

TURKEY'S ROLE IN CHINA'S SOFT BALANCING STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

China is pursuing a soft balancing strategy in the Middle East to achieve its economic targets and reap the benefits of oil reserves, challenging the predominance of the US in the region. As political and economic rivalry between the US and China accelerates in the Middle East, Turkey, an important regional actor, can help shift the balance of power toward China. In addition to Turkey's pivotal role in the bargaining process over power, this article studies the soft balancing concept in the theoretical framework of international relations as well as the dynamics of China's soft balancing strategy against the predominance of the US in the region.

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The geopolitical importance of the Middle East has been sharply rising since 1990, particularly because of its oil and gas reserves that respectively amount to 50 percent and 47 percent of the world's supply.¹ The region has thus become a pivotal area that responds to China's need for oil and other energy resources. China's venture to seek improved relations with regional countries will allow greater influence and control over the external environment. To that end, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 as a new strategy to increase its global economic network to form mutually beneficial partnerships. In order to halt China's increasing influence, the US will likely strategize to minimize Asian countries' economic dependence on China,² consequently forcing China to seek new strategic partners in the region. To that extent, the Middle East will be even more hard-pressed for China in the near future.

The more China develops its economic, trade, and energy relations with the Middle East, the more it will need to conduct soft balancing strategies toward the US. Turkey, as a rising power in the Middle East, Eurasia, and Central Asia, has a pivotal role in China's influence in these regions, particularly in the Middle East. As a political, economic, and cultural bridge between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, Turkey has the potential to become a game-changer in the politics of these regions.

Soft Balancing Concept in the International System

Power balancing is an important component in foreign policy that allows a state to protect itself from rival states while achieving its political and economic goals. In realist scholarship, power balancing is a key strategy for states to eliminate the threats of a dominant power. Realist scholars such as Morgenthau and Waltz argue that states initially seek security and stability at the systemic level, but can change their minds and start to balance a superpower in a more traditional way at any time.³ However, since a state can never be sure about the other state's real intentions in such an anarchic international system, they usually resort to strategies that will allow them to be secure and powerful in the face of possible threats.

Realist scholars argue that weaker states have common interests in balancing a more powerful state, and that there is little a dominant state can do to avoid this tendency.⁴ However, one state alone cannot balance a hegemon state; it needs partners or a

¹ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Gold at the end of the Rainbow? The BRI and the Middle East," *Global Policy*, Vol.9, No.3 (2018), pp. 388-96.

² G. John Ikenberry, "Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol.XX, No.XX (2015), pp. 1-35.

³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1967); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review*, Vol.91, No.4 (1997), pp. 913-16.

coalition to achieve a rough equilibrium.⁵ To that end, according to Walt, balancing or alliance strategies are alternative ways to respond to threats that are based on aggregate power and offensive intentions.⁶

“*The Middle East has become a pivotal area for China due to the Chinese economy’s dependency on the area’s energy resources.*”

Although realists argue that the US’ power will eventually be balanced, it remains unclear whether a bipolar or a multipolar system will be the outcome of the power balance. The promoters of soft balancing argued that power balancing had no utility in the early post-Cold War world due to the lack of a rival superpower. However, with the emerging power of China and the resurgence of Russia, a new balancing concept had to emerge. As a result, in the mid-2000s, soft balancing transformed into a concept against the US. The main question asked by soft balancing scholars is how to balance a dominant state without using hard power instruments. Separate from hard power, Paul claims that political alignment is essential for relatively weak states to form their defensive and deterrent capabilities in a soft balancing system.⁷ This alignment can also be either economic or strategic, or as Snyder argues, this alignment can be defined as a tacit agreement based on common interests, which can later turn into a formal coalition.⁸ Soft balancing is also thought to be an explicit strategy to limit a dominant state’s power.⁹

Furthermore, according to Pape, territorial denial is also one of the most effective tools in soft balancing strategy, which prevents a dominant state to use its territories to attack another state, ultimately reducing the dominant state’s potential to prevail over rivals.¹⁰ However, in this process, the rival state may also try to seek political or economic tools to technically disrupt the rising state’s power.¹¹ When states form alliances to balance a dominant state, all costs and risks are shared. Therefore, the

⁵ T.V. Paul, “Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy,” *International Security*, Vol.30, No.1 (2005), pp. 46–71.

⁶ Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987).

⁷ Paul (2005), pp. 46–71.

⁸ Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997), pp. 3-8.

⁹ Ilai Z. Saltzman, “Soft Balancing as Foreign Policy: Assessing American Strategy toward Japan in the Interwar Period,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol.8, No.2 (2012), pp.131–50.

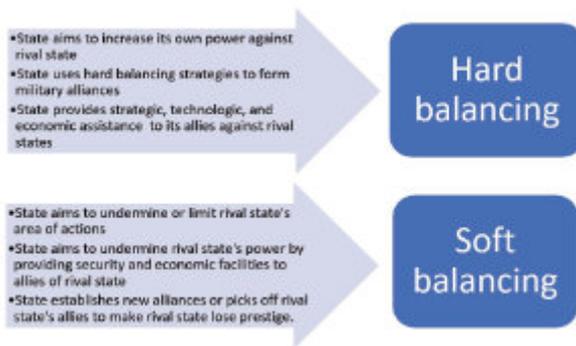
¹⁰ Robert A. Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States,” *International Security*, Vol.30, No.1 (2005), pp. 7–45.

¹¹ Akbar Khan and Han Zhaoying, “Conflict escalation in the Middle East revisited: thinking through interstate rivalries and state-sponsored terrorism,” *Israel Affairs*, Vol.26, No.2 (2020), pp. 242-56

formation of an alliance in soft balancing depends on the costs, benefits, and the possibility of success.¹²

As Paul argues, hard power balancing is costly and relatively risky.¹³ Formerly, the traditional balancing was based on territorial sovereignty, and was used to protect the state's borders against a dominant state. However, the threat of territorial existence and sovereignty is relatively lower today.¹⁴ Therefore, such a formation can be created more easily with the members of the same security organizations or strategic institutions.

Figure 1: The Typological Structure of Power Balancing



The Dynamics of China's Soft Balancing Strategy in the Middle East

As a result of not having a history of colonial dominance in the Middle East, as well as adopting a non-intervention policy toward states' internal issues, China has been able to easily establish friendly relations with the region. However, the US' assertive policies in the Middle East have negatively affected China's economic interests in the region. Now, China aims to halt the US' actions in the region by deepening relations with Middle Eastern countries—and US' present allies—through soft balancing.

China-Middle East relations date back almost two millennia. The relationship began a new chapter with the founding of The People's Republic of China in 1949. At the time, China's foreign policy was determined by a Maoist black-and-white viewpoint: countries, governments, organizations, and leaders were divided into either a "friend or foe", with a firm distinction between who was "with or against"

¹² Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics*, Vol.61, No.1 (2009), p. 208.

¹³ Paul (2005), pp. 46–71.

¹⁴ Paul (2005), pp. 46–71.

China. Therefore, China did not have any positive achievements in the Middle East or any other region during this period.¹⁵ However, this changed in the 1990s when China started to gain positive political influence in the Middle East due to its impartial diplomacy toward regional conflicts. With China becoming a net importer of oil in 1993, diplomatic and economic relations with Middle Eastern countries developed even further. Since then, the Middle East has become a pivotal area for China due to the Chinese economy's dependency on the area's energy resources.¹⁶

“In retaliation to the US's growing presence in the Pacific, China started to enhance its geostrategic position in the Middle East.”

In recent years, the economic interconnectivity among the rising global powers has been more complicated than ever before. Today's ally can be tomorrow's rival in a very short time. The political and economic interests may encourage two or more states in different regions to undermine the predominance of a superpower. For example, the US has followed a unilateral war strategy in the Iraq War, causing countries to engage in building institutional alliances against the US supremacy.¹⁷ In retaliation to the US' growing presence in the Pacific, China started to enhance its geostrategic position in the Middle East. In fact, after President Xi visited the Middle East in 2016, the Chinese government published the first Arab Policy Paper,¹⁸ which introduced a “1+2+3” economic model to the Middle Eastern countries.¹⁹

China's soft balancing strategy in the Middle East is evolving in accordance with China's energy and trade policies.²⁰ A crucial component of the strategy is The Belt and Road Initiative, mentioned earlier. BRI is considered as a new development par-

¹⁵ Yitzhak Shichor, “Gains and Losses: Historical Lessons of China's Middle East Policy for Its OBOR Initiative,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol.12, No.2 (2018), pp. 127–41.

¹⁶ Tristan Kenderdine and Peiyuan Lan, “China's Middle East investment policy,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol.59, No.5-6 (2019), pp. 1–20.

¹⁷ Sinem Ünalđılar Kocamaz, “The Rise of New Powers in World Politics: Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Journal of International Relations*, Vol.16, No.61 (2019), pp. 127–41.

¹⁸ Sebastian Hornschild, “China in the Middle East: not just about oil,” *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, 13 July 2016, pp. 1–2.

¹⁹ In this model: “1” means energy cooperation as a principal axis; “2” means infrastructure investments and facilitation of the trade; “3” means high-tech fields of nuclear power, space satellites, and energy cooperation. For further explanation, see: Jin Liangxiang, “China's Role in the Middle East: Current Debates and Future Trends,” *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol.3, No.1 (2017), pp. 39–55.

²⁰ Mordechai Chaziza, “Sino-Turkish ‘Solid Strategic Partnership’: China's Dream or a Reality?” *China Report*, Vol.52, No.4 (2016), pp. 265–83.

adigm that will enhance cooperation, investment, and the infrastructure of railways, highways, oil and gas pipelines, trade facilitation, and financial integration in designated regions. With the aim of protecting, resuming, and furthering these policies, China will most likely challenge regional competitors, namely the US, with political and economic conflicts.

Ever since China became an important economic power in the world, China-US relations have transformed into a power competition. As long as China and the United States continue to depend on oil and other energy resources of the Middle East and other strategic regions, the competition will intensify.²¹ As Chinese President Xi Jinping stated, China is moving toward becoming a global leader in “composite national strength [a political, economic, military, and social power] and international influence.”²²

With the establishment of the BRI, China will become a more dominant economic partner of the Middle East. In order to prevent trade and energy supply disruptions, China hopes to establish an integrated energy, trade, and business development model with key Middle Eastern countries that will allow the relationship between China and the Middle East to rapidly develop.²³ The motivations behind the BRI are not just limited to balancing the US and alleviating China’s economic slowdown since 2012.²⁴ It is also important for China’s long term policies, such as China’s ambition to revive its past glory, boost exports, export currency, promote China’s global economic integration and, ultimately, realize the Chinese dream.²⁵

The Significance of Turkey in China’s Middle East Strategy

Turkey and China are located at the opposite ends of the Asian continent and have been linked through the ancient Silk Road for centuries. From the Second World War on, Turkey had started to develop political, economic, militaristic, and strategic relations with the US and European countries. With the end of the Cold War, Turkey began to increase its political and economic impact on Eurasian politics, ultimately becoming an important actor in the Middle East and Central Asia.

²¹ Mohammad Salman, Moritz Pieper, and Gustaaf Geeraert, “Hedging in the Middle East and China-U.S. Competition,” *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol.7, No.4 (2015), pp. 576-96.

²² Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” speech given on 18 October 2017 at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, *Xinhua*, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf

²³ Feng Chaoling, “Embracing Interdependence: The Dynamics of China and the Middle East,” *Brookings Doha Center*, March 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/en-embracing-interdependence-pdf.pdf>

²⁴ Heike Holbig, “Whose New Normal? Framing the Economic Slowdown Under Xi Jinping,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol.23, No.3 (2018), pp. 341–63.

²⁵ Gan Junxian and Yan Mao, “China’s new silk road: where does it lead?” *Asian Perspective*, Vol.40, No.1 (2016), pp. 105–30; Maha S. Kamel, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for the Middle East,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol.31, No.1 (2018), pp.1–20.

Its position as an economic and cultural bridge between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East makes Turkey's participation in the BRI inevitable—specifically, in the China-Central-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC), which is one of the most important economic belts of the BRI. If Turkey and China are not able to cooperate, it will be far more difficult for the CCWAEC to reach Europe and the Mediterranean, as well as the Middle East, through railways and land routes.

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Considering the current energy demand, increased terrorism threats, and higher security needs, China-Turkey cooperation is crucial for the region's economy and security in the long-term.²⁶ Turkey, as a result, launched the Asia Anew Initiative last year to strengthen its political, economic, military, and cultural relations with China and other Asian countries.²⁷ In addition, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey are currently establishing a new strategic partnership by building the China-Pakistan-Iran-Turkey energy corridor (CPIT).²⁸ This is one of the most important signs of China's developing relations with the Middle East and Turkey.

Along with the BRI, another important component of China's soft balancing strategy is the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).²⁹ China has established the AIIB with the participation of 21 countries in 2014. While China became the biggest shareholder with 26 percent, Turkey became the 11th biggest shareholder of the bank with 2.5 percent.³⁰ In recent years, Turkey has developed an interest in joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as well; its application to SCO's Dia-

²⁶ Emrah Yıldırımçakar, “China’s Construction of the Normative Power in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative and Turkey-China Relations,” *Journal of International Studies*, Vol.3, No.2 (2019), pp. 145–69.

²⁷ Ümit Alperen and Eyüp Ersoy, “Turkey and Asia Anew: A Foreign Policy Initiative in Passing,” *The Diplomat*, 18 October 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/turkey-and-asia-anew-a-foreign-policy-initiative-in-passing/>; Burak Akinci, “Spotlight: Turkey launches Asia Anew initiative to move closer with Asian countries,” *Xinhua*, 13 August 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/13/c_138304255.htm

²⁸ Fei-fei Guo, Cheng-feng Huang, and Xiao-ling Wu, “Strategic analysis on the construction of new energy corridor China–Pakistan–Iran–Turkey,” *Energy Reports*, Vol.5 (2019), pp. 828–41.

²⁹ Lai Ha Chan, “Soft balancing against the US ‘pivot to Asia’: China’s geostrategic rationale for establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.71, No.6 (2017), pp. 2–22.

³⁰ Emrah Yıldırımçakar, “BRI and an Outlook of Turkey-China Relations,” *International Social Sciences Studies Journal*, Vol.5, No.40 (2019), pp. 3889–901.

logue Partner Status in 2011 was successful, allowing Turkey to officially become a Dialog Partner of the SCO in 2012.³¹

Turkey aims to secure a better place in SCO and be more active in Central Asian politics in order to establish strong relations with Asia and its related organizations. To that end, Turkey, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia signed an agreement to create the Lapis Lazuli Corridor. The agreement was signed on the margins of the 7th Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) in Ashgabat in 2017. China's reach to Central Asia and the Caucasus has been a major push factor in forming this new initiative. The Corridor aims to develop regional economic cooperation and connectivity among the five countries, enhance the economic and cultural links between Europe and Asia, improve the infrastructure of Central Asia, and support China in accelerating the BRI.³²

Conclusion

China wants to position itself as an important economic and military actor, as well as an alternative to the West. In line with the realist argument, it is difficult for a state to balance a superpower alone without a coalition or alignment with relatively weaker states. China is therefore increasingly forming partnerships on different levels with Middle Eastern states,³³ and by doing so, is challenging the US' global power and prestige. With its expanding economy, large population, and global rise, China is increasing its influence both in the Middle East and Central Asia. Meanwhile, as Turkey is also increasing its regional power in the Middle East and Central Asia, it is becoming a key player in regional alliances. Therefore, Turkish-Chinese cooperation will not only allow China to succeed in expanding the BRI to Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, but will also support China in challenging the dominance of the US in the Middle East.

³¹ Emrah Yıldırımçakar, "The New Challenges of the SCO and Turkey-SCO," *Journal of Political Administration and Local Studies*, Vol.2, No.2 (2019), pp. 93–108.

³² "China Funded Lapis-Lazuli Transport Corridor Unites Caucasus and Central Asia," *Silk Road Briefing*, 5 December 2017, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2017/12/05/china-funded-lapis-lazuli-transport-corridor-unites-caucasus-central-asia/#more-1053>

³³ "Quick guide to China's diplomatic levels," *South China Morning Post*, 20 January 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1903455/quick-guide-chinas-diplomatic-levels>