aspect of this debate is the

951 See Haliday, Fred (1974): *Arabia without Sultans* Saqi Books, London

952 Yodfat, Aryeh (1977): "The People's republic of China and the Middle East", *Courier de L'Extreme Orient*, Nr. 63, 05.01.1977, Centre d'Etude du Sued-Est Asiatique et de L'Extreme Orient, Bruxelles; Shichor (1979)

953 Shichor, Yizak: *China's Economic Relations with the Middle East: new Dimensions* in: Kumaraswamy, PR (ed.): *China and the Middle East – The Quest for Influence* (1999) ; Blumenthal (2005)

954 Craig-Harris (1993); bin-Huwaidin (2002); Calabrese, John (1991): *China's changing Relations with the Middle East*, Pinter Publishers Ltd., London

955 Blumenthal (2005)

956 Kumaraswamy, PR (ed., 1999): *China and the Middle East – The Quest for Influence*, Sage Publications, London, 1999

juxtaposition with a 'declining West' and the assumed dichotomy of cultural approaches.⁹⁵⁷ One of the shortcomings of the first perspective is that it assumes that behaviour is automatically induced by structure, and that China and the regional states will always behave like 'normal' states, while the second often harbours ideas of culturist determinism.⁹⁵⁸ After 2003, the debates about China framing its own international role with a 'peaceful rise' and the Western role expectation of China as a 'responsible stakeholder' have influenced the discourse on China's role and its responsibilities in the region.

8.2. Western Perspectives of China's Historical Role in the Middle East

The Western discourse seems fascinated with the 'Silk Road' and other historicising frames. Most Western authors spend at least some time on the historical relationship, and on occasions even outdo their Chinese counterparts in this regard. The explanation for this phenomenon could be rather straightforward; Western fascination for a non-Western 'world history'. While the exotification of the 'orient' is obviously nothing new, the idea that those 'other' states have an international history, predating the narrative of Western globalisation seems intriguing to many Western authors and their readers, especially when it can frame the present.⁹⁵⁹ Prime among the examples of this narrative about some pre-western relationship that now re-appears, is the relationship between China and Iran, which combines two countries that are often depicted as mysterious and difficult to comprehend for Western audiences and decision makers:

"The relationship between Iran and China has deep historical roots going back to the ties between the Hans and the Parthians in 139 BCE. [...] In the sixteenth century the Western powers began their encroachment on both the Persian and the Chinese empires, the two countries endured the humiliating experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism. It is against this background of historical ties and common political experiences that Iran–China relations in the modern era unfold."⁹⁶⁰

From this historicised framing, the modern connection and the attributed shared 'non-Westerness' can, or so the authors imply, be understood. The historical frame thereby is a frame that helps the 'West' understand 'the rest'.⁹⁶¹ This dichotomy of 'them' and 'us' is

957 See for example Simpfendorfer (2009)

958 Garver, John W. (2006): *China & Iran: Ancient Partners in a post-imperial World*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2006

959 For the standard depiction of the Silk Road in western literature on the topic see Craig-Harris (1993) p. 3-22

960 Manochehr Dorraj & James English (2013): *The Dragon Nests: China's Energy Engagement of the Middle East*, in: *China Report* 49, 1: 43–67, p.50

961 An analysis through the orientalist/occidentalist framework on this topic is still missing.

important and very visible, but it has to be kept in mind that it can be used in at least two different ways. Either in an alarmist ‘clash of civilisations’ style, where the ‘West’ is faced with an inevitable conflict with the ‘non-West’, or in what one could call an ‘enlightenment’ approach to emphasise the differing perspective of the ‘other’. Obviously both approaches are often intertwined sub-consciously and not easy to tell from each other.

There is so far very little consciousness about the tactical use of these historical narratives in the Western discourse on China and the Middle East. One of the few exceptions is Robert Bianchi, who describes how the relationship is reworked as part of the official Chinese nationalist narrative:

“The trans-continental ambitions of Chinese nationalism are vividly portrayed in the official reworking of history that popularises and romanticises pre-modern imperial connections across the Eastern Hemisphere and throughout the Indian Ocean Basin, including the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the farthest shores of Africa.”⁹⁶²

Prime among those historical figures that serve as a symbol for a global role of China both in the West as in the East is the Muslim-Chinese Admiral Zheng He of the Ming Dynasty, who “has been transformed into a marvellously multivalent icon of peaceful expansion, Sino–Islamic brotherhood and Third World solidarity”.⁹⁶³ For Bianchi, he is even more enlarged, by contrasting him to Christopher Columbus, whose journeys in Chinese depictions are puny expeditions, in a clueless stumble across the ocean to finally exploit the inhabitants of his discoveries.

Another important function of the ‘historical’ perspective in the Western discourse, especially when talking about the period post-1949, is to explain the seemingly unexplainable: China’s inability or unwillingness to play a role in the region so far. Yitzhak Shichor, like other Western authors assumes that China’s ‘failure’ to use the capabilities it is assumed to have in the Middle East has always been out of an explicit unwillingness to play an active role in the region, giving it at the same time the chance to blame the West for the conflicts and benefit from them.⁹⁶⁴

962 Bianchi, Robert (2013): China–Middle East Relations in Light of Obama’s Pivot to the Pacific, in: China Report February 2013 vol. 49 no. 1 (2013) p.107

963 Ibid.

964 Yitzhak Shichor (2013): Fundamentally Unacceptable yet Occasionally Unavoidable: China’s Options on External Interference in the Middle East in: China Report 49, 1 (2013): 25–41 , p.28

Flynt Leveret and Jeffrey Bader even see China's support for Middle Eastern liberation movements as purely rhetorical:

"In the 1960s and through most of the 1970s, Chinese policy did little more than rhetorically align Beijing with radical elements of the Arab world and posture in support of the Palestinian cause, consistent with China's support for 'national liberation movements' worldwide."⁹⁶⁵

The 1980s in contrast, according to Leveret and Bader, with their increased arms exports to the Middle East, are actually a period of increased Chinese political activity in the region, compared to the purely rhetorical support China gave in the decades before.⁹⁶⁶ Shichor interprets the growth in capabilities of China as steady during this period, moving from military to economic influence, giving it the chance to play a bigger regional role:

"At least by the 1980s, the Chinese had become a significant factor in the Middle East military balance [...]. Much more significant in the longer run, Beijing has gradually begun to play a greater and more diversified role in the Middle Eastern economy [...] By the beginning of the 2000s, Beijing had appeared to acquire the potential for assuming a more proactive role in the Middle East (and in other regions) not only in economic terms but also in political and military ones—not unlike the other great powers."⁹⁶⁷

That China and Asia did not build on this and failed to develop a security role in the following decade, is interpreted by Christopher Davidson as a conscious decision by both sides, which does not stand in contrast to the rapid development of their economic engagement.

"In the mid-1980s it appeared that China's role in the region would increase, as Saudi Arabia began to buy Chinese CSS-2 East Wind missiles. However, Saudi Arabia was unwilling to go further and purchase Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles, preferring to keep sourcing its ordinance from the United States. [...] Regardless of the various explanations, the present reality is that the Persian Gulf monarchies and their great Pacific Asia trade and investment partners do not yet have a meaningful security relationship. However, this is in no way jeopardizing their current and future closeness, with both clusters of countries now going to considerable lengths to improve other, non-economic aspects of their interdependency. Indeed, there now appears to be a tacit understanding from both parties that their relationship simply need not contain a military security component, at least for the time being."⁹⁶⁸

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991 served as the first major test of China's new foreign policy in the Middle East. Shichor insists that China's decision for "'intervention' in the first Gulf War should be interpreted not in regional but in international terms."⁹⁶⁹ This trade-off between its

965 Leverett, Flynt & Jeffrey Bader (2005): Managing China-U.S. Energy Competition in the Middle East, in: The Washington Quarterly, Winter 2005-06, 29:1 p. 187–201, p.188

966 Ibid.

967 Shichor (2013) p.28

968 Davidson (2010) p.22

969 Shichor (2013) p.32

non-intervention principle and the chance to regain international legitimacy lost after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre is the usual frame used for Beijing's decision to back the UN force against Iraq. However, Dorraj and English also put a regional perspective on it, using the frame of China always being 'pragmatic' and unwilling to commit to one side, to gain from both:

"By remaining supportive of Kuwait yet refusing to advocate the use of force against Iraq, Beijing solidified its role in the region as a non-aggressor and firm opponent of Western hegemony [...] Always pragmatic, China has demonstrated a willingness to support the international community on issues such as waging war against Iraq and sanctioning Iran, but only for a price, conditioned on China's definition of its principles and national interests."⁹⁷⁰

After 1993, when China became a net oil importer, China was often framed in a similar way of being driven only by its national interests, mostly energy, with little concern for regional policies. This is normally explained as a change of interests following the opening up and reform period and China's rise to be the biggest hydrocarbon consumer over the coming decades dominates Western views on China in the Middle East.

8.3. The Energy - Nexus in the Western Discourse on China's Role in the Middle East

While after 1993 most analysis takes 'energy' as the starting point of any storytelling about China and the Middle East, the major narrative is that of the 'energy' relationship having to lead to political spillovers. This can often be combined, with 'exotic' names like 'the great Dragon' and with the frames of 'Silk Road', 'no-colonial history', 'rising power' and 'U.S. hegemony' to create the narrative of China being a perfect match for Middle Eastern states:

"As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, the great dragon appears to be nesting in the Middle East for the long term, by deeply embedding itself in the economies of the region and by signing long-term energy agreements with the major regional producers. Since becoming a net importer of oil in 1993, China has carefully expanded its diplomatic, economic and cultural ties with the Middle East. [...] China's vast cash reserves, its willingness to pay premium prices and its potential as the major source of future demand for energy, all render it as an alluring partner. With its illustrious precedence of trade with the Middle East via the Silk Road and no history of colonial dominance in the region, China also represents a rising power capable of balancing the hegemonic policies and unipolar presence of the US"⁹⁷¹

In this interest-oriented framing, where foreign policy decisions are first of all undertaken by a rational estimate of national interest, 'energy' is normally seen as a uniting element driving

970 Dorraj & English (2013) p.58

971 Dorraj & English (2013) p.44-45

Chinese and Arabs into ever closer cooperation, not only with each other but even forming a “triangular relationships between China, the Middle East and the United States” that would play the role of a security guarantor in this relationship.⁹⁷² The well-known estimates about China’s astronomical future demand start the story, while the (anti-) climax of the Western narrative is the (non-) transformation of China’s role from an energy focussed one to a political one.⁹⁷³

In this energy driven narrative, China wants to have good relations with the Middle East without rivalling the US. Alterman and Garver see a clear interest on the Chinese side to stay away from obstructing US Middle East policies due to its newfound interest in regional stability. It therefore considers that US actions might serving its own interests, without actually aiding this policy in any way. At the same time China is depicted as using political rhetoric to ingratiate itself with regional states and thereby serving its energy interests.⁹⁷⁴ According to Alterman and Garver, another reason for China’s policy of rhetoric-without-action is that China believes that US policies will serve Chinese energy interests in the short term, but will ultimately fail in the long term to achieve their own goals to the detriment of US interests. Similarly, they accused China, in 2008 and before the “pivot to Asia” by the Obama Administration, of seeing the region as a useful quagmire that the US is stuck in, keeping its attention focused on East Asia.⁹⁷⁵

When analysing the Arab incentives for the relationship with China, the Western framing is normally that of ‘demand security’, as done by Ben Simpfendorfer:

“The Arab oil producers have a single reason why oil prices aren’t likely to return to \$30 a barrel for a long period. It is a goliath that has reshaped the Arab world. China has an unquenchable thirst for oil.”⁹⁷⁶

This frame of an “unquenchable thirst for oil” also loops back to the frame of China being induced to cooperate with the West due to its oil interests emanating from this thirst, giving this behaviour a long time frame.⁹⁷⁷ Furthermore, these frames of energy and economic

972 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.4

973 Leverett & Bader (2005) p.190

974 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.18

975 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.15-17

976 Simpfendorfer (2009) p.23

977 Simpfendorfer (2009) p.49

interdependence also serve to justify Western demands and predictions for a future security role, or more 'responsibility', for China in the Middle East. This progress from an economic to a security role is often depicted as inevitable and the lack of the latter as a deficiency of China's Middle East policy.

While this argument builds on the concept of China behaving like a 'normal state', other frames point to the uniqueness of China and its communist government, as when it comes to describing the role that China's two major policy banks play in its energy acquisition strategy. China Development Bank and China Export-Import Bank, are often framed as part of an all-out state-capitalist driven approach "for energy investment abroad, financing the development of infrastructure to deliver oil and gas to China, and providing credit to foreign energy companies in return for long-term energy contracts." Beyond this coordinated approach to energy acquisitions, the assumed close connection between capital and foreign policy in China is also framed as exploiting anti-US sentiment in the region for its oil policies:

"On numerous occasions, Beijing has skilfully exploited tensions between the US and key energy producers of the Middle East by presenting itself as the reasonable alternative to the US for the sake of expanding its own energy relations with those producers"⁹⁷⁸

These statements generally omit the support Western governments give to their National Oil Companies, implying thereby that China's behaviour is different and thereby somehow unfair to West competitors.⁹⁷⁹ This Idea can also be used in the frame of Chinese traders being supported by their state as Simpfendorfer does.⁹⁸⁰ The question remaining however is, if this economic cooperation will lead to political detriments for the West. "For one, Sino-Saudi financial coordination could have ramifications on the dollar's international standing over time."⁹⁸¹ In this way, the debate about 'energy' and 'trade' becomes part of the overall debate about China's 'rise' and the 'decline' of the West.

978 Dorraj & English (2013) p.48

979 Leverett & Bader (2005) p.193

980 Simpfendorfer (2009) p.49

981 Leverett & Bader (2005) p.196

8.4. The 'New Silk Road' and the 'Decline of the West'

Connected to this dichotomy of 'rise' and 'decline' narratives is the 'New Silk Road' frame. "As wealth and power shift to the east, China's influence is spreading rapidly to the West."⁹⁸² Ben Simpfendorfer starts the story of Arab-Chinese trade in the new Millennium by framing it in the historical narrative of the 'Silk Road'. It takes the author less than a paragraph to get from the ancient Arab traders in the Abbasid/Tang period to the post-modern skyline of Dubai in his book on "The New Silk Road".⁹⁸³ Robert Bianchi uses the 'Silk Road' frame similarly to describe the 21st century relationship, and he combines this with a strong post-colonial twist:

"This means not merely a revival of the continental and maritime Silk Roads, but an assertive post-colonial vision of 'Eurasia for the Eurasians' where non-Western civilisations regain equal respect and influence and where 'New World' guests are welcome as partners but not as masters."⁹⁸⁴

Simpfendorfer narrates this story as a simultaneous rise of the Arabs and China and points out that these simultaneous events are no coincidence. For this, he uses two interconnected frames to tell the story: the first being that China's economic development has spurred the oil price, which again has caused the "rise of the Arabs", and the second event being 11 September, which has led to an estrangement of Arabs and the West. He considers it a Western misunderstanding that "the rise of the Arab world is treated as a different story to the rise of China" and states that he has written his "book to join the dots."⁹⁸⁵

One of the most often cited witnesses of this specific form of globalisation is the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, who focussed both on Middle Eastern politics and the effects on globalisation. He is often referenced with his anecdote about Egyptian Ramadan lanterns in Cairo, now all being produced in China.⁹⁸⁶ Another widespread frame in Western analysis about the rise of China, is that China receives more and more international students, and that these students will then be more prone to favour China or be influenced by it culturally. Very often analysis of this factor is done by simply counting the students that went to China, and using the increasing number as a proof of growing Chinese soft power. A similar

982 Bianchi (2013) p.103

983 Simpfendorfer (2009) p.1

984 Bianchi (2013) 103

985 Simpfendorfer (2009) p.2

986 See for example Simpfendorfer (2009) p.5-10

approach is normally used when discussing the increasing number of Arab students who go to China to study.⁹⁸⁷

Ben Simpfendorfer, however, also brings in a new and innovative twist into this narrative, by focussing not only on trade numbers and other purely economic or 'power shift' variables to depict his frame of globalisation as the "New Silk Road", but also describing traders, both Chinese and Arab, to enliven and substantiate the relationship.⁹⁸⁸ An important part of this frame is Simpfendorfer's depiction of the Zhejiang City of Yiwu as a success story of rerouting the trade and migration patterns of Arab and Chinese traders. It is clearly depicted as a product of the US reaction to 11 September, when the US government made it more difficult for Arabs to receive US visas.⁹⁸⁹ Arab traders then opted for traveling eastwards instead, laying the foundation for Simpfendorfer's narrative of the "New Silk Road". A potent example for the frame of a xenophobic West and an opening-up China, an exciting paradox for Western readers used to the Western narrative of itself as a liberal and open society, is the new and bigger Yiwu Mosque, build by the city for its new Muslim customers. This is juxtaposed with the rising islamophobia in the West after 11 September: "The mosque is a reflection of how China and the West have diverged since 2001."⁹⁹⁰

Christopher Davidson argues that this trading relationship complements the energy relationship:

"Importantly, there is no longer a complete imbalance of non-hydrocarbon trade between the two regions, as some of the export-oriented industries that have been established in the Persian Gulf – mostly in an attempt to diversify oil-dependent economies – are now among the world's leading producers of metals and plastics. Their export capacity continues to increase, with most of their future surpluses being earmarked for their Pacific Asia customers."⁹⁹¹ [...] "Most of this growth is expected to be as a result of Dubai's strengthening relationship with China, Dubai Ports World stating in 2008 that China was already Dubai's second-largest trade partner, after Iran [...]."⁹⁹²

The same frame is also put on the changing investment patterns due to perceived Western hostility towards Arab investment. The rising capital possession of Arab sovereign wealth funds due to the high oil prices, connected with Western abhorrence of Muslim and Chinese investors is according to Simpfendorfer leading to the emergence of an "Islamic Corridor" of

987 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.82

988 Simpfendorfer (2009)

989 Simpfendorfer (2009) p.10

990 Simpfendorfer (2009) p.15

991 Davidson (2010) p.11

992 Davidson (2010) p.13

investment.⁹⁹³ The Sovereign Wealth funds turn the US, China and the Middle East into “the financial world’s holy trinity”.⁹⁹⁴ Davidson notes that:

“In the short term these opportunities are providing the Persian Gulf monarchies with a realistic alternative to the mature Western economies for their overseas investments. Such an alternative was viewed as being particularly necessary following the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York’s World Trade Center, after which many Western governments and companies did little to disguise their distrust of Gulf sovereign wealth funds, many arguing that the funds were not merely commercial and that power politics could be involved.”⁹⁹⁵

For the Western discourse this dichotomy between China and the West, or the role of China as an alternative to the West, is perhaps the most dominating frame and deserves special attention.

8.5. Arab Role Expectations in the Western Perspective - China as a Counter-Role to the West

This frame of the relationship as a result of Western mistakes is often also used in describing the political relationship. In this, the role of the Chinese is generally defined as the counter-role to the West. One frame that is often used is the comparison between the Arab-US honeymoon in the forties and early fifties with the new relationship between the Arabs and the Chinese. China takes the roles of ‘friend’, ‘supporter’ and ‘role model’ that American authors believe their own country held in the early days of their relationship with the Arab world. Again, this comparison normally serves to point out the faults of current US Middle East policy.⁹⁹⁶ Former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chad Freeman for example, in a 2006 speech to the World Affairs Council of Northern California, framed perceived Arab interest in China as a reaction to disappointment with the West:

“The Arabs see a partner who will buy their oil without demanding that they accept a foreign ideology, abandon their way of life, or make other choices they’d rather avoid. They see a country that is far away and has no imperial agenda in their region but which is internationally influential and likely in time to be militarily powerful.⁹⁹⁷ They see a country that unreservedly welcomes their investments and is grateful for the jobs these create. They see a major civilization that seems determined to build a partnership with them, does not insult their religion or their way of life, values its reputation as a reliable supplier too much to engage in the promiscuous application of sanctions or other coercive measures, and has no habit of bombing or invading other countries to whose

993 Simpfendorfer (2009) p.66

994 Simpfendorfer (2009) p.53

995 Davidson (2010) p.15

996 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.54-57

997 Freeman (2006)

policies it objects. In short, the Arabs see the Chinese as pretty much like Americans — that is, Americans as we used to be before we decided to experiment with diplomacy-free foreign policy, [...]”⁹⁹⁸

As Zambelis and Gentry mentioned earlier, the negative view of American hegemony in the region, especially since the Bush administration’s Iraq policy, alienated many regional allies.⁹⁹⁹ The traditional Arab role expectation of ‘balancer’, structured by memories of the Soviet regional role, is recognised in the Western discourse. Alterman and Garver acknowledge that many Middle Eastern states “would welcome China playing a more Soviet Union-like role in countering US moves in the region, and playing to these sentiments would certainly give China a higher profile role in the world.”¹⁰⁰⁰

Generally, in this narrative, Arabs are expecting China to take on a more active role in the Middle East peace process, the Iranian nuclear issue and shielding them against American ‘regime-change’ policies, as opinion polls often substantiate.¹⁰⁰¹ However, in the Western discourse, the narrative also assumes that Arab role expectations are not only focused on balancing, but actually go much deeper. Geoffrey Kemp juxtaposes American ‘hard power’ and China’s ‘soft power’, claiming that China’s soft power possesses automatic attractiveness to Arab countries; even though he doubts China’s ability to stay out of the hard choices of regional politics for long.¹⁰⁰² Behind this debate is also the Western worry, or hope, often expressed as a conviction, that China is offering the world a different development model from the one propagated by the West over the last 200 years.

8.6. The China Model in the Western Discourse on the Middle East

In this narrative, Arabs are looking to China as a country that has finally found its own path and has shown that development can be done in a different political and economic model than the one offered by the West. Regional leaders and intellectuals are also seen as pointing to China’s conservative approach of political and economic development and modernization as a model worth adopting and a viable alternative to US- and European-inspired reform models,

998 Ibid.

999 Zambelis & Gentry (2008) p.64-5

1000 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.10

1001 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.78

1002 Kemp, Geoffrey (2010): *The East Moves West India, China, and Asia’s Growing Presence in the Middle East*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., p.66

which Western authors believe are often perceived as instruments of Western imperial control and exploitation in the region. They assume that many Arabs see China as a developing country that is succeeding while building its own independent path, not one dictated by Washington or by US-backed international institutions:

“This perception is attractive to societies where the legacy of harsh colonial governance and foreign interference in local and regional affairs by the West continues to shape recent memory and influence perceptions. Consequently, the Chinese system of state-led economic development provides an alternative to the US system, with its emphasis on the principles outlined by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (also known as the “Washington Consensus”) and its insistence on implementing strict neo-liberal free market formulas and related policy prescriptions.

“¹⁰⁰³

For Zambelis and Gentry this perception builds mostly on the assumption in political economy research that regional regimes see that their power base as state driven development models, in which all major industries are state owned. This model now seems threatened by Western demands for neoliberal reform. At the same time this narrative of China in the role of a model for regional states builds on the assumption of a certain popularity of China in the region. This popularity is not supposed to come from China’s actions in the region but from its political and economic order that makes it attractive for regional regimes.

8.7. China’s Interests and Role Conceptions: The Vital Triangle and the Responsible Stakeholder

Before the Arab Spring, China’s behaviour in the Middle East was mostly seen as successful and adapted or as Altermann and Leveret described it with a reference to the Soviet Union:

“China is playing the game well. Unlike the Soviet Union, whose heavy handed reach in the Middle East prompted most countries to flee for the US security umbrella, Middle Eastern states of all stripes welcome China.”¹⁰⁰⁴

While this frequently leads Western observers to lament China’s unwillingness to play a role for example in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, it paradoxically more often leads to the opposite sentiment, the question, in as far China’s presence can pose a dangerous

1003 Zambelis & Gentry (2008) p.63

1004 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.57

competition to Western influence and interests.¹⁰⁰⁵ It therefore has always been one of the major attempts in the Western discourse to ‘uncover’ Chinese interests in the Middle East.

This Western discourse on China’s interests in the Middle East has always been heavily influenced by the international level, meaning that China has been assigned interests that do not emanate from the Middle East but from global geopolitics, East Asian regional politics and most importantly from its relationship with the US. The “Taiwan factor” especially, is often seen as important in determining China’s regional policies. Mostly because China expects the countries it has diplomatic relations with, to accept the sole representation of the Chinese nation, which in Beijing’s eyes includes Taiwan, by the government in Beijing. This is added to by the fact that in the event of a conflict over Taiwan between the US and China, its energy dependence on the Middle East means that China’s oil supplies could be blocked easily by the US Navy.¹⁰⁰⁶ In this frame, Chinese leaders are often seen as not being overly interested in the Middle East itself, but to view it “in the larger context of global strategies that can advance national wealth and power.”¹⁰⁰⁷ These would also include the considerations about Central Asia and the protection of China’s sea-lanes; for China then the Middle East is simply a gateway to the West.

How harmful to Western interests China’s role has been seen, depends on the specific regional topic and country one looks at. It therefore makes sense to go through the different representations of China in the Western discourses one by one, to see how China has been framed as a ‘threat’ to Western interests or not. The best examples for this debate are China’s relationship with Saudi Arabia, expectations about its possible role in the Middle East Peace process, its role in the 2003 Iraq war and most importantly its relationship with Iran. These examples often fuel the debate about how to manage China in the Middle East.

8.7.1. Oil or Security? - The Western View on China-Saudi Relations

Among those topics in the Western discourse, the relationship between China and Saudi Arabia gets among the most attention. This might be both because of the dynamic of the

1005 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.131

1006 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.48; see also Leverett & Bader (2005) p.193

1007 Bianchi (2013) p.103

relationship and the pivotal importance the kingdom has in US Middle East policy. Alterman and Garver note the high-level visits, and the partnership rhetoric exchanged during these visits, as a sign that both sides are interested in substantiating the relationship. At the same time, they argue that Beijing has always been aware of the high exposure these visits would get in the US and that China has been careful to choose rhetoric that would not antagonise Washington.¹⁰⁰⁸

The Western focus on the relationship started with the 1999 Sino-Saudi declaration of a “Strategic energy partnership” which opened the Saudi upstream market to China and the Chinese downstream market to the Saudis, and therefore this partnership until today is framed as the foundation of the relationship. This has also been the foundation of the Western framing of these deals as ‘strategic’ and ‘political’, instead of ‘economic’ or ‘energy’ oriented. For example when Sinopec in 2004 signed a non-associated gas deal with Riyadh, it was framed as a purely “political deal” and economically senseless.¹⁰⁰⁹ This framing of the relationship as having a different agenda beyond pure energy interests has always been accompanied with similar suspicions about the relationship being aimed against US-interests. One of the most important ‘threat’ frames has been the accusation of Saudi Arabia undermining the US arms embargo against China. Leverett and Bader for example repeat the allegations of dual use exports to China by Saudi Aramco, thereby implying that the connection between China and Saudi Arabia is contrary to US interests.¹⁰¹⁰

The aforementioned framing of China playing the counter-role to the US is also prominent in discussions about the Sino-Saudi relationship. The anti-Saudi backlash after 11 September was pervasive in all sectors of the economy and is seen by many western analysts as being the starting point for the kingdom's orientation towards the East.¹⁰¹¹ However, as mentioned before, the relationship is not purely framed as a result of Saudi displeasure with its US ally, but is normally framed as emanating from solid economic interests on both sides. In most Western literature, the Sino-Saudi relationship is depicted as a perfect match, even as

1008 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.35

1009 Leverett & Bader (2005) p.192

1010 Ibid.

1011 Leverett & Bader (2005) p.195

symbiotic for both sides: Saudi Arabia is the only country that can quench China's 'thirst for oil' and at the same time China is the only country that can give the Kingdom and the wider region security of 'regime survival' as a rentier state by giving it 'security of demand'. That in 2009 Saudi Arabia abolished the 'Asian premium', a pricing system which sold to American refineries for one dollar per barrel less than to Asian refineries, was interpreted by Western observers to "demonstrate that there is indeed a dramatic shift in the geopolitics of oil globally, in which China plays a very significant role."¹⁰¹²

Another major economic driver for the Saudi 'look East' policy is perceived to have been, and to still continue to be, the opening, or sometimes the promise of the opening, of the Chinese downstream-market to Saudi companies as this offers the Saudis huge incentives in orienting themselves towards the East.

"Innovatively, since 2001 some 30,000 of the imported Saudi barrels have been in part exchange for Aramco being allowed to operate 600 petrol stations in China's Fujian province. This could represent as much as 70 per cent of China's total oil imports "¹⁰¹³

However, the main framing of the relationship in US analysis is still through the lens of the US-China relationship, though not always does it have to be in form of a 'threat' to American interests:

"Chinese officials also appear to believe that, by cultivating closer ties to Saudi Arabia, a long-standing US ally, they may compel the United States to take China more seriously as a global player."¹⁰¹⁴

It is important to notice that this global level framing that Leveret and Bader are assigning to China is also prevalent when Western analysts talk about the impact of the region on the global economic order. Especially regarding the debate about the internationalisation of the RMB and the role that the use of RMB in the oil trade could have on that.

"As the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council become increasingly critical of America's positions towards Palestine and Iran, they are more receptive to China's attack on the dollar [...]. Washington is on notice—it can adjust its Middle Eastern policies or jeopardise its financial integrity in the region and around the world."¹⁰¹⁵

1012 Dorraj & English (2013) p.50

1013 Davidson (2010) p.10

1014 Leveret & Bader (2005) p.192

1015 Bianchi (2013) p.110

For Bianchi this is less a question of economic or financial decision making, not even of a sovereign Chinese decision, but mostly a reflection of the failure of US policy in the region. Overall, no Western analyst seems to expect China to one day play the pivotal security role the US plays today. One indication for this might also be that China's arms sales to the region are still very low compared to its competitors, something that is often attributed to the still relatively low quality of the Chinese weapons.¹⁰¹⁶ Similarly, Alterman and Garver note that Saudi Arabia has made a point by pushing up the number of Saudi students in the US, letting those on a Saudi scholarship reach 10000 in 2006, compared to only 400 in China. So far Western analysts seem to agree with their Saudi counterparts about the "vital role that the United States plays in security in Saudi Arabia from without and within. China cannot begin to play a similar role."¹⁰¹⁷

8.7.2. China, Israel and the Middle East Peace Process

While the West is less dependent on Israel than it is on Saudi Arabian energy, its political relationship with Israel is perhaps even more important. Therefore, the China - Israel relationship has been another focus in the Western discourse due to the pivotal role that Israel plays in Western thinking about the Middle East. Different from the China-Iran relationship discussed below, Western writers are concerned not about China getting to close to a foe, but to a friend. This is due to the important role that military cooperation plays in the relationship - and the role that US technology plays in the Israeli defence industry:

"By the late 1970s, China was in need of much of what Israel had to offer [...] It had the capacity, willingness and a price acceptable to China. The absence of recognition worked in China's favour as Israel was not in a position to demand any political concession in return for its military help. [...] Before the end of the Cold War, this was of no concern to the US as "The Soviet Union was the prime American pre-occupation and Sino-Israeli military ties became a second line of American defence. The end of the Cold War also ended this paradigm, as there was no Soviet Union to contain."¹⁰¹⁸

Therefore ironically the normalisation of the diplomatic relationship between Israel and China after the end of the Cold War, made the arms trade actually more difficult because of greater

1016 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.66

1017 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.64

1018 Kumaraswamy ,P. R. (2013): China, Israel and the U.S. - The Problematic Triangle, in: China Report 49, 1 (2013): 143–159, p.147&p.152

oversight by the US and its concern about Israel handing over sensitive technology to its new rival China.¹⁰¹⁹

At the same time, the Western discourse has always been most welcoming towards greater Chinese involvement in the Middle East peace process in the role of a ‘mediator’, at least since the Oslo peace process practically ended after 2000. It could be argued that the West was very keen to unload some of the burden of the stalled peace-process on China. The frame that was used in the Western discourse, was that China would be seen as more neutral and would be accepted as a mediator both by the Palestinians and the Israelis due to its lack of colonial heritage in the region. However, because of the limited effort of China, especially the role that its special envoys played in the region, being “limited to the collection of information and holding discussions with local leaders”,¹⁰²⁰ most Western observers now assume that China will be unwilling to play a bigger role in the Middle East peace process and will limit its policy to purely symbolic gestures:

“The US has filled some version of this role, but its actions have often generated criticism as well [...] As a possible future mediator, the main question being whether China is likely to play a more active role and whether that role is likely to lead to more clashes with the US. [...] Beijing hopes that the US will manage the peace process and China is willing to cooperate with Washington in that regard to the extent that China’s limited capabilities allow. However, if Washington’s efforts to manage the Arab-Israeli conflict fail, Beijing will not step in.”¹⁰²¹

8.7.3. The Western Perspective on China’s behaviour towards Iraq

Another relationship that has been debated very intensely in the Western discourse has been that with Iraq both before and after 2003. This relationship is often framed as a symbol for China’s future constructive role in the region. It is widely acknowledged that Beijing, while critical of the pre-2003 sanctions and trying to circumnavigate them, had still shied away from confrontation with the West over Iraq after 1991 and in 2003 China was much less vocal in its criticism of the US invasion of Iraq than countries like France or Russia. It even prevented its citizens from staging anti-US rallies and is seen as having been helpful in legitimising the US occupation of Iraq at the United Nations.¹⁰²²

1019 Kumaraswamy (2013) p.152

1020 Shichor (2013) p.33

1021 Chaziza, Mordechai (2013): China’s Policy on the Middle East Peace Process after the Cold War, in: China Report February 2013 49: 161-175, p.168, 171-172

1022 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.24

“China deliberately excluded itself from the ‘anti-war axis’, perhaps on the basis of earlier understandings with Washington. Beijing’s tacit agreement—contrary to its principles—to US military intervention in Iraq may have reflected a pragmatic analysis that in this way the crisis would be brief and least disruptive. Eager that regional and international stability be sustained for the sake of its economic growth, and now substantially dependent on Persian Gulf oil, the Chinese could afford neither the time nor the patience for a protracted struggle. (...) On the other hand, Beijing may have realised that rather than a swift victory, the US was facing a protracted and bleeding struggle—which is, perhaps, what Beijing really wanted. (...) Further, too much and too rigid an emphasis on the peaceful settlement of conflicts could have undermined Beijing’s consistent refusal to rule out the use of force to resolve the Taiwan problem (even though it was claimed to be an internal issue).”¹⁰²³

As one of the results of the 2003 Iraq War and the toppling of the regime of Saddam Hussein was the lifting of the sanctions on oil exports the activities of Chinese energy companies in the newly opened and promising Iraqi oil market became a prime concern in the Western discourse:

“China’s stand in the UN against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 further enhanced Beijing’s political capital in Baghdad. Thus, despite a massive expenditure of US blood and treasure in Iraq, Chinese energy companies appear better positioned to sign energy contracts with the new Iraqi government.”¹⁰²⁴

The Western discourse is mostly led along the line of China cleverly playing both sides, and the US wasting resources in a misguided idealistic policy. While the frame of a somehow ‘immoral’ Chinese foreign policy, that it is egoistically and narrowly oriented at fulfilling its energy needs at the costs of well-intended US policy frequently resurfaces in this discourse, the recurrent undertone in this debate often seems to be criticism of US policy itself.

8.7.4. The Debate about a Sino–Iranian Anti-Hegemonial Alliance

China’s relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran dominates the Western discourse about China in the Middle East, again demonstrating the hierarchisation process through ‘threat’ framing. While the culturalist framing as the ‘other’ to the West is often used for this relationship, its main prominence stems from the regional and global security debate, both because of worries about Chinese-Iranian military cooperation, but also because in the then stalemate in negotiations about Iran’s nuclear program, it was seen as the one Middle Eastern relationship where Beijing had leverage and the West had very little. Accordingly, expectations

1023 Shichor (2013) p.37

1024 Ibid.

towards China's role both positively about being a mediator, but also negatively, as supporting the Iranian 'rogue state' were high.

Because of both expectations, the relationship is often framed as a balancing act, especially by those analysts who expect China's global role to be that of a 'responsible stakeholder'. The Western discourse frames China as interested in Iranian Oil and as a balancer to American regional hegemony, but also as unwilling to take a collision course with the West, Israel and the Arab Gulf States. "Beijing must continually balance maintenance of positive relations with Washington, against expanded cooperation with the IRI."¹⁰²⁵ Most Western analysts clearly frame it as a difficult relationship where China does not want to alienate partners in the region and the US, and at the same time keep the relationship with the Islamic republic.¹⁰²⁶ Because of the Western perception of security threats from Iran, the focus is normally less on Chinese and more on Iranian gains:

"Over time, China's engagement in the region could, at least theoretically, provide Iran strategic backing for a foreign policy posture that would eschew engagement with the West and challenge Western interests more assertively."¹⁰²⁷

Reasons for this Chinese attachment are normally given as both the bond between ancient civilisations and the lucrative energy markets, but also the chance to limit US hegemony in the Middle East. John Garver, the main academic voice in the Western discourse on Sino-Iranian relations, also frames China's relationship as a continuous balancing between these diverging interests. He acknowledges however, that from Beijing's perspective the US is to blame for the conflictual relationship between Teheran and Washington and that Beijing would prefer not to play a role in this conflict. Beyond this interest driven frame, however, Garver also highlights the ideational and strategic side of China's perspective of the relationship:

"Chinese analysts writing in authoritative, elite journals see Iran as a proud, ambitious and capable country locked in conflict with the US over the relative roles of both in the Persian Gulf. The international imbroglio over Iran's nuclear programmes that escalated since 2003 is typically seen by Chinese analysts as, in essence, a conflict between Iran and the US over pre-eminence in the Gulf.¹⁰²⁸"[...] More pointedly, greater US control over Gulf oil would strengthen Washington's ability to cut off China's oil imports in the event of a Sino-American confrontation. [...] China's global position is also served by having the US chronically confronted by a strong and assertive Iran. Such

1025 Garver (2013) p.69

1026 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.36

1027 Leverett & Bader (2005) p.196

1028 Garver (2013) p.71

a situation diverts US strength and attention away from regions closer to China and its own vital interests.”¹⁰²⁹

In the debate about China and the Iranian nuclear program, China is seen as not too concerned with possible Iranian nuclear armament itself, even if Beijing officially says otherwise. If at all, it sees the Iranian nuclear program as a bargaining chip with the US:

“Beijing cooperated with the US in challenging Iran’s nuclear programmes not because Beijing believed Iranian nuclear weapons would injure China’s own interests, but because such cooperation helped keep Washington happy and stabilised the overall US–PRC relationship. [...] The common view of these Chinese analysts is that Iran if it is actually developing weapons, it is doing so in response to US sanctions, threats, multiple wars against Iran’s neighbours, efforts to overthrow the IRI regime and threats of attack on Iran [...]”¹⁰³⁰

This relationship is often described as the one field where China could easily play a clear-cut role if it would cooperate more actively with the US in either convincing or forcing Iran into a nuclear agreement with the West. Robert Zoelick’s remark about China having to be a “responsible stakeholder” was among other things aimed at China’s position on Iran.¹⁰³¹ The mainstream opinion here was that Beijing was actually trying to fulfil these expectations from the West as much as its interests allowed, and was continuously urging Teheran to be more cooperative. “While China’s methods differed from those of the United States, its ultimate objective was the same.”¹⁰³² The explanation for this willingness is not only Beijing’s perceived desire to be accepted as a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the West, but also that it is not interested in Iran possessing nuclear weapons, simply because it would devalue its status as a nuclear power.¹⁰³³ The Western demand towards China in this regard was normally not that it would have to totally change course on Iran, but that it should play its ‘responsible’ role, as it is perceived by the West, more actively.

China’s leverage in Western eyes is often founded in the assumption that, as Iran was suffering under Western sanctions and had nowhere else to go, giving China an enormously important role in convincing it to abandon its military nuclear ambitions. At the same time of course there was no doubt in the West that Beijing, through its semi-monopoly on the Iranian market the

1029 Garver (2013) p.73

1030 Garver (2013) p.74

1031 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.40

1032 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.44

1033 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.45

main benefactor of the sanctions, also disliked the instrument of sanctions on principle.¹⁰³⁴ That China agreed in 2010 to cut back its oil imports from Iran in response to Western pressure, was therefore seen as not only one of the few ways left to pressure Iran through the tightening of the economic noose, but also as a success in urging China to play a more 'responsible' role.

8.7.5. The Western Debate about managing China in the Middle East

Two powerful and partly conflicting perspectives permeate the Western discourse about China's role in the Middle East: The first is of China as a 'rival' and the second of China as a 'partner' of the West and a part of a 'vital triangle', which needs to take more responsibility and behave as a 'responsible stakeholder'.

Alterman and Garver, count together the different aspects of which the US is afraid of in China's role in the Middle East. The first perceived threat is the 'energy-competition'-threat-frame where China's energy hunger will lock in most of the regions oil reserves and make it more difficult for the West to access affordable energy. Another major threat for the US is that the PLA could, or does, engage in "supporting US enemies" in the region by supplying them with weapons and shielding them from UN sanctions. Lastly, and somehow conversely, the US is afraid that China might start "attracting US allies", especially countries like Israel or Saudi Arabia which form the pillars of US Middle East strategy.¹⁰³⁵ In both these last two threat-frames, the western discourse is quite aware of the balancing tendency of regional states, or more plainly, the notion that regional countries play China and the US off against each other for their own benefit.¹⁰³⁶

When it comes to China's relations with regional states like Iran, the accusations of clearly hostile actions by China are very rare since the millennium and China's role in advising the regional states against confrontation with the United States is recognised in the Western discourse. The frequent demand here, as mentioned before in the case of Iran, is not that China should fundamentally change course, but for example, that China should be incentivised

1034 Dorraj & English (2013) p.54

1035 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.95-99

1036 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.132

to play a bigger role on Iran in exchange for more leeway on its relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iraq. However, this assigning of a role to China in exchange for benefits might be more indicative about the role, and powerful position, that Western analysts see the US in. After all, it could be doubted how much influence the US still has on big parts of China's Middle East relationships.¹⁰³⁷

There seems to be a general agreement that so far, China's role in the region is mostly a counter-role to the US, however, there is no agreement that this is necessarily bad for the US.¹⁰³⁸ Zambelis and Gentry are among those that argue that China's new presence is counterproductive to American interests in the region:

"In so doing, the PRC poses a multifaceted challenge to the United States, whose presence and influence in the region have long been a cornerstone of American geopolitical strategy. Indeed, a growing Chinese presence in the Middle East may someday convince long-standing US allies in the region to reorient their strategic relationships away from Washington toward Beijing, dramatically transforming the strategic landscape in the process."¹⁰³⁹

Connected to this framing of China as an alternative, is the debate about 'rise and decline' mentioned earlier. Ben Simpfendorfer for example is eager to frame the story of 'Chinese and Arabs rediscovering each other' not only in the romantic frame of the 'Silk Road', but to also explain it with the frames of 'decline' and 'rise', especially when he references the role the US plays in the relationship between China and the Arab world:

"Among all the actors in the story, America has most to lose." [...] "It was only time before historic economic powers and trade routes reconnected themselves. But their rise now appears inevitable and America must find a place for itself in this new 'Old World'"¹⁰⁴⁰

Most observers in the Western discourse seem to agree however, that China will not not be able to replace the US in the Middle East in the foreseeable future, as Ambassador Freeman joked in 2008:

"They know that they can't divorce us, even if they wished to do so. They are as addicted to our money as we are to their oil. We are locked in a Catholic marriage. But they are Muslims and they don't have to divorce us to take a second wife. Hence their romances with China and India."¹⁰⁴¹

1037 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.46-47

1038 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.56-58

1039 Zambelis & Gentry (2008) p.62

1040 Simpfendorfer (2009) p.5

1041 Freeman (2006)

This narrative of more than one wife, arguing that the new situation where the Arabs have a choice does not necessarily mean that they will discard the US but might still prioritise the US over China and India, is reported by different authors.¹⁰⁴² This assumption, that roles which the US would play, would still be prioritised, is especially strong in the security area, due to the mechanisms of hierarchisation through securitisation.

“The intensifying connection between the Persian Gulf monarchies and the Pacific Asian economies has several wider implications. As has been described, as yet there is little military collaboration between the two groups, thereby allowing the United States to continue in its role as the protector of the Gulf States and the guarantor of the international oil industry’s most strategic shipping lanes.”¹⁰⁴³

Accordingly, most Western analysts are convinced that China will not challenge the US in the Middle East. “While the prospect gives rise to interesting geopolitical speculation, for the near term China’s political role in the Middle East and Gulf remains low level.”¹⁰⁴⁴

In his debate on the regional ‘threat environment’ Geoffrey Kemp juxtaposes the ‘wealth and war’ of the region. Framing it as both dangerous and lucrative. Security in Kemp’s eyes will focus the US, Japan, China and India to cooperate on the Middle East, he also focuses on the ‘String of Pearls’ debate.¹⁰⁴⁵

“Surprisingly, for many observers, there is still no obvious security dimension to the increasingly interdependent relationship between the Persian Gulf monarchies and Pacific Asia.”[...]“ Equally it would seem to make sense for the Pacific Asia countries to seek a more active role in the security arrangements and defensive shields of their primary energy suppliers. Part of the explanation is that the Persian Gulf monarchies do not yet see a reliable alternative to the West, as, for all its shortcomings, it was a Western-led alliance that liberated Kuwait in 1991 and it is the Western presence that has been credited with safeguarding the Gulf from Iraqi or Iranian belligerence in the past.”[...]Some commentators have argued that the same lack of enthusiasm for a security relationship between the two regions applies in reverse.”¹⁰⁴⁶

Concluding, it can be said that the Western discourse about China’s role in the Middle East has two strands; one is about the inevitable conflict between China and the West in the Middle East, the other the narrative of interdependence among all the actors. Most Western voices seem to start out with the danger of conflict and end with the imperative for the US to ‘manage’ China’s role in the Middle East and for China to take the role of the ‘responsible stakeholder’.

1042 Simpfendorfer (2009) p.37

1043 Davidson (2010) p.29

1044 Kemp (2010) p.102

1045 Kemp (2010) p.178 & 207

1046 Davidson (2010) p.22

Debates about China in the Middle East in the US are, not surprisingly, intimately connected to the question of the US position in the region and both arguments are closely connected to the question about American decline.

“It is imperative for the United States to develop a strategy for managing these challenges in the near term so that they do not escalate unduly in the medium-to-long term. It will not be possible for the United States to exclude China from the region, even if that were judged a desirable objective of US policy.”¹⁰⁴⁷

Alterman and Garver frame the imperative for cooperation in the frame of ‘security as a shared interest’ among all three sides.¹⁰⁴⁸ For Leverett and Bader, writing in 2005, convincing China to play the role the US wants it to play was still just about supporting China in fulfilling its energy needs. There was little talk of any greater Chinese political or status interests or for showing ‘responsibility’: “The smarter and potentially more successful US policy would be to try to work with China to give it both a sense of energy security and a shared interest in a stable Middle East.”¹⁰⁴⁹ The implicit assumption was, that this would then have spillover effects: “the prospect that an integrated regional security structure could be useful as a forum for drawing China into a more responsible posture toward the Middle East.” Still it is the power of the US that will be the driving force when they demand that “policymakers in Washington need to start thinking now about the elements of a strategy for managing the Chinese challenge in the Middle East.”¹⁰⁵⁰

8.8. China and the Arab Spring– the Irresponsible Stakeholder?

The Arab Spring, at least while it promised success and change in its first three years (2011-2013), changed the Western perception of China’s role in the Middle East. The narrative of ‘Western decline’ and ‘China’s rise’ was implicitly challenged by the demonstrators in many Arab capitals demanding something, which looked to all intents and purposes like Western-style democracy. The West discussed China’s role in the Arab Spring along two main story lines. First, the analysis focussed on the internal challenge to China’s government, the attempt to

1047 Leverett & Bader (2005) p.197

1048 Alterman & Garver (2008) p.129

1049 Leverett & Bader (2005) p.197

1050 Leverett & Bader (2005) p.199

stop a spillover of the revolution to China, and secondly Beijing's foreign policy reaction to the events in the region.

8.8.1. China and the Arab Spring

In the Western perception the danger for China's domestic stability and the government's panicked reaction to it, were highlighted and often attributed to insecurity of the Chinese government towards its own people.

"The political upheaval that has swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since January 2011 has accentuated this sense of vulnerability. It has also elicited a battery of reactions from Beijing—swift and repressive internally and measured and cautious externally."¹⁰⁵¹

Western debate about China's reaction normally focussed both on the shock that the uprisings were to the Chinese government, as well as the important role that censorship played in Beijing's reaction to it. It also highlighted the perceived similarities between the situations in Tunisia and Egypt and China.¹⁰⁵² While Chinese leaders were traditionally seen as uninterested in Middle Eastern politics, this perception quickly changed and the Chinese government was depicted as having panicked and badly manoeuvred:

"The great irony of the Arab revolts is that just when China's leaders see America losing ground in its prized overseas dominions, they are feeling the ground crumble beneath their own feet at home"¹⁰⁵³

Western analysis and debate about China's foreign policy reactions to the Arab Spring took longer to develop than that on the internal repression of dissent, but then intensified. China's interests in the region were now seen as having increased. However it was duly noted that the reaction to the uprisings varied from country to country as Calabrese defined it: "Tunisia—ignoring the uprising, adapting to the outcome; Egypt—seeking stability and favouring continuity". He explains these differences with the differing importance of the countries for China and argues that China was not merely surprised by the events but actually chose limiting its own role consciously as by "thus assuming the role of a benign external actor, China presumably sought to distinguish itself from the United States and other major powers."¹⁰⁵⁴ The frame of China now being interdependent with the region and thereby also responsible

1051 John Calabrese (2013): China and the Arab Awakening: The Cost of Doing Business, in: China Report 49, 1 : 5–23, p.5

1052 Calabrese (2013) p.6-7

1053 Bianchi (2013) p.112

1054 Calabrese (2013) p.9

for the cost of up-keeping regional security is prevalent in the Western discourse on China's behaviour during the Arab Spring.

"Indeed, the stakes for China—primarily a function of its growing economic presence globally and in particular, its increasingly extensive economic ties with the region—are higher than ever. They range from the stability of oil supplies and prices to the safety of Chinese nationals and the security of Chinese companies' investments abroad. [...] In fact, the Arab Awakening could ultimately provide a window of strategic opportunity for China to expand its economic presence and political influence in the region. After all, post-autocratic regimes are likely to be more pluralistic and practice a different style of statecraft than did their predecessors and are thus less inclined to be, or to be seen as, Western clients. [...] And try as they might to shield their interests abroad, more will be expected, indeed demanded, of them. One thing is certain: siding with authoritarianism is no longer a safe bet. That is the cost of doing business."¹⁰⁵⁵

Whatever its misgivings about the revolution, China is not seen as having shied away from Egypt after the post-revolutionary regime seemed to find its feet. While in the beginning, the uprisings were seen by Western observers as counterproductive for China's regional policy, the rise of new actors like the Islamists was quickly interpreted as benefitting China in the long term as they would be less likely to bow as much to Western demands as their predecessors:

"A more independent Egypt seeking new friends and ready to trade its diplomatic influence for economic relief holds tantalising possibilities for every wing of China's interlocking military-commercial-political elite. As tensions multiply between Washington and Cairo, China weighs the countless routes that an Egyptian partnership could open to the Middle East, Africa and Europe."¹⁰⁵⁶

There are basically two roles that China is attributed. The one is the 'inflexible colossus' that does not know how to answer to the revolutions due to domestic fears, while the other is the unscrupulous 'benefiter' from political turmoil, always eager to steal the march from the West:

"The more fluid balance of power that China contemplates in the Middle East is a perfect counterpart to the multi-polar international system it envisions in the post-American world order. On both levels, numerous nations would be free to form and break quasi- alliances instead of herding into rigid blocks dominated by opposing superpowers. [...] From the perspective of a rising but still secondary world power, the obvious advantage lies in the ability to erode the influence of a stronger rival without having to fight wars that you will probably lose."¹⁰⁵⁷

When it came to the question of international intervention in the cases of Syria and Libya, China's position was seen more critical in the Western discourse.

8.8.2. China and the (non-) Interventions in Libya and Syria

1055 Calabrese (2013) p.18

1056 Bianchi (2013) p.111

1057 Bianchi (2013) p.111

The challenge to China's non-intervention policy was perhaps the most debated part of China's response to the Arab Spring in the Western discourse. This is not surprising, as due to China's veto-power in the UNSC, it was the one part of the international response to the Arab Spring where China could directly interfere with, or even block Western actions. This intertwined the Western perspective on China's reaction to the Arab Spring with the wider debate about China's rise and the idea of the 'responsible stakeholder':

"Beijing's evasion has triggered a wave of reactions by Western leaders and organisations as well as by non-Western ones, urging Beijing to become a 'responsible stakeholder'; to play a more 'constructive' international role; and to use its growing power in the settlement of regional conflicts and other outstanding problems. China's usual reply has been that it is still not strong enough to play such a role, basically still being a 'developing country'. This sounds like an excuse and a rather simplistic reason for China's abstention from greater involvement in international and regional affairs."¹⁰⁵⁸

Yitzhak Shichor argues that the solid resistance of China to any further intervention after the Libya resolution stems from China's impression of Western deceit after the NATO-led campaign to oust Gadhafi.¹⁰⁵⁹ John Calabrese uses a more regional-oriented perspective on Beijing's behaviour following a line of reasoning often also expressed by Chinese experts:

"[...] the NATO military campaign went much further than Beijing had likely anticipated or could accept. However, both the Arab League and the African Union had supported the resolution, as had the Western powers. [...] Beijing's dilemma had been whether to place principle ahead of pragmatism. In having chosen pragmatism, Beijing avoided taking a position that would have isolated it regionally and internationally. Following the passage of the resolution, Beijing's diplomacy quickly changed track. [...] Throughout the Libyan conflict and, as will be shown, in other cases, China sought to align its position to the extent possible with regional players."¹⁰⁶⁰

There is general acknowledgement among Western authors that there was no special relationship between Gadhafi and Beijing and that Beijing was very silent during the early days of the uprising. However most Western authors, by feeling compelled to highlight this inactivity, seem to inherently assume that Beijing should have a propensity to protect a 'fellow dictator', or at least assume that a Western readership would automatically assume so.

China's successful evacuation of 30 000 of its citizens from Libya however garnered attention in the Western debate and even spurred further debate about a possible power shift in the region:

1058 Shichor (2013) p.26

1059 Shichor (2013) p.31

1060 Calabrese (2013) p.11

“Chinese warships moved from the Gulf of Aden where they were hunting Somali pirates through the Suez Canal and into the Mediterranean for the first time in history” [...]“In less than a month, Beijing had impressed several audiences with its global military reach. It showed nationalist critics at home that it would spare no effort to protect its teeming communities of overseas workers. It alerted Middle Eastern and African nations that its rising commercial profile would be backed up with force when necessary. And, most importantly, it reminded NATO powers that they no longer enjoyed exclusive access to North African territory and resources.”¹⁰⁶¹

Syria has perhaps been the most debated issue in the Western discourse because it was seen as a case where China has difficulties defining its role. After Beijing blocked Western resolutions together with Russia, even those simply condemning the Assad government’s crackdown on civilians, it was seen by many as taking sides by

“[...] seeking to shield Syria from Western sanctions and limit American intrusion“[...]“Angry Syrian protesters who burned Russian and Chinese flags in the streets of Damascus. [...] These recriminations appeared to lead Beijing to change the tone, though not the substance of its approach to Syria.¹⁰⁶²

This view that China had taken sides and was merely trying to pretend to be neutral, has been widespread among western observers with very little sympathy for Chinese protestations of neutrality. When confronted with the Chinese self-conception of playing a ‘neutral role’ one leading US newspaper commentator argued that “they are simply insincere”.¹⁰⁶³ Shichor perhaps best describes the unnerved state that Western observers often took on China’s position in the Arab spring:

“[...] China’s image reminds one of the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland, fading away behind an enigmatic smile. Name any issue and you are unlikely to find a coherent Chinese position. [...] Western, and now also most Middle Eastern countries, tend to overlook China and appeal directly to Russia as the more powerful vector affecting the regional situation, as if the Cold War has not ended [...] The main departure is that Mao’s China perhaps had the will to interfere but not the capabilities, while post-Mao China has the capabilities but not (yet?) the will.”¹⁰⁶⁴

Similarly, but focussing on the perceived unwillingness of the wider group of Asian “emerging powers” to behave like responsible major powers, Patrick Cronin from the US-Democrat affiliated Centre for New American Security in an opinion piece in August 2013, entitled ‘Where is Asia?’ made the envisioned future distribution of roles clear when he asks:

“What is the purpose of growing Asian power? Is the rise of China and Asia’s historical moment merely about self-aggrandizement, greed, and self-preservation? The United States long ago realized that great power status brings great power responsibility. When a government flagrantly

1061 Bianchi (2013) p.111

1062 Calabrese (2013) p.17

1063 Interview with Washington Post Journalist, Washington, June 2013

1064 Shichor (2013) p.39

violates international norms with the use of chemical weapons against innocent civilians, it is unbecoming for other major powers to feign blindness and shirk responsibility.”¹⁰⁶⁵

In this way, he challenges China to see that as a main supporter of the UN it can have no interest in seeing the UN mechanisms “being ridiculed by unpunished genocide”. Instead of asking if the American actions in the Middle East might draw America’s attention away from its pivot to Asia. Here again China is attributed a role along the example of an alleged ‘stewardship’ that the US has undertaken over the last years.

One of the most popular disciplines of Western China studies over the last years has been the debate about China’s future strategy. This fascination in the West with uncovering the ‘hidden intentions’ of China’s policy is also detectable with many authors writing about the Middle East.¹⁰⁶⁶ Often this search is frustrated by China’s ongoing debates and inability to agree on the best path, which however is often perceived as a cunning strategy:

“There is still no consensus in Beijing on overall Middle East policy, particularly in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Where some see opportunities, others see traps. For every voice urging the leadership to exploit America’s misfortunes, there is a counter-argument that the United States should be left to stew in its own mess. [...]. China’s foreign policy journals and think tanks are filled with cost-benefit analyses of countless policy options for dealing with Middle Eastern problems [...]. In the wider context of the ongoing debate over whether China’s overseas presence is too timid or too bold, the violence and unpredictability of the Middle East tip the scales in favour of prudence. America’s desire to look towards the Pacific is read as an admission of failure—a thin cover for hasty retreat from a land of sorrows and humiliations. Why take over America’s headaches when it feels so good to see their pain?”¹⁰⁶⁷

8.9. China or Asia?

In the Western Discourse, China often serves as a symbol for both Asia and the great ‘other’. The emphasis in the Western discourse is normally clearly focussed on China’s role in the region, even if authors do not deny the presence of other Asian actors: “Yet, it is China’s energy engagement with the region that demands our attention, both because of its momentum over the past two decades and its awesome potential for long-term growth.”¹⁰⁶⁸ Even if they include other players, they normally still follow the ‘power shift from the West to the East’ narrative:

1065 Cronin, Patrick (2013): Where is Asia?, in: Center for New American Security, <http://www.cnas.org/publications/where-asia#.VOGWIOQka8w>

1066 Including this Author, see: Krahl, Daniel (2007): Die Außenpolitische Strategie der Volksrepublik China gegenüber dem Nahen Osten, Diplomarbeit, Otto-Suhr Institut, Free University Berlin

1067 Bianchi (2013) p.111

1068 Dorraj & English (2013) p.45

“thus signifying a global shift in economic weight from the West to the East – the Persian Gulf’s eastward orientation can only intensify [...] and the trajectory of interdependence will continue to accelerate.”¹⁰⁶⁹ Other authors at the same time try to widen the perspective to other actors, trying to differentiate between them, as Tim Niblock argues:

“Yet, the picture of Western decline and Asian growth in Gulf economic involvement, as normally conveyed, is oversimplified to the extent of being inaccurate. While an overall shift has indeed taken place, the shift is not simply from West to East. Asian countries themselves are divided between winners and losers.”¹⁰⁷⁰

Christopher Davidson’s article for the “Kuwait Program on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States” compares the influence of the four major Asian powers China, Japan, South Korea and India in the Middle East with each other. He repeats the typical ‘oil to security’ narrative:

“This paper dissects this by examining both the hydrocarbon and non-hydrocarbon trades between the two regions before turning to their increasingly bilateral sovereign wealth investments and their cooperation on major construction and infrastructural projects. The paper will then explain the absence of military security arrangements, but will also demonstrate how several other measures are being taken to create stronger non-economic bonds.”¹⁰⁷¹

In his brief historical background of the relations between the Persian Gulf and Pacific Asia Davidson skips the ‘Silk Road’ narrative, perhaps because as a Middle East expert he follows the Middle Eastern, or Japanese as his article is based on a research stay in Japan, lack of interest in this mostly Chinese frame, and starts with the early 1950s and the entrance of Japanese oil companies to the region. He therefore omits the Chinese frame in favour of the Japanese post-War reconstruction as a frame of the relationship.¹⁰⁷² This economic cooperation between the Gulf and Japan was also helped, when India’s Nehru partially closed the Indian market after independence to the traditional Gulf traders, which then looked to Japan:

“Dubai played the role of an intermediary, its merchants carefully ordering the necessary materials well in advance so as to overcome the lengthy five-month shipping time from Japan. [...] By the late

1069 Davidson (2010) p.2

1070 Tim Niblock: Southeast Asia and the Gulf: Convergence and Competition in the Wider Asian Context, p.5 in: Niblock & Yang (2014)

1071 Davidson (2010) p.1

1072 Davidson (2010) p.2-3 “By 1956 Japan’s Arabian Oil Company had secured a forty-three-year concession to explore and extract Saudi oil,² and in 1960 production commenced. The lucrative relationship was then quickly strengthened by the Saudi ruling family, with its first minister for defence – Prince Sultan bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud – visiting Tokyo in 1960, and with its third king, Faisal bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud, visiting in 1971.”

1970s Dubai's trade with Japan had expanded to include electrical goods, with the re-exporting of millions of Hitachi personal stereos to the subcontinent [...]."¹⁰⁷³

Geoffrey Kemp, when claiming that "The East moves West", has the chapters of his book follow the familiar structuring narrative from oil to power, but Kemp focuses and starts with India and highlights that, like with China, the GCC also has a strategic dialog with India since 2003 and while there is very little Chinese media presence in the Gulf, Bollywood has a strong following in the region both with locals and migrant workers.¹⁰⁷⁴ Kemp focuses on India's historical role in the Gulf region during colonial times. These historical ties between India and Gulf are not only seen by Kemp in colonial times, but even going back to the time of the Harrapan culture 5000 years ago as a historical frame for Gulf-India relations.¹⁰⁷⁵ Kemp thereby not only produces a counter frame to the 'Silk Road' frame, but implicitly challenges the often prevalent focus on China in the region as representing 'Asia'. For example he compares the often reported port building activities of China in the Pakistani port of Gwadar with Indian-Iranian cooperation on the port in Shahbahar which gets much less publicity in the Western discourse.¹⁰⁷⁶

For Davidson again, China only really comes into the narrative after the beginning of the 'four modernisations' and China's first oil deals with Oman in 1983, "as a temporary measure, in order to alleviate the problem of transporting its own oil from its northern provinces to refineries on the Yangtze River."¹⁰⁷⁷ He also argues that Korea should not be overlooked in building up its relationship with the area because even if it had less historical connection to the region than Japan and China: "South Korea was nonetheless during the 1960s and 1970s carefully building the foundations of its present strong relationship."¹⁰⁷⁸

It's worth mentioning, that some authors, like Yitzack Shichor, depict Japan as actually having gone through a similar struggle of role search in the Middle East; and according to Shichor having failed to live up to the role expectations:

1073 Davidson (2010) p.3

1074 Kemp (2010) p.3-18 & p. 23

1075 See Kemp (2010) p26, p.37,p.43, p.47, p.51; However Kemp calls China's presence in the Middle East a 'return' because of the travels of Zheng He, which he sees as a proof for China's former "superpower status" opposite to India where he only sees a 'rise' p.64.

1076 Kemp (2010) p56

1077 Davidson (2010) p.4

1078 Davidson (2010) p.4

“China’s ability to intervene in the Middle East (and elsewhere) has been handicapped also by what I call ‘Japanisation’. [...] Its obsession with economic growth and increased interaction with the world economy in terms of both input and output, have led China into the Japanese paradox: economic power comes at the expense of political influence.”¹⁰⁷⁹

For all the Asian actors, although perhaps not at the same scale as with the UNSC member China, the discussion follows the by now familiar narrative of economic interdependence leading to a greater regional security role, and if not, than this has to be explained:

“Another component of the explanation is simply lingering distrust, despite all the aforementioned economic linkages and converging histories. This is not so much related to Japan or South Korea, which are effectively neutral military powers, but rather to China, which has repeatedly created difficulties for a stronger security relationship.”¹⁰⁸⁰

Davidson argues that the closest political links of the Gulf States to East Asia are still with Japan because of their long history of economic interaction. He sees the future growth of political roles for all three Asian actors as still dependent on Western agreement:

“With the noted exception of military security arrangements, the relationship between the Persian Gulf monarchies and the three principal Pacific Asian economies will continue to strengthen and broaden for the foreseeable future, provided that the former remain able to balance their existing relationships with the Western powers and Pacific Asia, especially China.”¹⁰⁸¹

Regardless of whether this Western agreement might be still as influential now than it was in 2010, to understand this complex interplay of different Asian, Western and regional actors, it is important to also look at the other Asian actors’ perspectives on China in the Middle East.

8.10. Another Angle - The Asian Discourse on China in the Middle East

Japan has been the first industrialising country to get into contact with the region, but Keiko Sakai argues that it has lost its relatively independent and purely economy-oriented policy towards the Middle East after 1991. From this time on the role of Japanese aid was not defined anymore in purely economic terms, but framed as security policy. For him this role change was brought about domestically by the weakening of the formerly supreme Ministry of Industry and Trade (MITI) and externally by the shrinking Japanese community abroad.¹⁰⁸² The feeling of a deteriorating security situation in East Asia compelled Japan to start monitoring China in

1079 Shichor (2013) p.36

1080 Davidson (2010) p.22

1081 Davidson (2010) p. 25-27

1082 Sakai, Keiko(2014): The Decline of Japans independent Policy towards the Gulf in: Niblock & Yang Guang (2014) p.212-214, p.203

the Middle East. China is perceived as a security concern for Japan in East Asia and as most of the energy of Japan comes from the Middle East, the role that China plays in the region is clearly securitised in the Japanese discourse.¹⁰⁸³

Japan sees itself as having only a modest military role in the Gulf, although it has established some dialogue mechanisms with regional states, “so far Japan’s role remains one of an auxiliary to the overall American security system”¹⁰⁸⁴ and its role depends on that of the US:

“Japan’s relations with the Middle East has been influenced by a perception gap since the Meiji era, which may mistakenly portray Japan as an important actor in maintaining security and stability in the Gulf, a role that Japan is not ready to play yet.”¹⁰⁸⁵

In the Japanese discourse, the debate about China’s possible role in the Middle East and the potential threat this could mean to Japan’s sea-lanes of communication has actually rekindled the debate about Japan’s own role in the region.¹⁰⁸⁶

From a Korean point of view, Seo Jeongmin argues, the nuclear deal with the UAE in 2009 became a turning point for South Korea’s relationship with the Gulf region.¹⁰⁸⁷ Seoul immediately expanded the strategic cooperation with the UAE through South Korea’s first unilateral military training mission abroad and sent a Military attaché to Saudi Arabia for the first time. Seo also interprets this development as a result of regional disagreement with US Middle East policy and the fact that “some GCC countries have therefore begun to search for alternatives to dependence on the West.” Even though this alternative might be a close US-ally.¹⁰⁸⁸ Again, energy dependence on the Middle East is perceived to have led to a debate about its Korea’s regional political role again, though it seems to be much less influenced by a debate about China’s regional role than in the Japanese case.

One of the few truly comparative approaches to the different Asian perspectives on the Gulf came out of the 2014 Gulf Research Meeting in Cambridge. Interestingly Ranjit Gupta notes

1083 Miyagi , Yukiko (2014): Japans politico strategic relations with the Gulf, in: Niblock & Yang Guang (2014) p.186

1084 Miyagi (2014) p. 192

1085 Sakai (2014) p.221

1086 Ishiguro, Hirotake (2014) The Japan Maritime Self Defense Force and regional security in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf: Looking towards 2023, in: Niblock & Yang Guang (2014), p.232-233

1087 Seo, Jeongmin: The changing strategic Interests of the Gulf-South Korea Relationship: from Nuclear to Military Cooperation, in: Niblock & Yang Guang (2014), p.239

1088 see Gupta, Ranjit, Abubaker Bagadir, Talmiz Ahmad and N. Janardhan (eds., 2014): A New Security Architecture: Prospects and Challenges for an Asian Role, Gerlach Press, Berlin

the reluctance of the 2012 workshop participants to talk about Asia's role in Gulf security.¹⁰⁸⁹ Indian diplomat Bagadier talks of the Asian developments changing the world and a "new world order", and uses the historical example of the 'Silk Road' to legitimize this development.¹⁰⁹⁰ This frame is repeated again by Tahmis Ahmad who also uses the Chinese/Western frame of a new Silk Roads to frame Asia's 'resurgence' and to frame the GCC and Asia as rising together. After describing the economic links between Asia and the Gulf, he talks about the political implications.

"Over the last 20 years, the Gulf has been in the throng of instability due to: US led military intervention in Iraq in 1991" (its) "dual containment policy against Iran and Iraq in the 1990s-its robust in ongoing military actions in the region as part of the global war on terror and its assault on Iraq in 2003 and its continuous confrontation against Iran, with frequent threats of military action."¹⁰⁹¹

Generally these texts are framing the West as 'arrogant' and 'hostile' and when western commentators doubt the ability of Asia to take on the security role, they are framed as ignoring Asian "wishes".¹⁰⁹² Indian analyst Janardhan argues however that the US can only be replaced in the long-term.¹⁰⁹³ For him the role of Asia in the Gulf has to move beyond the purely economic because of the decline of US power. In his view, China and India have to take on a security role, due to the strong securitisation of roles in the region that leads to Gulf countries appreciating security roles more, demanding them also from Asian countries.¹⁰⁹⁴

As a vehicle for this replacement, Tahmis Ahmad favours the BRICS as the platform for an Asian security role which he thinks should be a result of the 'look east' policy of many Gulf States that came as a result of America's reaction to 11 September.¹⁰⁹⁵ Janardhan frames the change as an outcome of simultaneous US fatigue with the region and a Gulf fatigue with the US. For him the sharp decline of the once undisputed hegemon is depicted in the new talk about alternative role takers in the security area in the region. He also repeats the narrative of a 'power shift from the West to the East' and the end of western hegemony which has lasted for

1089 Gupta, Ranjit, Abubaker Bagadir, Tahmis Ahmad and N. Janardhan (2014): Preface, in: Gupta et al (2014) p.IX

1090 Bagader, Abubaker (2014): Introduction, in: Gupta et al. (2014) p.4

1091 Ahmad, Tahmis (2014): New Silk Roads of the 21 Century – GCC-Asia Economic Connections and their political Implications, in Gupta et al (2014), p.25

1092 Ahmad (2014) p27

1093 Janardhan, N. (2014): India, China and the Gulf: Cooperation Competition or Confrontation, in: Gupta et al (2014), p.189

1094 Janardhan (2014) p.186

1095 Tahmis Ahmad (2014) p.27 & p.31

the last 200 years. As a heritage of this western hegemony, Janardhan sees the legacy of the British Indian rule in the Gulf as one of the historical bases for India's future role in the region. However he thinks China is pulling ahead of India in developing its power resources and thereby more likely or more able to take on a regional role.¹⁰⁹⁶

This short overview leads to the conclusion that ironically, the South Asian or mostly Indian discourse frames a stronger Asian role in Gulf security, including China's, as a reaction to Western decline and failed policies, while at the same time emphasizing a strong South Asian commitment because of China's presence in the region.

8.11. Conclusion – International Expectations towards China's Role in the Middle East

In the Western discourse on China and the Middle East, the focus is strongly on a 'non-West' framing, where everything that is not 'Western' melts into some 'otherness', and therefore the frames of 'Silk Road' and 'decline of the West' are prevalent. The background for the 'Silk Road' frame might be the exotic appeal or the fitting framing with the 'decline' topic, which references the idea of a 'return of the non-Western World'. It also has the advantage of combining the 'others', be they Arab, Indian or Chinese. In this way, both Islam and China are symbolic for the 'others'.

Another feature of the discourse on China and the Middle East is the long perspective, where the traditional Silk Road view is combined with projections of a midterm or distant future. This is often enriched by positivist balance-of-power frames, which focus on economic capabilities and normally lead to a functionalist reasoning, where changes in the material structure are perceived to lead to a change of role. This is most prominently seen in the Western energy discourse where China's role in the Middle East is simply regarded as a function of its 'energy needs' and the supply from the region. According to this narrative, the dependence of China or the interdependence of the Gulf and China with each other, will lead to further cooperation, increased activism of China and finally a security role in the region. This functionalist reasoning is also supported by most Arab expectations. Arab role expectations often feature in the

1096 Janardhan (2014) p.194

Western analysis and Western analysis again has a strong influence on the Arab perspective due to the knowledge gap discussed before. Arab role expectations are seen as witnesses for the functionalist reasoning where the 'oil for security' bargain is extended to a new partner. In the same way the new role of China is mostly dominated by those security issues, which have been so far undertaken by the West. China is taken as a 'normal' state whose self-interest will eventually drive it to assume more responsibility in the region. In the Western expectation, this prescription of responsibility has a very strong normative connotation and China taking on this responsibility is a moral or ethical responsibility as a member of the international society. While in the Western perspective, China is seemingly only self-interested, it will be driven to take its due role through material needs. In this way China, which has benefited from globalization more than most other nations, is supposed to take on more responsibility for the up-keep of the international system which makes globalization possible. The roles that China can or has to take on in this perspective are predefined in the old-style Western oil-for-security bargain. Instead of accepting the role conflict between Chinese role conceptions and Arab role expectations, the Western discourse labels China as 'insincere' by talking about taking on more responsibility, without actually implementing it in a Western sense especially in cases where West sees itself as dependent on China for solutions, like in the case of the problems with Iran and in Syria.

Most other Asian discourses, the Japanese, Korean and especially Indian discourses, see China mostly as a competitor for the resources of the Middle East. In these states, China is often perceived as a 'threat' in general and therefore its growing presence in the Middle East is perceived first of all as a threat to the energy supply to their own economies. Only in the Indian discourse seems to exist an interest in cooperating with China on a common security framework for the Middle East, justifying this in familiar tones about the failure and general untrustworthiness of the West as a provider of regional security.

9. Conclusion – China’s Role in the Middle East

What then is China’s role in the Middle East? As mentioned in the beginning of this book, there is no simple answer to what China’s role is, because different perspectives give you different answers. Western and Arab expectations of China’s role in the Middle East are very different from China’s own conception of its role. These different perceptions were thrown into sharp contrast during the Arab Spring, and while the differences remain, a process of debate about this role and its different perceptions is evolving. This book wants to be a part of this debate.

China’s role in the Middle East is less a function of its growing capabilities, and more a result of socialization between China and Middle Eastern countries. Accordingly, from 2013 onwards China actively tried to address its role conflict in the Middle East. After the mere rhetorical declaration of its new role as ‘mediator’ in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in April 2013, Xi Jinping substantiated China’s willingness for a role change in October 2013 by publicising the ‘One Belt –One Road’ framework as a revival of the old silk road. He thereby not only reused one of China’s traditional frames for its relationship with the Middle East, but even ‘institutionalised’ China’s role change, albeit in so far rather vague terms. At the same time, China got more actively involved in the negotiations about the Iranian nuclear program, playing a role in finally reaching a deal with Teheran in June 2015. While Beijing propagated its

non-interventionist approach as a blueprint for its role in future conflict resolution mechanisms.

That the difficulties of this role making process described in the preceding chapters will continue, was however highlighted by the rather lukewarm response to the Iran deal by Beijing's Arabian Gulf partners in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, who were not satisfied with a non-intervention approach to Iran. If this 'failure' to fulfil the role expectation of security provider will be more blamed on the traditional holder of this role, the US, or on the new actor in this field, China, will have to be seen. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi would definitely prefer, as regional states often do, a role-learning process in which China would fulfil the demands of traditional regional role expectations, instead of bringing in its own conception. Similarly, Beijing's entry into the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations was substantiated after Beijing's 2013 peace proposal, by China's declaration of its intention to join the 'quartet' of mediators in early 2014. As in 2013, the assessment so far by the other regional actors is that Beijing is not really willing to fullfill the demands of this role, and expectations of Beijing to play a real role in this regard are rather lukewarm. Most importantly perhaps, when the Jihadist militia of the 'Islamic State' overran big parts of Syria and Iraq after June 2014, it was clear to everybody that the US was the only extra-regional actor that could provide some form of security for regional states against this threat. Perhaps because of this, Russia filled the traditional counter-role of 'balancer' and was chosen by Egypt's al-Sisi government when it bought arms, instead of its ally Washington; Russia even started intervening directly in the Syrian civil war in 2015.

While these events happened after the research period of this book, they underline the assumption that foreign policy role formation is no simple function of changes in material capabilities and show that role theory can be a tool to understand these multi-layered and complicated processes.

9.1. Theoretical and Methodological Conclusions

In this regard, constructivist role theory has strong explanatory power when it comes to understanding how China's rising capabilities on the global level, impact the perception and role attribution processes on different regional levels, and how the incorporation of a new actor into the regional role-play takes place. The division into the different variables of role conception of the ego and role expectation of the alter, helps us understand why the role

enactment of China during the Arab Spring, which was seen as absolutely legitimate and reasonable by Beijing, was met with so much hostility from the Arab side. Even at a time when China's role in the region remained rather undefined and ambiguous, the framing of China into certain role expectations by both regional and international actors was clearly taking place. For the period after 2013, which was not covered in this research, a more active and role conscious approach by China should make it easier in the future to operationalise the different role variables.

The look at historical role conceptions in China and the role expectations towards external actors in the Middle East has allowed us to understand how modern conceptions and expectations differ in different regions and cultures. This use of framing techniques emanating from different historical narratives allows actors to make sense of the actions of other actors. However, it also leads to role conflict especially if a new actor like China enters the arena with its own role conceptions, relatively ignorant of regional role expectations, and as shown in this research, with a lack of understanding of regional role hierarchisation processes through securitisation.

Combining role theory and regional security studies enabled us to understand first how certain roles are influenced by regional discourses, but more importantly, how these role expectations are hierarchized through processes of securitisation. Assuming that the contact between China and the Middle East will increase steadily over the next years, and having seen the debate about role conflicts among Chinese decision makers, a more active approach towards role making can be expected from the Chinese side, and to a lesser degree from the Arab side. A more complex version of socialisation-theory than what securitisation theory can offer at the moment, will therefore be useful, and will be discussed in chapter 9.7.

Distinguishing four different levels of discourses has been a useful analytical framework as it enables us to understand the different perspectives of China, the regional debate, the Saudi, Emirati and Egyptian domestic discourses and those of the other international actors. While it remains difficult to clearly delimit the different levels, especially the regional and the domestic level, it still allows us to identify the three main findings: The 'knowledge gap' between China and the Arab states; substantial differences in the framing of political identity and roles; and

most importantly the differing role conceptions and expectations between China and the Arab states, which in turn are a result of both knowledge gap and cultural differences.

9.2. The Arab-Chinese Knowledge Gap

As was shown, the lack of information and knowledge about the other side remains one of the major problems in the interaction between China and the Arab states. Information about the other, about his role expectations and role conceptions and even his actual material conditions, are only transported in a limited way. It is difficult enough for an actor to measure the material capabilities of another actor, like its economic numbers or its military hardware. However, to understand the other, his self-conceptions and expectations from other actors, is often impossible. The assumption of 'likeness' between states, their interests and behaviour, which is often transported within the concept of a 'Westphalian'- system of states, is unfortunately very seldomly helpfull in promoting a greater understanding of diversity in political culture between different regions. Unlike the West, China is a new counterpart for the Arabs, and vice versa. Hence, misunderstandings are very common.

The near complete absence of research on or even general intellectual interest in China in the Arab states is unlikely to change over the coming years. It is obviously partly a result of the difficult situation that education and research faces in many Arab states, but another reason is the strong focus of the Arab world on the West, which despite all the criticism, remains the benchmark of 'modernisation' and lifestyle aspiration in many Arab countries. When Arabs look for a new model, they would often rather look to seemingly Islamic or traditional models than towards China. However, it is also a question of willingness and ability of China to win over the hearts and minds, and most importantly the curiosity of Arabs. As mentioned, states like Malaysia, which as a Muslim state seems culturally closer, have been much more active and successful in creating this curiosity. Instead of being understood as a new intellektuall challenge and opportunity for the regional security system, China is mostly still interpreted through a Soviet frame. Another aspect of this phenomenon is the difference in elite and popular interest, as Mohammed al-Sudairi has argued in the Saudi case. The Saudi elites seem to be more convinced than their public about the strategic importance of the relationship with China, though the knowledge gap about China exists on all levels. In the Saudi media discourse, the Chinese are often 'othered' by being portrayed as incomprehensible to Arabs. The

reproduced Arab image of China differs from the Arab image of the West, which, while often portrayed as hostile to Arabs and Muslims, is at least perceived as familiar to the Arab world.

While in China the research capabilities are much more developed than in the Arab states, political rules, like the difficulty to publicly question government policy, the lack of field research and remaining dependence on Western research make a wider discussion and better understanding of the specifics of the region and its expectations towards China difficult. Several aspects of a widespread ideological outlook in the Chinese discussion, like the interpretation of religion as backward and the nearly automatic assumption that Arabs as 'third world brethren' must have sympathy for China as a non-western and non-imperialist country, constrain this debate. Undoubtedly, political bias and cultural misunderstandings are also a frequent occurrence in Western discourse, including the academic, but a greater exposure to the region through frequent field trips and a higher independence of many researchers from state interference can often make up for this. Consequently, the West currently remains the centre of knowledge on both regions and the pivotal intermediary between them.

Therefore the West still plays a huge part in forming the Arab discourse on China and the Chinese discourse on the Middle East. For the foreseeable future, Western inspired clichés and misunderstandings or even political frames, and thereby interests of the West, will be transported into the discourses both in China and in the Arab world. This obviously prohibits or at least hampers the development of some kind of 'non-western' community feeling on both sides. More importantly however, the knowledge gap gains political importance because the framing of the 'other' in relation to the 'self', often serves as a precondition for formulating expectations towards the 'other'.

9.3. 'We', 'Them' and the 'Non-West'

China's perspective on the Middle East is framed by the narrative of pre-Western globalization, made up of the shared heritage of being ancient civilisations, the 'Silk Road' and the victimisation by colonialism. This is a narrative in which the Middle East and China already had a connection through the 'Silk Road' long before the rise of the West. This 'in-group' declaration by China however, should not be misunderstood as an acknowledgement of equality with the Arab states. While China declares itself as bound to the Middle East through

'third world' solidarity, it at the same time hierarchises the relationship by taking on the roles of the 'biggest developing country' and 'leader of the developing world' and proposing itself as a 'model' for other developing countries. This is also reflected in the emphasis that China puts on great power relations, compared to its relations with other developing countries in its overall foreign policy outlook. Similarly, the frame of sharing some 'oriental' or 'non-western' identity somehow clashes with the often depreciative tone of Chinese authors when they discuss the strong influence of 'backward' religion in the Middle East. Accordingly, although a community of 'third world countries' is supposed to exist in Chinese political rhetoric, China still sees the need to make the Middle Eastern States 'understand' China. In this way, China's Middle East envoys and other forms of institutionalised interaction between China and Middle Eastern States should be understood as serving the double function of both hierarchisation and role learning at the same time. Still, these frames of 'developing' or 'non-western' countries serve an important purpose; by framing both Arabs and Chinese as part of an 'in-group' it is easy to depict the Western presence in the Middle East as 'hegemonial' and China's presence as 'legitimate'.

Contrary to this Chinese perspective, Arabs so far show very little interest in being part of an 'in-Group' with China, compared to their interest towards the West or even Russia. The persistence of the mentioned knowledge gap towards China, and wider East Asia, on the side of the Arabs, seems to be both a cause and a result of the disappointed role expectations discussed below. The idea of the 'China model' and general interest in Chinese culture, which are heavily debated in the West, are far less pronounced in Arab discourses. More knowledge exists towards South Asia and South-East Asia, especially in the Gulf because of the shared regional history and the expat labour force, but also because of active approaches, like the Malaysian governments' funding of research centres in Egypt. The possible success of such an activist strategy can be seen in the successes of Israeli outreach campaigns to China and the Chinese Middle East expert community.

Diverging from the Chinese perspective, the Arab-Chinese relationship is seen as rather recent in the region and the emphasis China puts on the frames of 'ancient civilisation' and 'silk road' is not shared in Arab countries. In the Arab perspective there is still more of a shared community with the West, and this feeling has only deepened since the beginning of the Arab

Spring, which saw the West and most of the Arab states supporting the same side in conflicts like the civil wars in Libya or Syria. While the influence of the perceived suppression of Islam in Xinjiang on the Arab discourse about China might not be as strong as is often assumed in the West, it still has dented China's image in the Middle East. The perception of China as 'atheist' also leads many Arabs to consider themselves rather as part of a 'monotheistic in-group' with the West, than with China. The depreciative undertones, which often colour Chinese discussions of Arabs, are even more frequent in the Arab discourse on the Chinese, frequently bordering on the racist.

Finally, the Western discourse on China and the Middle East, often picks-up or perhaps even stimulates the Chinese 'non-Western' framing. Everything that is not Western melts into some 'otherness' in many Western publications, and the 'Silk Road' just becomes another potent frame for the narrative of the 'decline of the West and rise of the rest'. The attractiveness of the 'new silk road' frame might be the exotic appeal or the fitting combination with the 'decline' frame which brings up the idea of the return of a non-Western world. While the culturalist framing is basically absent in Japanese or Korean depictions of China in the Middle East, which are more framed in terms of 'energy security', the 'non-Western' or 'post-colonial' frame appears to be rather frequent in the Indian perspective. The cultural underpinnings also colour the concrete role conceptions and expectations of Arabs and Chinese towards each other.

9.4. Chinese Role Conceptions and Arab Role Expectations

The historical roles ascribed to external powers in the Middle Eastern RSC differ fundamentally from the Chinese historical experience. While 'anti-imperialist' rhetoric is used in the Middle East as frequently as in China, outside intervention has been a permanent characteristic of the Middle Eastern RSC. Conservative states with a long historical interaction with colonial powers like Saudi Arabia and the Emirates see the provision of security by their external partners like Britain and the US as these states' responsibility, be it by defending them against regional threats from Iran or Iraq, or by putting pressure on Israel. While the 'oil for security' bargain does not apply to Egypt, Cairo still expects guarantees of regime survival by external patrons in exchange for holding the peace with Israel and being an ally of the West against Islamist movements. Egypt however also expects external powers like Russia to play the Cold War role

of 'balancer' to the US. Cairo is thereby under the dual role experiences of both Nasser-era alliance with the Soviet Union and Sadat-era alliance with the US.

On the Chinese side, the identity conflict between a civilizational and a territorial state still has tremendous impacts on its own role conception and, among other things, leads to its emphasis on 'non-intervention'. Because of its tradition of autarchy, China tries to de-securitise, and to a certain extent de-politicise its relationships with countries outside its own East Asian region. Even if this often conflicts with its rhetoric of 'third world solidarity', it conceptualises its role as 'neutral' and only focused on economic 'win-win' situations. Since the beginning of 'opening-up and reform' China's foreign policy prefers not to be seen as confrontational as in its perception economic growth is only possible through access to markets and resources, therefore conflicts with countries outside its own region are regarded as non-beneficial.

At the same time, it needs to be seen as a developing country to evade the perception of 'neo-colonialism' or 'interference' through the role of 'leader of the developing world'. Besides 'energy security', the biggest political interest of China is fighting the so called 'three evils', and having good relations with Middle Eastern countries is seen as giving China a certain role in fighting them, even without being directly involved.

Confusing for Western observers is the fact, that when China says it wants to take more 'responsibility', it normally understands quite the opposite to what Western countries would understand, namely that it will interfere less or not at all in other countries' affairs. There is a clear conflict between China's global status as a superpower, and the fact that China prioritises the demands of its role as an East Asian regional power.

Contrary to these Chinese role conceptions, the regional discourse in the Middle East is highly securitized and the regional order traditionally includes a strong security role for outsiders. On the regional level where the security discourse takes place, China, like other foreign players, is mainly judged according to its willingness or ability to take on a security role. There is comparatively little discourse on economic issues on the Middle Eastern regional level and the emphasis in the discourse is on political balancing. Therefore, China is often interpreted according to its ability or willingness to take over the role of the former Soviet Union, and after the 2003 Iraq war, many Arabs expected China to take on the role as a 'balancer' to American

regional hegemony. Often this expectation seems to have been less a result of specific Chinese actions than because of the failure of the EU to fulfil similar Arab role expectations.

That China has built good relations with Israel in the last two decades irritates many Arabs although many still see it as different from the position taken by the West. In this case, China might even profit from the cliché of being less principled and more pragmatic than the West, which is seen as a whole-hearted supporter of Israel, while China is more regarded as an opportunistic supporter of Israel. China's relations with Iran also lead to anger on the Arab side which would like China to maintain greater distance from Iran.

That China declares itself to be neutral in many Middle Eastern conflicts is a concept not accepted in the Middle East, where the role of 'neutral' is not available for a major external actor. This massive divergence in Arab expectations and China's role conception leads to a role conflict and to Arab anger and disappointment towards China. Because China's differing role conception is not understood and its behaviour does not correspond to the expectations towards an external actor, there is a sense of betrayal among regional actors and the feeling that China is an 'enemy' or at least a 'free rider', not living up to its responsibilities. Very often this is then explained by clichés ranging from the traditional distrust towards atheist states to cultural explanations, often bordering on the racist.

When looking at the level of the different member states of the RSC, the focus of the discourse is often more targeted at economic issues. In the Saudi discourse, it is well understood that China cannot supply the external and internal security services to the kingdom that its close alliance with the US provides. While the role expectation towards China follows the regional model of an external 'balancer', it is less understood as balancing against the US, than as balancing against the over-dependence of the kingdom on the US. Similarly for the Emirates, expectations are less that China takes over the security provider role from the US, as the UAE has benefitted immensely from this role enactment by the US. For soft-balancing it looks to European countries like France, and not to the East. Still, there is a wide gap between the Emirati expectations towards the heavily securitised role that foreigners usually play in the Gulf, and China's role enactment. The UAE seems to expect China to take on a role of a 'friend' by supporting their interests, be it towards Iran or in Syria. Egypt's role expectations towards the international level however, are much more influenced by Cold War frames than those of

other regional states, and the conflict with Israel plays a more important role. It therefore expects a much harder version of balancing than Gulf States would do. The expectations towards China still largely stem from the Soviet Union and China's perceived failure to live up to these role demands, leads to a stronger focus on Russia, and to a lesser degree France.

These conflicting Chinese role conceptions and Arab role expectations lead to role conflict and disappointment, even anger on the side of the Arabs and the West; thereby confirming the proposed hypothesis derived from role theory in the first chapter. For many Arabs, the China dream is over: The disappointment after the Iraq War but especially during the Arab Spring has dashed most hopes that Arabs had for a new 'balancer'. China has no interest in balancing in any kind of anti-hegemonial alliance and thereby rejects all kinds of possible political roles from the Arab perspective. The Arab spring has emphasised the role conceptions of both the US and China in the Middle East. The Arab dissatisfaction with the US should be seen as symbolic of the different role expectations by the Arabs towards the US and China. China is seen as useful in economic terms, but the country is not perceived to be willing to take the role the Arabs want it to play towards the US, no matter if this is the taking over of certain functions of the US or the balancing of the US. For Egypt, Russia still seems to be the first choice when it comes to play the role of a possible balancer, for the Gulf States which look for a softer form of balancing that is less provocative to the long term ally this is France. That China is seen as important in economic terms, and therefore less appealing on the highly securitised regional level, could however have a different effect on the domestic level, where the roles of foreign actors in economic development play a major part in the discourse on regime survival.

9.5. Energy and Economic Roles

China frames its role as an 'energy buyer' in two different ways. On the one hand China portrays its energy needs as purely commercial and 'legitimate for an industrializing country' to counter Western accusations of trying to lock out other interests or demand for more 'political responsibility'; on the other hand it frames its energy deals as an act of 'commercial balancer', supporting regional states against the strong dependency on the West. Ironically, the danger to regional economies of an over-dependence on China is not debated, although Chinese scholars reference regional criticism of the trade imbalance. Non-energy trade with the Middle East, is also an important aspect of China's debate about improving the integration

of its own Muslim minorities, as a tool to integrate Muslims stronger into its economic success story. This follows the narrative that ethnic and religious problems are first of all social and economic problems and thereby can be solved through economic measures.

For the Saudi political discourse, oil equals security, as the future survival of the kingdom is perceived to be depending on reinvesting the oil wealth of the country into measures supporting regime stability. In the Saudi case, energy security does not mean 'security of supply' but 'security of demand'. In this way, the strategy of 'going east' is regarded as a question of survival for the kingdom. Asia and especially the biggest buyer China is seen in the role of a long term customer for the future, due to the expectation of a growing demand in East Asia, but also due to US's attempt to strengthen its energy independence.

However, regional disillusionment is also strong in the economic role due to the feeling that China is not interested in investing in the regional economies, and China is not seen to make good on the messages of solidarity that it spreads in the region. China not only plays the strategic role of buying oil and investing in Saudi downstream oil investment, but it also plays a dual role of both 'enabler' and 'constrainer' of Saudi Arabia's industrialization policy, mostly because of imports of goods made in China. The Chinese are not seen as willing to invest in Saudi industrial development which is heavily criticized by the Saudis.

In the Emirati discourse, China is seen as taking a positive counter-role to the UAE, especially for trade dependent Dubai. In this perspective, the rise of the Emirates is closely connected to the rise of East Asia. Therefore, the role expectations expressed towards China are mostly economic as a trading partner. As the survival of the smaller Gulf states is built on the economy however, the importance of China transcends the purely economic role and becomes important for the future survival of the state.

Different from the Gulf States, Egyptians first of all see China as an 'economic threat'. As Egypt has to urgently find jobs for its unemployed population, the import of Chinese products is seen as having destroyed Egyptian industries and their manufacturing jobs, and because of Egypt's political instability, job creation has also always been a question of regime survival. However, there again seems to be a difference of threat perception between elite and popular perspectives. Elites, while they are still critical of China for not investing enough, seem to be

more convinced of the opportunities of Chinese outsourcing of production to the Nile, and therefore see China less as a threat to Egyptian industry, and rather in the role of 'investor' and 'employer'. Public opinion on the other side, might be more impressed by the clichés about bad Chinese quality and illegal street vendors taking away Egyptian jobs. Again, the 'China model' which plays a big role in the Western discourse on China's rise, is overshadowed in the region by other, Islamic models like Turkey or Malaysia.

9.6. The Arab Spring

In the Chinese debate before the Arab Spring, the Middle East also had the role of an ideological ally as the only region in the world where there is no functioning democracy, and a good argument for the concept of political order being based on culture. With the Arab Spring, the Chinese perception changed and the Middle East was now seen even more as a source of instability and danger to the Chinese domestic order. China tried to counter this threat in its debate by focusing on the causes of the Arab Spring as typically Arab and emphasizing that the Chinese political system has been more effective in meeting its people's needs.

Once again, Chinese commentators put the US in the role of trouble maker, that has tried to start another 'colour-revolution' and interfered in the internal matters of sovereign states. Concerning the intervention in Libya, China sees itself as tricked by the West and is not willing to describe its then softer attitude towards intervention as a role change, but simply as an attempt to support the Libyan people. On Syria, China sees itself as the only neutral country and as holding the role of the 'responsible stakeholder'. Officially China considers the position of the US in the region as weakened, while at the same time Chinese analysts are concerned that the traditional anti-American governments have basically disappeared or been weakened. At the same time, of course anti-Western non-state actors have increased their power during the course of the Arab spring in form of Islamist movements, which Beijing perceives perhaps as an even bigger threat than Western hegemony.

Overall China sees its own reaction to the Arab Spring as a success, although the official and the unofficial statements differ. Chinese analysts criticise however that Beijing's reaction to the Arab Spring came too late, and that China was badly informed about the new social actors that arose in countries like Egypt, as the embassies had no contacts to domestic players beyond

the toppled governments. This was mostly seen as a result of Beijing's non-interference stand and the concept of a 'harmonious world' which lead it to insist on purely government-to-government relations with other countries. This made it more difficult for China to get access to the revolutionary groups after they had succeeded in overthrowing the previous leaders. Still, most Chinese analysts and decision makers seemed to be shocked by the negative Arab reactions to China's role performance. The discussions about the need for a change in China's role conception that resulted in its forays into conflict mediation and the 'one belt - one road' concept, can be seen as a result of this assessment of the Arab Spring. The same can be said about its attempts to improve information-gathering and research on the region.

Lastly, in the Western discourse, the perception of China's role during the Arab Spring is often covered by orientalist assumptions about 'egoistic' Chinese reasoning. Instead of accepting the role conflict between Chinese role conceptions and Arab role expectations, the Western discourse labels China as 'insincere' by talking about taking on more responsibility, understood by a Western audience as interventionist policy, without actually implementing it. This has led to multiple misunderstandings and disappointments on the Western side, regarding China's willingness to take on the role of 'responsible stakeholder' in the region.

9.7. Five Hypotheses for Future Research

This book is not an endpoint of research, but rather a starting point. The opportunities that this role-theoretical, multilevel approach offers for future research are vast, as can be expected from a topic as wide-ranging and complex as the evolving relationship between China and the Middle East. It should be understood as an overview over the field and as an outline of some of the next possible research steps to gain a better understanding of China's relationship with the Middle East. The following five concluding hypotheses that result from the aforementioned findings could therefore serve as starting points for future research.

Hypothesis One: China's role conceptions contain historical naratives that lead to conflicts with Arab expectations because of different historical experience and resulting different historical frames which are used to 'read' China's role performance by the Arab side.

For a start, a rewarding field of research would be a genealogy of the different narratives used by different sides in the discourses, especially the 'silk road' narrative. As was described, the

'silk road' narrative is stronger in China and the West than in Arab countries. This difference should be tested in countries like Iran or Turkey, which because to their own history might identify more with the frame or the whole narrative. If so, it would be interesting to know if these perspectives are indigenous or if the narrative starts to transcend the discursive boundaries; in the Arab discourses at least there might be indications that this starts to happen, perhaps even more now with the 'one-belt-one-road' initiative. This could also be an indication that China starts to be able to influence the discourses in the other regions by framing them with its own narratives.

It will obviously be advisable to extend the number of countries researched, and to look for differences in different Arab discourses especially in the traditionally pro-Chinese Algerian discourse. It would also be interesting to ask, if there is a difference between the framing of the relationship in Arab countries and Iran. This could build on the trailblazing research undertaken in this regard by John Garver.

While this research focussed on a rather narrow basis of intellectual discourses, media surveys, like the one undertaken anecdotally by al-Sudairi on the Saudi press, and on a small part of the Egyptian press in this research, should also be undertaken on the newspapers in different Arab countries, regional social media and regional TV stations for a more thorough and more broad-based comparison.

The parsimonious approach of Nonneman's Complex Framework of Analysis made it possible to compare the different perspectives, but it obviously does not leave enough space and resources for making in-depth research on the different discourses. It is therefore obviously necessary to study the processes inside the different discourses in much greater detail than was possible in this research. While role discussions have been used by numerous authors, as described in Chapter one, a better understanding of the general process of foreign policy role discourses in Arab States would be beneficial to gain a better understanding of China's place in them.

Hypothesis Two: The role conflict in the Arab-Chinese relationship will lead to a learning process and a process of a two-way sozialisation of both sides into a fitting set of role conceptions and role expectations.

As the direct relationship between the two sides is relatively new, the conflictual position of role conceptions and expectations is not exactly surprising. For the same reason there is no imperative that this has to remain unchanged for the mid- or long term future. Constructivist role theory assumes the changeability of foreign policy role conceptions and expectations and therefore we could expect a learning or adaptation process to take place on both sides. This has to overcome the historical frames, either by reframing the perceived actions of the other as fitting the relevant narrative or by constructing new roles for each other, according to the disposition of the other actor.

This socialisation is a difficult and time consuming process and can only be observed over the long term. However, the learning-, or perhaps only adaptation, process that seems to have happened on the Chinese side, in part as a reaction to the perceived role conflict during the Arab spring, could indicate that these socialisation processes are indeed taking place. A combination of the role theoretical hypotheses forwarded in this book with a socialisation approach, as undertaken by Rachel Foltz¹⁰⁹⁷ on the German and Nordic security policy discourses, would be an interesting extension here. To start with, this book did not attempt to present a real genealogy of the discourses about China's role in the region from the Nasser- or Mao-eras to the Arab Spring. A temporal comparison would no doubt uncover an interesting shift in the use of frames by both sides in perceiving each other. A more detailed discourse analysis and temporal comparison could be used for testing the hypotheses forwarded here.

Hypothesis Three: This socialisation process will take place as a multilayered process

The interlinkage between the regional discourse on China and on other Asian players has only been hinted at here. The question how the Arab role expectations towards China, Japan, India, South Korea and the South East Asian nations condition each other, will be one of the most rewarding, and complex, questions for future research.

Perhaps more ethnographically inspired, it is so far very little understood how social processes like migration and the sojourns of Arab traders and students in China change the perception of Arabs towards the Middle East. Obviously, not all students that study in China have a

¹⁰⁹⁷ See Foltz (2013)

favourable view of their host-country afterwards, although this often seems to be an assumption in Western research. We should also ask what the impact of Chinese residents in Arab countries is on the public opinion of their host country, and how these sojourns change the political views of Chinese migrants.

Finally, there are methodological opportunities to improve the analytical model. The limits of the different levels are often blurred and this is obviously a limitation when it comes to understanding how different discourses influence each other. It would however also be necessary to gain a better understanding about the interrelation between public and elite discourses. In addition, as this research focussed mostly on state-centered discourses, with the growing importance of different forms of Islamism in the region the Islamist discourses on China could add new insight, especially when compared to more secularist discourses.

Hypothesis Four: Different processes of securitisation and the resulting hierarchisation of roles and role segments intervene in the role socialisation process

This research focussed on those discourses in China, the Middle East and the West, which talk about China's role in the Middle East. This leads to a research bias as very often what is not talked about can be more indicative of a position in a discourse, than what is talked about. A discourse analysis of the (security-) discourses that do not talk about China might therefore tell us how China and the role it can play, is actually hierarchised in the regional and international discourses.

Hypothesis Five: China's regional role conception serves as a role segment in its global role conception

China's international role is developing and as became clear, its Middle East policy is still very much dominated by its global outlook. It will therefore be important to understand its Middle Eastern Role as a role segment in its wider foreign policy role conception. There will be interaction between this segment and other regional roles, especially its role conceptions in Africa and Central Asia, which often include similar interests but also conflicts as the one discussed in the debate about the Lybia resolution.

9.8. Outlook - Will China's Role Change?

The last nine chapters have shown that China's rise takes place within a historically predefined set of regional roles; and it will have to be seen how much China's global rise not only reflects on regions like the Middle East, but in turn might also be influenced by these regions. The learning and understanding of each other's roles will remain one of the greatest challenges for all involved players over the next years, and it will be demanding for both China, the region, and the rest of the world, to learn from each other.

The role theoretical framework used in this book can help to get a better understanding of these processes. The Arab Spring has shown how dangerous the lack of understanding of each other's roles and the resulting anger on all sides can be. China, which was popular in the role of a non-Western international actor only a few years ago has created much resentment towards itself on the Arab side. This could have been prevented if there had been a greater sensibility for how specific regional roles are developed and how they are enacted. But for this, international actors have to open up to different identities and different conceptions of roles by the other actors and the systems that they exist in.

While the West might so far have been the most sophisticated and experienced player in international role-plays, benefitting not only from its research capabilities but even more its global discourse hegemony, its insistence on projecting its own role expectations towards other players will find it more difficult to succeed, the more experienced new players like China become. As the global distribution of material resources changes and regional interactions and systems become more complex, it will pay off for the West to try to understand the processes of socialisation going on between countries with different cultural backgrounds and to move away from the dichotomy of 'the West and the rest' and the tendency to perceive this 'rest' merely in counter-roles to Western roles.

In this regard the evolvement of China's role in the Middle East will be interesting to watch. Due to the complex analytical framework and the multiple perspectives necessary for understanding this process, no single answer can be given to the question of China's role in the Middle East or to predict any changes in the middle or near future. But one can expect that three possibilities arise:

The first and rather unlikely possibility is that China will manage to stay in a mostly economic role, like Japan, that it can repel the demands for more security 'responsibility' in the region and thereby evade the costs that more intervention would bring. But China is already developing away from this role due to the demands that securing the sea lanes and protecting its expat population in the region put on its regional role. That China is willing to invest in security infrastructure in the region, however should not be taken too quickly as a confirmation of the second option, demanded and often predicted by both Arab and Western counterparts: That China should take over more 'responsibility' for security as defined by the other players. This means for example getting more involved in the security of its oil investments in Iraq, put more pressure on Iran to behave as the West and the GCC wants it to, or even an active intervention in the Middle East peace negotiations. From the Arab point of view, besides taking over those role components demanded by the West, dedicating its capabilities to balance US hegemony in the region to varying degrees would be another expectation.

But while China will definitely find it necessary or even rewarding to fulfil some of these role expectations in the future, it is unlikely to simply yield to all of them, and learn them as its new regional role. More likely is the third option: That China might succeed in leaving the old role patterns that stem from colonialism and the Cold War at least partially behind and develop its own regional role. This would be the most difficult process and would demand a strong mobilization of resources and creativity on the Chinese side, but also willingness from the Arab side to engage more deeply and try to understand the perspective of the other. While the ossified structure of Chinese politics make creativity and flexibility difficult sometimes, the confucian concept of 'teaching and learning' in foreign policy might prove a useful framework for such a process of engagement, necessary to develop and install new concepts of regional order and the role of external actors in it. A more active and engaging strategy has been demanded by Chinese analysts and decision makers as a consequence of the disastrous role conflict during the Arab Spring. While the evolving role of the US in the security system of the Middle East will still be a source of counter-roles for all other players and will remain a factor of regional identification and mould for roles of new actors, it is very likely that China will try to cut out its own mechanisms by for example engaging players like Iran rather than confronting them; after all Western policies and roles have not been overly successful in the

Middle East over the last decades. Therefore, the 'one-belt-one-road' strategy, while still a rather empty framework, will have the chance to prove that it cannot only offer China the status it demands, but that it can develop mechanisms for new modes of development and intervention, needed by the region.

What can be said with some certainty however, is that given the volatility of the Middle Eastern system, any prediction of political outcomes in the region for even the next five years would be hyperbole. Research on China's role in the Middle East can only give us a better understanding of the historical and current processes.

'East of Suez' is not the distant 'other' anymore that it was when the British Empire relinquished its role there and China will not simply take over this role or any of the roles that developed in the regional space that the British left behind. Foreign policy roles are among the most lasting and powerful remains of the colonial system, and if we understand globalization as a process, that ends colonialism and leads to a democratisation of the international system, then a better understanding of the process of role formation is important. Therefore, an increasingly theory - inspired and empirically sound approach to this understanding could be one way to help ease the process of realignment of international relations as a result of changes in the international structure. What role China will play in the Middle East in the future depends not only on China's material ability and willingness to take on more 'responsibility', it also depends on the ability of the other states to understand China's role conceptions, to explain their own role expectations towards China and to engage in a mutual role learning process – 'East of Suez' and beyond.

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11. Interview sources & Questionnaire

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2. Interview with Huang Minxin, Xian, July 2011
3. Interview with Chinese Analyst, Beijing, July 2012
4. Interview with Chinese Analyst, Beijing, May 2013
5. Interview with Chinese Diplomat, Cairo, February 2012
6. Interview with Chinese official at TEDA Special economic zone, Ain Sukhna, April 2012
7. Interview with Chinese official, Sharjah conference, January 2012
8. Interview with Li Weijian, Shanghai, February 2011
9. Interview with Wang Jinglie, Beijing, April 2013
10. Interviews with Wang Sulao, Beijing, July 2011 & April 2013
11. Interview with Sun Degang, Shanghai, February 2011
12. Interview with Cairo University Lecturer, Cairo, February 2012
13. Interview with journalist working for Iranian television, Beijing, June 2010
14. Interview with Arab League Diplomat, Cairo, March 2012
15. Interview with Chief Economist of Dubai International Financial Center, Dubai, Dec.2011
16. Interview with Chinese (HK) advisor to UAE government, Dubai, March 2012
17. Interview with Dubai Bank, Dubai, March 2012
18. Interview with Dubai Chamber of Commerce, Dubai, April, 2013
19. Interview with Dubai Consultant, Dubai, November 2011
20. Interview with Dubai Financial Analyst, Dubai, October 2011
21. Interview with Dubai Government Advisor, Dubai, December 2011
22. Interview with Dubai Tourism official, Sharjah, January 2011
23. Interview with ECBC, Cairo, February 2012
24. Interview with Egyptian academic, Cairo University, Cairo, February 2012
25. Interview with Egyptian Analyst (al-Ahram centre), March 2012
26. Interview with Egyptian Diplomat, Beijing, April 2013
27. Interview with Egyptian Diplomat, Cairo, April 2012
28. Interview with Egyptian Economist, Abu Dhabi, December 2011
29. Interview with Egyptian Lawyer, Cairo, January 2012
30. Interview with Arab League Official, Cairo, April 2012

31. Interview with Emirati University Lecturer, March 2013
32. Interview with energy analyst, Dubai, October 2011
33. Interview with GCC Diplomat, Beijing, December 2010
34. Interview with Military Analyst, Dubai, November 2011
35. Interview with Muslim Brotherhood foreign policy advisor, London, September 2013
36. Interview with Qatari Academic, Doha, November 2011
37. Interview with Qatari academics, Doha, October 2011
38. Interview with Qatari analyst, Doha, October 2011
39. Interview with Saudi analyst, Dubai, November 2011
40. Interview with Saudi diplomat, Beijing, May 2013
41. Interview with UAE Analyst, Abu Dhabi, March 2012
42. Interview with UAE Foreign Policy Advisor, Abu Dhabi, March 2012
43. Interviews with Egyptian and Saudi diplomats, Beijing, April/May 2013
44. Interview with Washington Post journalist, Washington, 2013
45. Interview with Western diplomat, Berlin, March 2013
46. Interview with Western diplomat, Dubai, March 2013
47. Interview with Japanese Security Official, Dubai, April 2013
48. Interview with Korean diplomat, Dubai, March 2013
49. Interviews with Egyptian Tour Operators, Cairo & Luxor, January to March 2012

Nationality:	Occupation/ Major:	Female/Male	
Which of these countries do you have sympathies for? (max.3 countries)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Saudi Arabia <input type="checkbox"/> India <input type="checkbox"/> Iran <input type="checkbox"/> Britain	<input type="checkbox"/> Russia <input type="checkbox"/> China <input type="checkbox"/> France <input type="checkbox"/> Turkey	<input type="checkbox"/> South Korea <input type="checkbox"/> Malaysia <input type="checkbox"/> USA <input type="checkbox"/> Japan	<input type="checkbox"/> Germany <input type="checkbox"/> Qatar <input type="checkbox"/> Egypt <input type="checkbox"/> _____
Which of these countries would you like to work/study in? (max.3 countries)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Saudi Arabia <input type="checkbox"/> India <input type="checkbox"/> Iran <input type="checkbox"/> Britain	<input type="checkbox"/> Russia <input type="checkbox"/> China <input type="checkbox"/> France <input type="checkbox"/> Turkey	<input type="checkbox"/> South Korea <input type="checkbox"/> Malaysia <input type="checkbox"/> USA <input type="checkbox"/> Japan	<input type="checkbox"/> Germany <input type="checkbox"/> Qatar <input type="checkbox"/> Egypt <input type="checkbox"/> _____
Which (if any) of these countries is a political threat to your own country?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Saudi Arabia <input type="checkbox"/> India <input type="checkbox"/> Iran <input type="checkbox"/> Britain	<input type="checkbox"/> Russia <input type="checkbox"/> China <input type="checkbox"/> France <input type="checkbox"/> Turkey	<input type="checkbox"/> South Korea <input type="checkbox"/> Malaysia <input type="checkbox"/> USA <input type="checkbox"/> Japan	<input type="checkbox"/> Germany <input type="checkbox"/> Qatar <input type="checkbox"/> Egypt <input type="checkbox"/> _____
Which (if any) of these countries is an economic threat to your own country?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Saudi Arabia <input type="checkbox"/> India <input type="checkbox"/> Iran <input type="checkbox"/> Britain	<input type="checkbox"/> Russia <input type="checkbox"/> China <input type="checkbox"/> France <input type="checkbox"/> Turkey	<input type="checkbox"/> South Korea <input type="checkbox"/> Malaysia <input type="checkbox"/> USA <input type="checkbox"/> Japan	<input type="checkbox"/> Germany <input type="checkbox"/> Qatar <input type="checkbox"/> Egypt <input type="checkbox"/> _____
Which of these countries could serve as a political/economic model for your own country?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Saudi Arabia <input type="checkbox"/> India <input type="checkbox"/> Iran <input type="checkbox"/> Britain	<input type="checkbox"/> Russia <input type="checkbox"/> China <input type="checkbox"/> France <input type="checkbox"/> Turkey	<input type="checkbox"/> South Korea <input type="checkbox"/> Malaysia <input type="checkbox"/> USA <input type="checkbox"/> Japan	<input type="checkbox"/> Germany <input type="checkbox"/> Qatar <input type="checkbox"/> Egypt <input type="checkbox"/> _____
Which of these countries played a negative role during the Arab spring?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Saudi Arabia	<input type="checkbox"/> Russia	<input type="checkbox"/> South Korea	<input type="checkbox"/> Germany

<input type="checkbox"/> India	<input type="checkbox"/> China	<input type="checkbox"/> Malaysia	<input type="checkbox"/> Qatar
<input type="checkbox"/> Iran	<input type="checkbox"/> France	<input type="checkbox"/> USA	<input type="checkbox"/> Egypt
<input type="checkbox"/> Britain	<input type="checkbox"/> Turkey	<input type="checkbox"/> Japan	<input type="checkbox"/> _____

Do you think the power of the USA is in decline?

1. Yes, and other states are rising	2. Yes, but no other states are rising	3. No decline of USA
--	---	-----------------------------

Which country would you like to see as the future global superpower(s)? (max. 2 countries)

1. USA	2. Russia	3. China	4. India	5. EU	6. _____
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Which of these countries do you think your country should have close relations with

1. USA	2. Russia	3. China	4. India	5. EU	6. _____
--------	-----------	----------	----------	-------	----------

Which words come to your mind when you think of 'China'?

What (if anything) do you think your country can learn from China?

Should China play a stronger role in Middle East politics? Why/not?

Do you like the political system of China? Why/not?

Do you see the Chinese economy as a threat to your own economy? Why/not?

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