

China's soft power: an assessment of positive image building in the Middle East

By

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Abstract

With the boom in the Chinese economy and its increasing influence in the global world order, China adhered to a new strategy that focuses on improving its image in the world by relying solely on soft power. China's soft power strategy in the Middle East is little researched, however, the Middle East is of paramount global importance as the region is the world's largest energy supplier. This thesis examines China's soft power strategy and its key objectives in the Middle East through an in-depth analysis focusing on economic, cultural, political and military soft power initiatives. The findings of this research argue that China's pivot towards the Middle East is primarily driven by its need to secure energy sources, as well as other economic interests. Its influence in the Middle East is rapidly increasing through these various soft power initiatives. Although China's soft power strategy is mainly focused on economic and cultural soft power initiatives, political and military soft power initiatives have taken a larger focus in recent years. As China is gradually shifting from non-interference to limited-interference in the regions political and security affairs, it is committed to maintain and improve its image, which it attained solely through soft power, by not losing its neutrality while gradually becoming more proactive in the political and security field.

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Introduction

With the end of the Cold War, the world shifted into a unipolar power system. The dissolution of the Soviet Union preluded to a new era in which America's extensive diplomatic influence and military strength contributed to the new widespread perception of an America-centric world order, particularly in the 1990s. The United States (U.S.) transformed the global economy into a capitalist system by adopting a neoliberal economic policy that promoted elements such as free trade and open markets. Initially, mainly North American and Western European states benefited from this capitalistic system. Yet, with the turn of the century, this situation has changed as new players across the world have been shifting towards the center of the world order, thereby gradually influencing a shift in the global balance of power. At the same time, America's influence has declined as a result of what some scholars call "imperial overstretch", meaning that the great power's global commitments have become too expensive to sustain (Fox, 2016). Especially China is considered to increasingly pose a challenge to America's global influence (Regilme & Parisot, 2017).

When in 1976 the Mao regime came to an end, China had the opportunity to redefine its national objectives. It adopted an economic strategy which resulted in the opening-up of the economy. As China's economy integrated into the global capitalist system, the country succeeded to transform into a major global trade and economic power with its economy growing at an average annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of ten percent. As a result of this high growth rate, China is now the world's second largest economy. Moreover, China is the leading state in foreign investments, the world's largest exporter and second-largest importer of merchandise goods (Petras, 2012). With a population of almost 1.4 billion people, this economic transformation raised some 800 million people out of poverty (Eckart, 2016). As former president Hu Jintao stated in the yearly speech at the National Congress of the Communist Party of China: "China's development has not only enabled its people to move steadily toward prosperity and happiness, but also contributed substantially to the growth of the world economy and the progress of human civilization." (2007).

The unprecedented rise of China that further diffuses the shape of global power, was creating concerns and suspicion amongst other governments (Wang & Lu, 2008, p. 435). As the Chinese leadership realized that China was no longer an emerging state but was rising to become a global power, it began to adopt a soft power strategy in 2007. Not only was soft power used to show the world its commitment to a 'peaceful rise and thus to counter the prevailing discourse amongst other states, it was also linked to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation as a great power (Economy, 2016). The concept of soft power was initiated by Joseph S. Nye in the 1990s. He stated that soft power is the ability to shape someone's preferences through 'attraction', rather than 'coercion', which is the case with hard power. Other academics have ever since increasingly researched the notion of soft power. The variety of 'attractive sources' for soft power particularly have been the subject for scholarly discussions as the notion of

'attraction' is subjective and hence has led to the expansion of the definition of soft power. In the Chinese context, soft power has developed into a more inclusive form of power through attraction. By countering the Western, particularly the American, notion of soft power influence through the implementation of self-defined Chinese conception of soft power, China has tried to attract adoration and admiration in a different manner (Economy, 2016).

China has increasingly expanded its involvement in the Middle East since the 1990s.¹ Its engagement in the region has predominantly been economic, particularly focused on securing energy sources. Nonetheless, China is increasingly being approached by Middle Eastern states for trade, construction, investments, diplomatic consultations and even security operations (Scobell & Nader, 2016, p. 5). By establishing close ties with all states in the Middle East, China is expanding its interests and deepening its presence in the region. As China is deepening its involvement in the region, it tries to maintain its political neutrality towards regional conflicts and controversies, particularly by adhering to solely soft power tools. China's flexible and pragmatic strategy enables it to become increasingly active on the diplomatic front, establishing different platforms for increased cooperation, such as the "One Belt, One Road" initiative (OBOR).

The majority of the conducted research on China's global outreach through its soft power strategy has predominantly focused on Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. However, there is a lack of conducted research that focusses on Chinese soft power in the Middle East. Yet, the Middle East is of paramount international importance as it is the world's largest energy supplier. Moreover, the Middle East is the world's most volatile region, which automatically means that due to this global reliance on the region's energy sources, any tumult in the region affects the rest of the world. In the light of the transforming world order, it is crucial to understand how regional dynamics are changing as new players are entering the stage, in this case, China in the Middle East, one of the most important regions in the world. Moreover, analyzing China's sole commitment to soft power in the Middle East will provide us with a perspective on how untraditional great power foreign policy is deepening China's relations with the Middle East. Therefore, this thesis sheds light on China's influence in the Middle East and aims to answer the following questions:

What are the key objectives for China's foreign policy in the Middle East? How is China using a soft power strategy to gain influence in the Middle East?

The purpose of this Master's thesis is to gain insight into China's soft power strategy in the Middle East. In order to gain a clear understanding of the different elements of China's soft power strategy, a holistic definition of soft power will be used including economic, cultural, political, and military soft power.

¹ The definition of the Middle East is not static. In this particular thesis, the Middle East constitutes of Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, The Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. In addition, Afghanistan and South-Sudan are added to the definition in order to demonstrate China's increasingly active role in the political arena (chapter six).

This thesis argues that China's interest in the Middle East is mainly shaped by its need for continuous energy supply and economic and trade-related considerations. Moreover, China is increasingly deploying its economic and cultural soft power initiatives which enhance its trade relations and cultural exchange with the region. Although China is also deepening its relation regarding political cooperation and soft military contribution, which indicates a more pro-active stance, China's focus on its geo-economic interests restrains China from getting too involved in regional affairs.

This thesis is divided in a theoretical and an empirical part. The first chapter deals with the theoretical background on soft power. It includes a definition of power, academic discussions on the definition of soft power, and describes how China has deployed its global soft power strategy. The second chapter lays out the methodological approach of this thesis, which is inherently descriptive and explorative. In chapter three, the empirical part of the thesis is initiated. This chapter provides insight into China's rise, the adoption of the soft power strategy, and its recently enhanced relation with the Middle East. Subsequently, in chapter four, the first key element of soft power, namely economic soft power will be analyzed with regards to the Middle East. Their economic ties are mainly focused on energy, infrastructure, manufacturing goods, and the OBOR initiative. The second key element; cultural soft power, will be analyzed in chapter five, exploring educational outreach, the spread of Chinese media, and the promotion of arts. The sixth chapter analyzes the third key element of political soft power, focusing on China's gradual shift in the political arena of the Middle East. In the seventh chapter, the last key element of soft power, namely China's soft military power is being analyzed. This is followed by chapter eight, which will deal with the opportunities and challenges of future Chinese presence in the Middle East. Finally, with the outcome of the analyses of the elements, this thesis provides an answer to the research questions in a final conclusion.

1 Background

1.1 What is power?

“Power is like the weather. Everyone depends on it and talks about it, but few understand it.” (Nye, 2004, p. 1)

Power. Although everyone recognizes the existence of power, the concept is ambiguous and hard to define. The simplest understanding of power is the capability of accomplishing something. Yet, this definition fails to provide any information about context or relationship. One of the most known definition on power has been Robert Dahl’s definition: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.” (Dahl, 1957, p. 203). Thus, the definition of power contains a relationship between an agent, A, and a subject of power, B. This relationship is bound to be different since it depends on specific contexts. As Joseph Samuel Nye Jr states, it is not possible to speak about power without specifying *who* is involved in the power relationship nor without specifying *what* topics are involved (Nye, 2011, p. 6)

Power is often defined in relation to the possession of resources as a shortcut to analyze other states’ power. However, successful conversion of resources into power requires skillful leadership and well-designed strategies in order for actors to realize the potential of their resources (Nye, 2011, pp. 8-9). Therefore, it is rather through behavior that powerful actors can obtain the ability to alter the outcomes of their preference. The ability to alter the outcome, instead of the amount of resources, indicates “real” power (Nye, 2011, pp. 10-11). According to Nye, behavior can be altered with the help of three means; coercion, inducement, and attraction. He makes the distinction between hard and soft power by analyzing the nature of the behavior and the tangibility of the resources. Hard power is when the ability to change others’ actions is *commanded* by either the use of coercion or inducement. Others are therefore forced to alter their actions since hard power commands them to do so with threatening to use military force or economic sanctions. Soft power, however, is trying to obtain certain outcomes with the help of *attraction* (Nye, 2004, p. 5).

1.2 What is soft power?

“It may be better for a prince to be feared than to be loved, but the prince is in greatest danger when he is hated” - Machiavelli (Nye, 2011, p. 82)

The ideas that constitute soft power are not new. Several great thinkers have contributed with their notions to the concept of soft power as it is known today. Almost a century ago, Antonio Gramsci stated that not the military power, nor the force to control the political and economic arena are the most effective tool to control a state, but ideology and culture. In addition, Hans J. Morgenthau, the founder of the realist school of thought within the field of International Relations, has acknowledged that national power consists of visible and invisible power. According to Morgenthau, invisible power, consisting of

a state’s national character, national morale, and the quality of its international policy is as important as visible power (Li & Hong, 2012, p. 49). Joseph S. Nye initially introduced the concept of soft power in the 1990s. He later extended and improved his soft power theory.

According to Nye, desired outcomes can be obtained without using tangible threats or payoffs. By using soft power, others are persuaded to reshape their behavior according to your preferences. This is being done without any form of threat or exchange as would have been the case with hard command power. On the contrary, soft power relies on attraction. The resources for soft power tend to be associated with the co-optive end of the spectrum of behavior (see figure 1) (Nye, 2004, pp. 5-10). A state’s ability to successfully exercise soft power depends on the attractiveness of three main assets; its culture, its political values, and its foreign policy (Nye, 2011, p. 84). A state’s culture becomes attractive to others when it includes and promotes common values and interests. Likewise, a state can have more soft power when its national politics are attractive to other states, for instance by being a strong democracy. Furthermore, a state’s behavior in the international arena, either regarding its foreign policy or its behavior within international institutions, does strongly affect the attractiveness of the state. (Nye, 2004, pp. 11-15)

Figure 1: Power (Nye, 2004, p. 8)

	Hard	Soft
Spectrum of Behaviors	Command ← coercion inducement	agenda setting attraction → Co-opt
Most Likely Resources	force payments sanctions bribes	institutions values culture policies

1.3 Other perspectives

A large body of scholars has criticized Nye’s theoretical framework of soft power. They question why particularly culture, ideology, and values are the core sources of soft power. Nye assumes that “these sources of power are inherently attractive, persuasive, and appealing in nature” (Li M. , 2009, p. 4). However, basing soft power on these sources could be problematic. It could, for instance have a counter-effective effect, as is the case with for instance American popular culture in certain parts of the world, where it contributes to anti-Americanism rather than results in soft power (Katzenstein & Keohane, 2007). Todd H. Hall argues that in order to consider soft power attractive power, it should be acknowledged that attractiveness is based upon subjectively generated standards (Hall, 2016). The Beijing Consensus, the Chinese economic model that combines political authoritarianism with economic

liberalism, is appealing to many developing states. Yet, many Western developed states find that the Beijing consensus is having a negative impact on their bilateral relations with China (Li M. , 2009, p. 6)'.

Thus, attractiveness is dependent on the extent X appeals to another's taste. Other scholars have criticized Nye's soft power as a too Western-focused theory. As the shape of global order is shifting, non-Western states' foreign policies are considered attractive based on other sources, which are not included in Nye's limited conceptualization, such as the amount of foreign investment. Joshua Kurlantzick argues that soft power has changed over time and that the definition of soft power should be broadened by including all elements outside of the security realm, particularly focusing on economic soft power, since this enhances states' attractiveness (Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 6). Moreover, Li argues that the distinction between soft and hard power is not as absolute as Nye states. Traditional sources for hard power could be used to exercise soft power. International peacekeeping and deploying the military for humanitarian purposes are for instance considered soft military power. The social context is therefore crucial in deciding whether power should be considered hard or soft (Li M. , 2009, p. 6).

1.4 Chinese soft power

Soft power theory has gained major popularity amongst Chinese academia and officials. In 1993, soft power had been introduced in China in an article by Wang Huning, a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Huning stated that, instead of deploying costly and less effective hard power, states could attract others by having an admirable culture and ideology. However, the article was not really influential, partially caused by the reluctance of conservatives within the CCP to copy strategies of the Western World (Courmont, 2013). After the turn of the century, soft power gained momentum in China. Between 2000 and 2004, 53 Chinese articles were annually published on soft power. This amount accelerated further to an annual average of 314 times between 2005 and 2007 (Lai, 2012, p. 2). The process of adopting Nye's ideas of soft power and applying these ideas to China has resulted in an alteration of the theory and consequently resulted into "Chinese soft power" theories with different characteristics. Chinese academics adhere to Nye's definition of soft power as power through attraction, but have a wider scope on what elements generate attraction. They agree with Nye that culture, foreign policy, and values are major aspects of soft power. However, Chinese academics have another understanding of attractive institutions and values, emphasizing China's economic development model, the Beijing consensus, as a prominent feature of soft power. Chinese academics stress that China's socio-economic success and its experience with development give opportunity for soft power. Sophisticated diplomatic relations and respectable behavior in the international arena are also endorsed to improve a nation's soft power. Moreover, Chinese academics argue that national unity and regime legitimacy are key for developing soft power since a government needs to enjoy the support of the population to successfully gain international status and influence. Other elements that are considered sources of soft

power are science and technology, which can be major sources of comparable advantages (Wang & Lu, 2008, pp. 427-430).

Besides the popularity of soft power theory amongst the Chinese academics, Chinese government officials have also embraced soft power. On 30 August 2004, during the Tenth Conference of Chinese Diplomatic Envoys Stationed Abroad, former president Hu Jintao, stated for the first time in history that China's basic objective should be to combine its own development by enhancing friendships with other states and likewise by promoting a peaceful and stable international environment in which China was to develop soft power sources that would benefit its international status (Lai, 2012, p. 11). Governmental officials were aware that China's rapid economic development was making the world suspicious and concerned (Wang & Lu, 2008, p. 435). Soft power was considered the answer to counter the "threatening rise of China" discourse, and to assure the world that China aimed to commit to a "peaceful rise" (Lai, 2012, p. 2). In 2007, during the Seventeenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, China formally announces to adopt soft power as a political strategy. In the year that followed, China developed many sophisticated tools of influence to slowly improve its global soft power strategy. In recent years, soft power has become the main strategy of China's foreign policy. Soft power is no longer considered solely a tool to reach great power status, rather China is using it to internationally cultivate a good image, especially in the developing world (Courmont, 2013, pp. 347-350).

With China investing enormous amounts in initiatives that contribute to its national image building, its soft power capacity has grown over the years. China's soft power strategy has mainly focused on the developing world, particularly Southeast Asia, Africa and increasingly Latin-America and the Middle East (Courmont, 2013, p. 351). Several studies on China's soft power strategy, particularly in Southeast Asia and Africa, have clarified what tools the Chinese government deploys. These tools closely correspond with the ideas of Chinese academics on soft power. China's tools include a soft discourse, cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy and trade, developmental aid, and non-interference towards controversial international issues. Furthermore, China is committed to international peace and security by contributing to several peacekeeping missions, as well as providing international aid. Additionally, China adheres to "good neighbor" policies, aiming to promote a permanent state of peace and security in its wider region, which in turn contribute to a better economic environment (Lai, 2012, pp. 2-3)

1.5 Conceptualization of soft power

As analyzed above, the sources of soft power are not static. Soft power is generated through attraction, which is objective. The variety of sources are identified through empirical researches on Chinese soft power in other geographical locations contributed to the understanding that this thesis should not only include the economic and the cultural realms, but also the political and the soft military realms. As this thesis is aiming to map out China's soft power strategy and the manner in which China is using this strategy to gain influence in the Middle East, a holistic approach is necessary that connects different

elements of soft power strategy. Consequently, this thesis identifies four major sources of Chinese soft power: China's foreign economic policies, China's culture, China's neutral political contributions, and China soft military missions.

2 Methodology

In this China-focused Master's thesis, an in-depth analysis will be made on China's soft power strategy in the case of the Middle East. This thesis aims to investigate China's increasing influence in the Middle East and its key objectives. This will be done by a qualitative literature based research design that focuses on four key elements of China's soft power strategy: economy, culture, politics, and military soft power. Within the boundaries of this thesis, these four dimensions could provide a precise, and as complete as possible, in-depth analysis on China's soft power strategy. Previous research on China's soft power strategy in Asia and Africa included these dimensions as well. As qualitative research provides a great deal of descriptive detail, it fits within this thesis' research objective (Bryman, 2012, p. 401). Power in general, and in particular soft power, is difficult to measure. In other words, quantifying soft power is complex. The absence of quantitative data could pose weakness on the outcome of the thesis. However, as a qualitative design provides the ability for in-depth descriptions of the current condition of Chinese soft power in the Middle East, it is the right method in this research.

By employing a literature based research method, data will be collected by analyzing a wide variety of sources. Firstly, primary sources will be used to identify the Chinese government's own perspective on its soft power strategy and its relation with the region. These primary sources include governmental documents, such as the 2016 Arab policy paper, and speeches of Chinese officials, such as the speech of former President Hu Jintao in 2004. In addition, a wide variety of secondary sources will be used during the gathering of data; academic literature, research reports, newspapers, and publications on websites of particular institutions, such as the Confucius institute. The sources are selected based on their quality and accuracy for this thesis. Furthermore, reliable secondary sources are used by analyzing their objectivity by focusing on the absence of personal bias and value-freedom.

As this research is covering a rich region including seventeen Middle Eastern states in this particular case, it is necessary to acknowledge some limitations of this research. Although most states share the same language and religion, the states are not homogeneous. In fact, they have different historical, political, social and economic backgrounds. It should be clear that this thesis does not aim to examine each state individually, rather it tries to describe the current situation in the context of the Middle East from a regional perspective. Researching China in the Middle East is a relatively little-researched field. Therefore, this research will be primarily explorative and descriptive.

3 China-Middle East relation

The historical origins of the relationship between China and the Middle East date back to ancient times, when they were connected by trade networks which are now known as the Ancient Silk Roads. Before the 1980s, China's diplomatic ties with the region were primarily motivated by its communist ideology. Yet, with the opening up of China to the rest of the world, China's interests in the Middle East are renewed.

3.1 China's rise

The end of the Mao regime in 1976 gave China the opportunity to redefine its objectives. This resulted in an enormous shift of its economic policy. From 1979 onwards, China opened up to large-scale foreign trade and investments and likewise implemented free market reforms. Thousands of governmental industries were privatized and public subsidies were increasingly being used to promote capitalist development. By providing cheap labor, which China abundantly possesses, China gained access to the technical know-how of foreign firms, which it later used in the country's own build-up. The housing for the low-wage urban factory workers was being subsidized by the government, providing the chance for massive growth as lots of labor power moved to the cities. In order for China to develop its infrastructure, funds were provided for the construction of modern infrastructure (Petras, 2012). The economic capitalist strategy that had been adopted by the communist government resulted in an "economic miracle". With an average annual growth of the real GDP of almost ten percent between 1989 and 2016, China developed into a major global trade and economic power (Trading Economics). In 2010, China overtook Japan as the world's second-largest economy, by having an economic output of 1.33 trillion dollars. As China continues to grow at the same pace as it has done in the last three decennia, it is expected to become the world's largest economy between 2025 and 2035. China's ambitious geo-economic strategy does not only mean economic growth, but also includes active global diplomacy and the maintenance and promotion of a stable international arena (Olimat, 2010, p. 308)

3.2 China's interest in the Middle East

China aims to sustain economic development to continuously improve the living standards of the Chinese people in order to maintain national stability. Therefore, China has continuously adapted and developed its foreign economic policy; its geo-economic strategy. Geo-economics is "the use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results." (Ferchen, 2016, p. 5). In 2001, China adopted the *Zou Chuqu*, the "going-out" strategy. This strategy initiated an outward look for Beijing, trying to discover new markets for its exports, as well as finding new energy suppliers. China has particularly been active in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin-America, but the Middle East has also increasingly drawn Chinese attention, mainly because of the Middle Eastern characteristics (Chen, 2011, p. 1).

One of China's main obstacles has been energy security. The continuously growing economy has required increasing amounts of oil. China's foremost interest in the Middle East is securing access to energy sources (Alterman, 2017, p. 6). The Middle East developing markets, which have the potential to become a major trade hub that links three continents, draws China's attention. The region is also very likely to remain a significant location for Chinese contractors to undertake major infrastructure projects (Kāzemi & Chen, 2014, p. 41). The strategically well located Middle East is playing an important role in China's new "One Belt, One Road" initiative, the plan to rebuild the ancient silk roads, which will connect China, through Eurasia, and the Middle East all the way to Europe. Because the Middle East is playing such a prominent link in the OBOR initiative, China is interested in transforming the region in a stable conflict-free region, as conflict could be a pitfall for a successful completion of the initiative. Additionally, China fears that as a consequence of the regional conflicts radical Sunni Jihadi ideology spreads among its own Muslim population; the Uighurs and Han Muslims. Preserving security in China's wider neighborhood, including the Middle East, is therefore a key interest. The Middle East is also key to China's desire to develop stronger relationships with regional power and to expand its geostrategic beyond its immediate Asia-Pacific neighborhood. Increasing involvement in the region will contribute to China's goal to obtain respect from its citizens, the regional states, and the rest of the world. Moreover, it will enhance China's status as a great power (Scobell & Nader, 2016, pp. 8-19). Another major interest of China in the Middle East is its arms trade and military cooperation with regional states. As most Western countries are hesitant in trading high-tech military sales to China, Israel has grown to be China's second largest advanced weapons supplier. As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has stated in a meeting with the Chinese "Israeli know-how is more valuable than Arab oil." (Zhu, 2010, p. 59). Besides being a recipient of Israel's high-tech weapons, China is also one of the main weapon suppliers to several states in the Middle East (Zhu, 2010, pp. 59-62).

As China is increasingly present in the region, the Middle Eastern states have increased their interest. In comparison to the Western states, in particularly the U.S., China adds no political strings, nor specific conditions to cooperation. Where the U.S. was hesitant to sell armed drones to the UAE, China was glad to offer Chinese produced Wing Loong drones. Likewise, Saudi Arabia increasingly is turning to the Chinese weapon market as tensions with the U.S rise (The New Arab, 2016). Likewise, the Chinese development model, which includes economic growth without the need for political reforms, appeals to several Middle Eastern governments. China is a welcomed actor in the region. The Middle Eastern states are aware of the economic benefits a good relationship with China will provide them. As China's influence increases, not only in the region, but certainly also in the world, the regional states perceive China as a new power that could counterweight the traditional American influence in the region (Alterman, 2017, p. 13).

3.3 Platforms for increased cooperation

3.3.1 The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum

The Middle Eastern States reacted positively to China's increasing presence in the region. Both parties expressed the desire to create a platform to improve mutual cooperation in which they both would benefit. In 2004, the former Chinese president Hu Jintao paid a state visit to Egypt to discuss the establishment of the so-called "China-Arab States Cooperation Forum" (CACF) with Amr Moussa, Arab League Secretary-General, and representatives of the member states. With the combination of "going out" and "bringing in" approaches, the Forum improves China's own status through soft power initiatives by offering mutual benefits and development, and fostering friendships without forming depending alliances. Although the creation of this multilateral cooperation organization is still very recent, the efforts have resulted in a progressive 'win-win cooperation' between the Arab States and China. The institutional construction has been expanded quickly after the establishment. Under the Forum's framework, multiple issue specific sub-communication mechanisms are established dedicated to cooperation in the economic, cultural, political, and humanistic field. For instance the 'Entrepreneurs Conferences and Investment Seminar', which focusses on the solid economic facets of cooperation, aimed at tangible benefits to both sides. Another example is the Energy Cooperation Conference to encourage entrepreneurs to coordinate, cooperate and have constructive dialogues about energy development (Kuangyi, 2014, pp. 27-34).

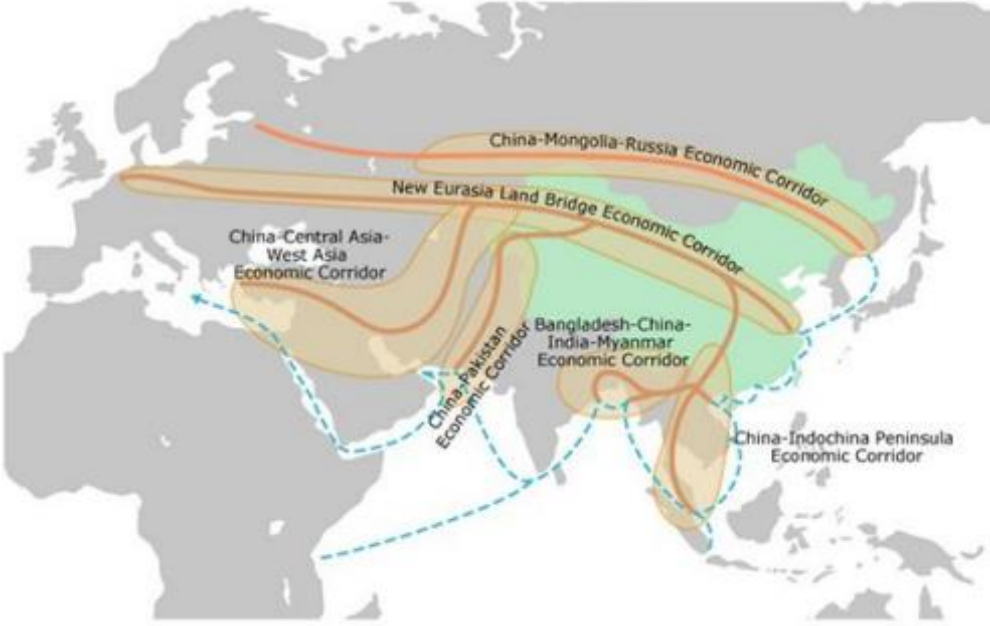
3.3.2 The One Belt One Road Initiative

In the fall of 2013, President Xi Jinping introduced a strategic framework to build a 21st century reinvention of the Ancient Silk Roads; the OBOR initiative. By building a trade corridor over land, the "Silk Road Economic Belt", and a trade corridor over sea, the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road", China's geo-economic "going-out" strategy seeks mutual benefit for all parties involved. "The Belt and Road Initiative is a way for win-win cooperation that promotes common development and prosperity and a road towards peace and friendship by enhancing mutual understanding and trust, and strengthening all-round exchanges." (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). The initiative, which already features 63 economies, has the potential to transform the international economy. It is estimated by Chinese official sources that upon realization the initiative will directly benefit 63 percent of the global population and will account for a collective annual gross domestic product of US \$2,1 trillion, which accounts for almost thirty percent of the world's wealth (Johnson, 2016).

Through the ancient Silk Roads trade network the region had been connected to the Far East for thousands of years. As the region connects Asia with Africa and Europe, its geographical location has strategic importance for OBOR's success. Most Middle Eastern governments reacted positively to the idea of reviving the ancient Silk Roads. Sixteen Middle Eastern economies are currently integrated into

the OBOR initiative.² The initiative provides the region with economic growth prospects, as trade and investment are set to shift ‘two-ways’. Multiple states, like the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Egypt and Iran, are developing their economies by focusing on becoming major maritime trade hubs. The OBOR initiative coincides perfectly with the ongoing undertakings. Furthermore, the initiative strengthens ongoing structural transformations in the Middle East, for instance by enhanced infrastructure construction and industrial capacity building (Grieger, 2016, p. 2)

Figure 2: the OBOR initiative: Six Economic Corridors Spanning Asia, Europa, and Africa (HKTDC Research, 2016)



3.3.3 China’s Arab policy paper

Although China has been aiming to enhance its relationship with the Arab states, a clear strategy was missing. As a result, the Chinese government issued its first Arab policy paper on January 13, 2016. The blueprint reveals China’s long-term commitment to the region and indicates a more proactive policy in the region. Although a lot of focus lays on the further deepening of their economic ties, the policy paper also mentions China’s commitment to peace and development in the Middle East. Overall, the paper is divided into five parts, namely, deepen China-Arab strategic cooperative relations of comprehensive cooperation and common development; China’s Arab policy; strengthen China-Arab cooperation in an all-around manner; China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and its follow-up actions; relations between China and Arab regional organizations (Xinhua News Agency, 2016).

² Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirate, and Yemen.

4 Economic soft power

China has experienced enormous economic growth since the 1980s; an average annual growth of around ten percent. By reaching outwards through economic diplomacy, China is enhancing its global economic presence. According to its geo-economic strategy, the government's main task is developing economic ties with other states. With regards to the Middle East, China also relied on this typical "business-first approach". According to China's official statistics, the total trade volume with the Middle East increased by 87 percent to \$100 billion from 2005 until 2009. This volume further increased to \$222 billion in 2012 (Kāzemi & Chen, 2014, p. 41). Furthermore, in 2013, China was ranked the second largest trading partner of the Middle East, while being the biggest trading partner of ten individual states (Sun & Zoubir, 2015, p. 904). Two years later, China evolved into the world's largest exporter to the region (Hindy, 2017).

In order to facilitate further economic expansion, the Chinese government continuously seeks to improve its relation with the region. With the creation of several platforms for the enhancement of cooperation, like the CASCF, as well as including the region in the OBOR initiative, China's tries to emphasize the growing economic ties as "win-win" relations (Sun & Zoubir, 2015, pp. 907-910). The economic ties have been built on three main pillars: energy, infrastructure, and manufactured goods. In 2014, President Xi Jinping introduced the "1+2+3" formula, which prioritizes energy cooperation, but also emphasizes the importance of deepening trade and investment, as well as enhancing cooperation in new sectors, such as renewable and nuclear energy and aerospace technology (Ministry of Foreign Affairs , 2016).

4.1 Energy

As the Chinese economy has continuously been growing, the demand for energy has also increased. In 1993, China became a net oil importer and consequently had to turn outwards to search for new energy sources. In 2009, China became the world's second-largest net importer of crude oil and petroleum products. Four years later, in September 2013, China surpassed the United States as the world's largest net importer of petroleum and other liquids like oil. Although the government has made an effort to diversify its energy supplies by exploring renewable energy sources, natural gas, and nuclear power, China is still very reliant on the rest of the world, particularly the Middle East (EIA, 2015, pp. 1-2). Between 2013 and 2014 alone, China saw its oil import increase with nine percent, while its GDP growth was moderate (Alterman, 2017, p. 6).

The Middle East is home to the world's largest amount of oil reserves. In 2014, 51 percent of the Chinese oil imports were from the Middle East, making China's economy reliant on the Middle East (EIA, 2015, p. 10). Ensuring access to the Middle Eastern oil is therefore a vital element of China's policy. Besides the trade in oil, China has initiated direct investments in the Middle Eastern oil industries. Hereby, Chinese national oil companies, like China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), started to compete

with Western oil companies to attract contracts (Khoudouri, 2014). Most of these service contracts are for developing large oil fields. China is, for instance, the largest investor in postwar Iraq, as CNPC obtained the right to develop the al-Ahdab oilfield, among several other Iraqi oilfields, for twenty-three years (Downs, 2013). Moreover, China is also engaging in joint constructional contracts with domestic companies. China's Sinopec, another national company, worked together with Saudi oil giant Aramco to build an oil refinery in the port city of Yanbu, resulting in a 37.5 percent stake in the plant (Zhu, 2010, p. 53). China continues to sign mega oil deals, increasing its influence in the region. The oil states are welcoming China's increasing demand with open arms. The new partnerships are providing the states with greater independence and political flexibility from for instance the U.S.

In recent years, the energy industry has increasingly been focused on developing renewable energy sources. The region's oil producing states are looking to diversify their energy supply in order to face future challenges and to maintain their leading position in the energy supply market. Moreover, the majority of the region's states contain few hydrocarbons and lack the oil-generated economic prosperity. The region's non-oil dominated states often subsidize the high energy price, resulting in limited investments in economically enhancing sectors. As China is among the leading states when it comes to research, development and production of renewable energy, particularly solar technology, this know-how does not only provide new business opportunities, but also a new source of soft power (Cole, 2016, p. 60). In the 2016 policy paper, China elaborates on its future goals to strengthen cooperation on renewable energy and its aim to jointly build the China-Arab Clear Energy Training Center (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Besides China's capacity and capability, it also has the financial possibilities. With an investment plan of spending \$360 billion on renewable energy globally by 2020, China is taking on the leadership role worldwide, which also results in its increasing influence in the Middle East (Gruendler, 2017).

4.2 Infrastructure and other construction

According to the China Global Investment Tracker, Chinese total investment and contracts in the Middle East between 2010 and 2017 account little over \$90 billion. Although most investments have been made in the construction of energy infrastructure, enormous amounts have been invested in the construction of transport and real-estate (AEI). The quick urbanization of Chinese cities due to the booming economy has resulted in knowledge and expertise for Chinese construction companies, which are predominantly state owned enterprises. This capacity has led to new opportunities in regions where the demand for infrastructure is high, like the Middle East. The Middle Eastern population is projected to increase by over 40 percent over the next few decades. In order for the region to serve this growing population, it is necessary to invest in its existing, as well as new infrastructure (Rice, 2015). The importance of infrastructure became clear after the political leaders witnessed the upheavals during the 'Arab Spring' and the role material deprivation played on the political instability. Quick results, rapidly erected

housing and infrastructure at attractive prices, which often are backed by the Beijing government to enhance its comparative advantages, made Chinese construction attractive (Alterman, 2017, pp. 6-7). Moreover, the economic prosperity certain states have witnessed, have resulted in gigantic construction booms. Because of these states, like UAE, Qatar, Oman, and Egypt, the region's construction market is expected to be the fastest growing market in 2017 (BMI Research, 2017B). The construction projects range from high-profile projects like the light rail line in Mecca, which was the first cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China, an oil pipeline in the UAE with access to the Indian Ocean, and the construction of villas on Dubai's famous Palm Jumeirah, to the construction of a million housing units by 2020 in Egypt (Alterman, 2017, p. 7).

In accordance with the 'going-out' strategy that the Beijing government has adopted, the state-owned construction companies will continue to be drawn to the high value project opportunities the region's construction market offers. As it is mutually beneficial for both sides, infrastructure will serve to cement the ties between the fast growing trade partners. Given the fiscal weakness of certain states, as well as the impact of low oil prices on the region's oil-exporters, China is increasingly investing in projects. The financial partnerships open new doors to Chinese companies to gain assets in the infrastructure construction, as well as for the state owned construction companies (BMI Research, 2017A). In addition, China's OBOR initiative will enhance larger investment in infrastructure in the Middle East. The region's location is at a crucial spot along the New Silk Roads. New infrastructure like ports, bridges, power plants, roads, railroads, and pipelines are needed to make the massive trade network a success. China has announced that it will invest one trillion dollars in the OBOR initiative over the next decade. With the help of new China-led funding bodies, like the New Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the funding for the OBOR initiative is securing long-term development. The huge investments in infrastructure do not only provide work for China's state-owned construction companies, it also is a huge source of soft power. Unlike the West, which is hesitant to invest in developing economies, China is bolstering the economies of its whole wider region (Cendrowski, 2016).

4.3 Manufacturing

Another important element that constitutes the trade between China and the Middle East are manufactured goods. Part of the reason why the Chinese economy has grown fast over the last two decades is its comparable advantages of using cheap labor to produce low-cost goods. The Middle East is a major consumer of these low-cost goods. Par example, Chinese export to Libya increased from \$216 billion in 2003, to \$1.3 billion in 2005 and Dubai is home to Dragon Mart, a mall that showcases Chinese manufacturers and wholesalers (Alterman, 2009, p.65). Clothing, telephones, and broadcasting equipment are amongst the region's most popular manufactured imports from China (Hindy, 2017).

Furthermore, China, although relatively little, is increasingly using the Middle East as manufacturing location to gain access to other economic markets, which often closed special trading agreements. For

example, China has invested lots of money in the Qualifying Industrial Zones of Egypt and Jordan. These zones, which house manufacturing firms, are forming a free trade zone with the United States and Israel (Azmeah & Nadvi, 2014, p. 1318).

4.4 Economic soft power

China's economic diplomacy has become an important tool in the Chinese foreign policy to generate soft power. This explains China's lacking interest in interfering in regional affairs and its pragmatic stance in the volatile region. Par example, aside from China maintaining a tight relation with Saudi Arabia, it also does so with Saudi's regional nemesis Iran. While sanctions refrained other international actors from trade with Iran, China has grown into Iran's biggest trading partner (Hindy, 2017). The increased economic presence in the Middle East and their role in the development of the Middle Eastern states have significantly contributed to a positive image of China. The soft power China's generates through the increasing relationship has grown over the years. In particularly the OBOR initiative has enhanced China's influence. While between 2005 and 2009 the Middle East's export to China grew by 25 percent, the Middle East's export to the U.S. declined by 45 percent (Chen, 2011, p. 271). The expanded Chinese influence which initially started with economic cooperation has created incentives for increased cooperation in other fields, such as cultural exchange. Especially OBOR opens the door for more long-term structural cooperation.

5 Cultural soft power

As soft power has become the prominent feature of China's foreign policy, culture has played a major aspect in the strategy of China's outwards image projection as a state with rich history and culture. As Nye states, an attractive culture will contribute to a positive outward image, which enhances a state to be more influential (Nye, 2004). In this regard, China finds itself in a favorable position since its culture is amongst the oldest, global reaching, and most recognizable cultures in the world. During the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party in 2007, former President Hu Jintao stated that "The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, will definitely be accomplished by the thriving of Chinese culture" (Liu Y., 2011, p. 27). Cultural diffusion was thereby adopted as one of the main approaches for national soft power building. With the adoption of a cultural strategy, Beijing seeks to transform the Chinese culture into one of the most influential cultures in the world in order to showcase national power and support national interest. Different efforts have been made to develop the Chinese global cultural industry. One of the focus points has been the political and financial support for major global cultural enterprises, by for instance holding film festivals to promote the Chinese film industry and building a national media system broadcasting internationally (Liu Y., 2011, pp. 17,28-30).

5.1 Educational outreach

As a product of the cultural strategy, China established its first Confucius institute in Seoul, South Korea in 2004. Similar to the British Council, or the Alliance Française, which are institutes that promote the British and French culture abroad, China quickly expanded its Confucius institutes which aim to promote Chinese language and culture in foreign states. According to a deputy of the National People's Congress, the use of the language will enhance the spread of Chinese culture and therefore China's global influence (Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 68). The number of Confucius institutes spread quickly to over 500 institutes worldwide, including seventeen institutes in the Middle East and five Confucius classrooms, which are Chinese learning 'classrooms' within local educational institutes (Confucius Institute). The promotion of language has become a prominent asset of cultural soft power diffusion. Besides the Confucius institutes, several other initiatives have been taken to increase the use of the Chinese language within the Middle East: under the CACF, a memorandum has been signed on co-publishing and translating books (Kuangyi, 2014, p. 32). Furthermore, a joint training-program for Chinese-Arabic Translators is being established for young students from the Arab League states to gain knowledge of the Chinese language and governmental affairs. The scholarship is provided by the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC), an institution which is affiliated with the Ministry of Education. Upon completion of the program, the students are required to work as a link between China and the Middle Eastern states (Chinese Scholarship Council, 2016).

Although non-religious educational exchange between China and the Middle East is a relatively new phenomenon, the number of exchanging students is growing. In the quest for soft power, educational

cooperation should be winning “the hearts and minds of the younger generation in the Arab world”. (Sawahel, 2016). With the help of scholarships offered by the CSC, Middle Eastern students are being funded to pursue a higher education in China. In addition, Chinese universities started offering curriculums concerning the main languages of the Middle East: Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew. Likewise, Middle Eastern universities offer Chinese teaching courses (Jinglie, 2010, pp. 30-31). To facilitate cultural exchange under the OBOR initiative, China created a scholarship program designed for students from the OBOR states to study in China (Xinjing, 2015). In 2012, the number of Arab students studying in China exceeded the 10,000 (Sawahel, 2016). As education was one of the topics in the 2016 policy paper, China considers it a principle for increasing cooperation in the future. China aims to strengthen cooperation on education by encouraging joint scientific research, increasing the number of government exchange scholarships, and the number of exchange students, which indicates that educational outreach will only increase in the near future (Ministry of Foreign Affairs , 2016). Subsequently, similar to the idea of the American University of Cairo and the British University in Egypt, the first Chinese university in the Middle East is being constructed; the Egyptian Chinese University. Furthermore, as mentioned in the policy paper, the development of the China-Jordan University is being promoted. However, it is questionable if the majority of the Arab exchange students are genuinely interested in the Chinese culture, as most Arab students are pursuing technical degrees, rather than engaging with the language and culture (Sawahel, 2016).

5.2 Media

As China aims to increase its reputation and image globally through (cultural) soft power, it has launched a campaign to internationalize its media foothold. As former President Hu Jintao stated: “the country will build a modern media system and enhance the power of news media for domestic and world service so as to create a favorable social environment and atmosphere for public opinion”. (Si, 2014, p. 6). These efforts try to enhance global understanding of China and the Chinese culture, but particularly aim to provide a counter narrative to the mainstream Western media by being the voice of the Chinese stance on global events (Si, 2014, p. 6). Among several other media agencies, the Chinese state-owned news agency *Xinhua* has been developed into an international news agency, publishing and broadcasting in over eight languages. By creating a news agency in Cairo, *Xinhua* expanded its reach to the Middle East by publishing and broadcasting in Arabic (Yang, 2015). Likewise, *CCTV*, now called the *CGTN*, China’s state television initiated broadcasting their news in Arabic in 2009. As the vice president of *CGTN* stated in 2009, “CCTV’s Arabic International Channel will serve as an important bridge to strengthen communication and understanding between China and Arab countries.” (Anqi, 2009). In order for *CGTN* to not only broadcast in Arabic, but also have deeper integration in the society, it hires local correspondents and staff and provides training courses for journalists (Si, 2014, p. 6). Furthermore, *China Today* has also spread its Arabic version in the Middle East, informing its readers on global

events, China-related news, as well as China-related activities organized in the Middle East (Rakhmat, 2017).

Another important source of cultural soft power is the utilization of popular culture. Popular culture is the whole of mainstream ideas, perspectives, and norms which are fostered by mass media. This makes popular culture a power tool to quickly spread information and to potentially influence (political) thought and action (Fiske, 1989, p. 23). The U.S. has successfully been using popular culture to expand its global influence. In recent years, China has been eager to explore its own ways to expand its soft power in the Middle Eastern mass media. In 2015, one of China's largest production organization called China Intercontinental Communication Center (CICC) closed a deal with the Abu Dhabi-based production company called Image Nation to set up a \$10 billion strategic investment fund to form a foundation for a joint film industry. In November 2016, the CICC-Image Nation partnership expanded by creating a \$300 million global film fund, the Culture China-Image Nation Content Fund, which should invest in the Chinese commercial film and television industry. As a result, the new factual entertainment channel Quest Arabia had been realized, which will air in twenty-two states in the Middle East in the Arabic language. Under the subtitle of USILK, a line-up has been made of a series of programs focused on the Silk Road region. It will particularly broadcast different China-centered documentary series which focus on different themes; China's culture and society; rural China, biodiversity; the development of contemporary China and its new strategies in politics; economic; entertainments; environmental instability, and the various aspects of the Chinese culture. This media expansion indicates China's willingness to diffuse Chinese popular culture to present itself as an upcoming "cultural superpower" (Rakhmat, 2017).

That China is focusing on long term goals regarding its relationship with the Middle East becomes clear since China's diffusion of soft power through popular culture is also focused on the youth in the Middle East. A twenty-six episodes long animation series called *Kong Xiaoxi and Hakim*, which will be broadcasted in both China and Saudi Arabia, as well as other Middle Eastern States, emphasizes China's focus on cultural exchange. In an entertaining manner, the watcher is being introduced with the Chinese culture; cuisine, clothing, and martial arts. Likewise, the Chinese youth are informed on the Saudi Arabian culture, customs, and food. As the first season is focused on two Chinese teenagers who help Hakim and his father retain its restaurant, the announced second season will focus on Hakim visiting and learning martial arts in China (Ling, 2017).

5.3 Arts

Cultural exchange in the form of art exchange has always been an important component of China's diplomacy with foreign states. Art is a crucial tool of cultural diplomacy as "it is a creative field which has the potential to bring people from two different cultures together, celebrating diversity and encouraging mutual understanding between people." (Hurdicas, 2016). With the creation of several

cooperation platforms, like the CACF and the OBOR initiative, cultural exchanges have become institutionalized (Lirong, 2010, pp. 33-35). Every year, several art festivals are organized throughout the region as a product of these platforms. For example, in August 2016, under the frame of the CACF, the third 'Chinese Art Festival' was organized in Tunisia to strengthen cooperation between the two states over the long-term. The festival displayed the Chinese culture; traditional Chinese orchestral music, oral stunts, Kunqu Opera, Peking Opera, magic, and acrobatics. Moreover, an exhibition of cultural heritage in Beijing showcased kite making, dough figurine making, Chinese calligraphy, seal carving and paper cutting. (Hurdicas, 2016). Another manner in which the states are aiming to strengthen cooperation on culture is by the exchange of artists. Again as an initiative of the CACF, more than fifty Arabic artists have travelled to China in the past five years, to experience China's nature, culture, and daily life. This multilateral exchange platform resulted in a showcase of a total of 40 pieces in the National Museum of China (National Art Museum of China, 2014). In China, fast-proliferating art museums are becoming increasingly more interested in Middle Eastern art. However, aside from the government-sponsored initiatives to enhance art exchanges, Middle Eastern art is rarely shown in China's mainland. Nevertheless, engagements between the Middle East and China continue to proliferate (Movius, 2017).

6 Political soft power

In light of China's geo-economic strategy, its diplomatic efforts have increasingly been influential in recent years. This has brought along increased cooperation in other fields, such as cultural exchanges. Although the relationships between China and the Middle Eastern states have improved tremendously in the 21st century, China's political role has remained moderate. Unlike Western states, which try to impose their political, e.g. democratic, values in a unilateral way, China intentionally does not interfere in other states' internal affairs out of respect for their sovereignty, independence, traditions, and lifestyles. This non-interventionist policy contributes to China's pragmatic stance towards the relationships it fosters with all states in the region, including regional rivals, since it believes that good relations contribute to better economic opportunities.

As the world's most turbulent region, the Middle East regional affairs have often influenced the rest of the world. As China sees the Middle East as an increasingly important market for energy and other regional exports, China aims to maintain good relationships with all major regional players, such as Egypt, Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. China's lack of political baggage generates advantages for its role in the region. In the fear of losing this position, China has been wary to get involved in regional issues (Alterman & Garver, 2008, p. 79). For example, China was a strong supporter of the Palestinians during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the 1980s and only recognized the Israeli state in 1992. Yet, as China recognized the importance of political neutrality on possible economic relations, the Chinese policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict moved towards the middle ground, resulting in a similar policy as the U.S. and the European Union (Singh, 2014, p. 10). However, recently China's involvement in international diplomatic efforts in the region has slowly been increasing.

6.1 Post-Arab Spring

The so-called "Arab Spring" and the political transitions that several states witnessed caused China to redirect its dealing with the region, in which China needed some time to find its own position. As political Islamists took over power in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, China was very willing to establish relations with the new political forces. In Egypt, President Morsi, as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, reached out to China in order to reduce Egypt's traditional reliance on the West. Continuing political instability, however, caused unexpected setbacks for China. For example, when the Morsi regime was removed in 2013, the newly signed deals with Egypt were destroyed. Although the new Egyptian government led by President al-Sisi deemed to be more Western focused than the prior regime, the relations between China and Egypt have become more fruitful ever since. China's focus on economic matters rather than close involvement on political issues has enabled China to adopt quickly to the newly ruling political forces (Liu T. C., 2014, p. 4).

With the outbreak of the Syrian war, China 'supported' the al-Assad regime by continuously stressing its policy on non-interference in the UN Security Council (UNSC). Beijing's actions were motivated by stating that a solution to the conflict should be sought through negotiations instead of force. During the Libya conflict in early 2011, China and Russia abstained from voting for Resolution 1973. This resolution imposed a no-fly zone and stated that necessary measures could be taken to protect the Libyan citizens from attacks by Qaddafi. Yet, according to Chinese allegations, Resolution 1973 had been exploited by the Western powers, resulting in the forceful overthrow of the Qaddafi regime. China's support for al-Assad, has resulted in critical voices; Chinese citizens expressed their discontent with the support online, while developing states frequently condemned China's choice. It also stiffened its relationship with states in the region, like the Gulf States. Yet, as the conflict carried on, China has expressed its reservations on the conflict, condemning the excessive use of force by the regime. In addition, China expressed several reservations on resolutions declared by the UNSC aiming at military intervention in Syria. With these reservations, China underlined the need for dialogue instead of the use of force. In addition, it contributed to safeguarding its own national interest by showing the political will to maintain good relations with all states in the region. Several efforts have been taken to enhance mutual dialogue between representatives of Beijing and the Syrian opposition, underlining China support for regime change as long as the format is acceptable to both sides, meaning through dialogue, in order to halt the bloodshed and stabilize the region (Evron, 2013, pp. 84-87) This shows that China to some extent played a role in influencing the region's political arena. Nevertheless, to secure its national interest and friendship with all states, China remained in the background compared to the other powers involved in the Syrian conflict.

6.2 Involvement in peace processes

Although China is trying to dodge off playing a role in the region's politics, it has been willing to act in situations where the benefits outweighed the costs. One of these cases has been the involvement in the South Sudan peace process. There where China typically calls for a peaceful resolution from afar, it took on an active role as leading mediator by funding, participating and providing assistance to the mediation process. China is by far the number one importer of South Sudan's oil and China's leading oil company, CNPC, is the largest foreign investor in the state's oil sector. Besides the economic interest, some analysts have considered South Sudan as China's 'testing ground' for a more proactive political involvement as part of becoming a responsible global actor (Verjee, 2016). China is also involved in the Afghan peace process, which aims to end the fifteen year long civil war. Peace in Afghanistan is not only important for China's regional economic interest as Afghanistan is part of the OBOR initiative, it is also important for China's national peace and security as it will prevent terrorist spillover to its own Muslim Uighur militancy (Chiue & Ferrie, 2016).

Over the years, China has shown some interest in participating in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Establishing peace is according to Beijing crucial in creating stability, which is needed since Israel and Palestine are part of the OBOR initiative. On a request from Yasser Arafat in an attempt to get China more involved in the peace process and balance the west's influence which tended to favor Israel, China appointed a special envoy on the conflict in 2002. In the following years, China continuously expressed its support for an independent Palestine, as well as confirming Israel's right to exist. In support for the continuation of the peace process, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed a Four-Point peace plan in 2013, when he invited President Abbas and Premier Netanyahu to Beijing in the same week; an action that shows China's increasing involvement in the peace process. China's Premier Li Keqiang stated: "As a friend of both Israel and the Palestinians, China has always maintained an objective and fair stance, and is willing to strive together with all sides to actively advance the Middle East peace process." (Shai, 2014, p. 33). While the Palestinian side is welcoming the more proactive stance and is even requesting more Chinese involvement in the peace process, Netanyahu provides no clear position (Olimat, 2014, pp. 186-188). Yet, despite the envoy and the other initiatives, concrete input in the peace process has hardly been noticed.

6.3 Nuclear deal Iran

When in 2005 Iran announced the start of its uranium enrichment process, an international response quickly followed. During negotiations between the P5+1, the UNSC members and Germany, the calls for action were diverse; the European states and the U.S. argued for tough sanctions on the one hand, while on the other hand Russia and China opposed sanctions and were opting for negotiating with Iran. China and Iran have historically had close relations and while the Western states maintained a trade embargo on Iran, China enhanced its relationship with Iran by further enhancing their economic ties. Since Iran is an important link in the OBOR initiative and a large supplier of oil, China had immediate interest in closing a successful deal. However, all P5+1 states, including China and Russia, were opposed to Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. Although China played a minor role during the negotiations, its role as arbiter between Iran and the U.S. was constructive to the negotiations. It played a pivotal diplomatic role in which it was careful to maintain close ties with Iran, while pressuring Iran to make concessions regarding its nuclear program. Simultaneously China urged the U.S. to accommodate Iran and to seek a concrete solution. On 14 July 2015, a nuclear deal with Iran was reached (Garver, 2016).

6.4 China's soft political power

As many Chinese analysts have described the Middle East as "the graveyard of great powers", China's involvement in the region's politics has been minor (Alterman and Garver 2008, 17). The geo-economic stance and the importance of remaining neutral have resulted in China's enhancement of relations with all states in the region. This approach became clear during China's presidential tour to the Middle East in 2016, as Xi Jinping did not only visited Saudi Arabia, but also Egypt, and Iran. The lack of

involvement in the Middle Eastern politics makes China a wanted player for mediation. Moreover, several states see China as a potential successor of American influence. Although China's attitude is rather reserved, China increasingly takes on a more proactive posture in the major processes in the Middle East, which suggests that China is willing to slowly but surely use its soft power to influence political outcomes.

7 Military soft power

As China is dedicated to increasing its influence by soft power means, it has not established any permanent (hard) military presence in the region. This is different from other states that have established permanent bases throughout the region, particularly the U.S. This could be explained by their focus on geopolitics, rather than geo-economics; their national interest is more connected to concerns that could threaten the national security. China's primary concern, however, is protecting its global economic interests. Therefore, China is not interested in getting involved in regional conflict in which it might damage relationships with the engaged parties. Besides the need to protect its foreign commercial investments and interest, its concerns are also related to the large group of Chinese expatriates in the region. This and China's geo-economic strategy have occasionally led to temporary Chinese deployment of soft military in the Middle East. This focus on solely soft military power in the region contributes to the peaceful rise to power narrative. Moreover, China's contribution to international peace and security generates a positive image.

Unlike hard military power, soft military power is characterized by a temporary deployment of armed forces without having extraterritorial privileges, nor institutionalized military arrangements. Rather, the military is being used for specific missions, both military and civilian. These missions should not only benefit the foreign state, but also the host state's population as is the case with humanitarian relief, protection, peacekeeping, and conflict prevention. Moreover, it can also entail buildings, such as joint intelligence facilities, military replenishment stops and technical stops, maintenance bases, and military teaching institutions (Sun D. , 2015).

7.1 China's missions

In order for China not to get involved in regional conflicts, it deploys its soft power military missions under the banner of international missions that promote peace and development and benefit the whole international community. Piracy in the Gulf of Aden and around the Somali waters has posed an international problem on maritime transport. For China, as a world economic power, the Gulf of Aden is important for the access it provides to the Suez Canal, an important gateway to Europe. The importance of this gateway will increase further because of its role in the OBOR initiative. Since 2009, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) escort fleets are active in the counter-piracy mission. This mission has increased China's soft military presence as the PLAN fleet visit several states in the region, like Oman and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the mission in the Gulf of Aden has directly influenced the installation of several temporary PLAN technical service stops in the region. In the ports of Aden, Djibouti, Jeddah, and Salalah, fuel and material resupplying stops have been established while other stops allow the PLAN to completely recharge, to rest weaponry, and to repair the ships (Sun D. , 2015). China also uses its military capabilities in a soft manner by contributing to UN peacekeeping missions. Currently, these forces consist of 1,721 personnel which are active in Lebanon, the Western Sahara,

South-Sudan, Darfur, and around the borders between Israel and its neighbors (UN, 2017, p. 9). Within the volatile region, the growing number of Chinese expatriates are continuously exposed to security risks. On February 25, 2011, China deployed the PLAN to support and protect the evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya. Within a week all 35,860 Chinese citizens, as well as 2100 foreign nationals, were evacuated in what is now known as China's largest noncombatant evacuation operation (Collins and Erickson 2011). Likewise, China evacuated Chinese and foreign nationals from Yemen in 2015 on request from several foreign governments (Rajagopalan, 2015). Moreover, the PLAN had an active role in the international convoy that removed the chemical weapon arsenal from Syria in 2014. During this joint mission from the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, a Chinese missile frigate escorted the vessel that transported the chemical weapons from the port of Lattakia (OPCW, 2014).

7.2 Soft military power

Peace and security in the Middle East are of increasing importance for China. China's soft military activities in the region have become an important tool to safeguard its own economic interest, protect Chinese workers in the region, and to generate soft power. As contributor to international missions, China is placing itself in a favorable light internationally and domestically, thereby expanding its global influence. Its involvement in international peacekeeping efforts also provides China with a venue to increasingly influence and shape global norms, and demonstrates China's commitment to a peaceful rise to global power status, rather than forming a threat (Wang B. Y., 2013). Moreover, its gradual involvement in the Middle East aligns with China's broader strategy for the region; the enhancement of its relationships with all states in the Middle East, which could contribute to more economic opportunities, as well as more influence in the region.

8 Opportunities and challenges

Throughout the analysis of this thesis, it has become clear that China's position, which it solely attained through soft power initiatives, in the Middle East has rapidly increased. China's increasing focus on the deepening of ties and increasing involvement in the region has demonstrated its commitment to the region. These strong ties between China and the region provide a lot of space for future opportunities. Yet, juxtapose opportunities, the dynamic region also presents a lot of possible challenges for China.

8.1 Economic development

Whereas China once primarily engaged with the region from its ideological driven foreign policy, it is now mainly driven by energy and commercial interests. The Middle Eastern states are amongst the developing states and will open doors to many investment opportunities for China. As China's economy will continue to grow, the demand for energy sources will continuously give new incentives to China to increase its presence within the region's energy sector, as well as remaining an important trading partner. Likewise, the focus on renewable energy by both sides in their aim to diversify their energy sources places China in a favorable position, as China is one of the world's leading countries in renewable energy. Moreover, the region's significant role in the OBOR initiative stimulates the long term economic commitment between China and the region, facilitating important opportunities for cooperation, like the recent construction of necessary infrastructure. Following the Arab uprisings in 2011, the Middle East has been in the process of radical restructuring. Regional instability often is followed by lower economic activity and foreign direct investments, as most multinationals and states are reluctant to invest. China, however, often grabs the opportunity to gain a foothold in the post-crisis states. As the region is currently facing multiple crises, the reconstruction of those states will offer China lots of opportunities (Lahrichi, 2013).

8.2 The need for stability

Although China utilizes the opportunities of instability, it would much more benefit from a stable and peaceful Middle East. As China's position in the region is expanding, the expectation of China's ability and willingness to play a stabilizing role in regional political and security affairs is also growing. China's sole focus on trade and economic benefits and its limited involvement in politics is increasingly leading to criticism (Andersen, Jiang and Sorensen 2015, 7). Subsequently, Beijing has selectively been more active in the region's political realm by providing conflict mediation. The opportunity of playing a bigger role in politics could attribute to China's image as 'responsible great power'. Moreover, increasing political involvement could also enhance China's influence in the region. Yet, at the same time, it could pose serious challenges for China. Greater political involvement could jeopardize China's status in the region as it could possibly endanger its neutral stance. Being no longer 'everyone's friend', but rather picking sides during crises could result in the worsening of bilateral relations. This could

negatively affect China's economic objectives in the region, while these objectives are key to China. In addition, China could get caught up in regional conflicts, something that has happened with all other great powers in the Middle East. This could seriously harm the state's reputation, as has been the case for the U.S. following the war on terror.

China's role in the security of the region has been minor. Yet, as the soft military presence is increasing, the non-interference policy is shifting towards a policy which is more inclined to engage militarily in the region. Although China remains committed to their soft power strategy to rise to power, several signs could indicate that China is opening the door for future hard power projects in the region. For instance, China signed a new counter-terrorism law in 2015 that, for the first time, legalizes the sending of Chinese troops for combat abroad without a UN mandate. Moreover, in 2016, China initiated the construction of its first overseas naval base in Djibouti. With a strategic location close to the Middle East, the base could contribute to a more active role in ensuring peace and stability at the regional and global level, something that is crucial to the success of the extensive OBOR initiative (Ghiselli, 2016). Yet, China's reserved stance to actual hard power within the region itself displays the earlier mentioned challenges a bigger involvement in the region's security could form. Moreover, it endangers China's commitment to its soft power strategy.

8.3 Terrorism

Terrorism poses a severe threat to China's interest in the region. Assuring peace in the Middle East will also contribute to domestic stability and peace. One of the growing challenges China is facing, is the rise of Islamist terrorism. The deepening of the relations with the Middle East increasingly has exposed Chinese people to radical Islamic thoughts. Particularly cultural exchange has led to the increasing familiarity with Islam (Borton, 2016). Consequently, the Middle East conflicts have attracted Chinese jihadists. ISIS even released its propaganda in Mandarin Chinese-language and Uighur. It is estimated that more than hundred Uighurs from the Xinjiang province have joined ISIS, making it the third largest nationality of foreign fighters (Gramer, 2017). China has been vocal in various anti-terrorism campaigns. In order to combat this global problem, opportunity arises in counterterrorism cooperation between China and the U.S., the two foreign great powers in the region (Alterman and Garver 2008, 131).

8.4 The U.S.: conflict or cooperation

The rising importance of China in the Middle East has increasingly formed competition for the traditionally primary external power in the Middle East; the U.S. Following the recent reduction of America's reliance on Middle Eastern oil, its involvement in the region has declined. Moreover, as the U.S. has increasingly become unpopular in the Middle East, many states consider China an alternative strategic partner able to counter America's influence in the region. America's foreign policy is mainly causing an anti-America stance in the region. Particularly America's role in the war on terror and its

support for Israel has resulted into fierce criticisms. These and more American actions in the region have skillfully been criticized by China, which thereby tries to enhance its own image as the region's friend (Zambelis and Gentry 2008, 63-65). Against the backdrop of these developments in America's foreign policy, China's influence in the region is rising. Although the region's dynamics are increasingly changing, it is unlikely that this competition will develop into direct confrontations. Yet, the challenge remains to maintain a stabilized competition in the region (Salman, Geeraerts & Pieper 2015, 115).

Besides that China's entry poses new challenges for America's position in the Middle East, there are also several avenues for possible cooperation to advance shared interests. Strategic cooperation between China and the U.S. could help the Middle East move away from crises and conflict and towards becoming a prosperous region that connects the major regions globally. For instance by shared assessments to enhance understanding and improve political solutions to regional problems, intelligence sharing, and joint development assistance. This stability is also necessary for their complementary interests; unprecedented economic connectivity and trade through Asia and the Middle East, and energy security, on which they could cooperate to secure a stable flow of oil and a stable price (deLeon and Jiemian 2015). So far, China has not been seeking to confront the U.S. in the Middle East. Chinese interests have rather benefited from America's security protection in the region. Each party, China, the U.S., and the Middle East, should recognize the common interest and promote cooperation. Noteworthy, the first cooperation initiatives have successfully been established. Examples are the trilateral cooperation between both states and Afghanistan in the areas of counter-terrorism efforts and peace talks, as well as cooperation for the counter-piracy effort in the Gulf of Aden (Bin, 2017). Yet, increasing cooperation will remain a challenge as long as the U.S. eyes China's rise in the region with suspicion and remains protective over its own role in the region, as well as China's hesitant attitude towards more involvement.

9 Conclusion

9.1 Conclusion research questions

This thesis has aimed to investigate China's soft power deployment in the Middle East and to provide an answer to the question what China's foreign policy key objectives are in the Middle East, and how China is using a soft power strategy to gain influence in the Middle East. In order to answer these questions, an assessment has been made through the analysis of the four key soft power forms, economic, cultural, political and military soft power.

Since the 1980s, China has been opening up to the rest of the world by integrating its economy in the capitalistic world economy. With an average annual growth of the real GDP of almost ten percent between 1989 and 2016, China transformed into a major global trade and economic power. With the turn of the century, the Beijing leadership realized that a strategy was needed to reduce other governments' discomfort with China's rise and to bring about a successful Chinese rejuvenation to great power status. This led to the adoption of a Chinese soft power strategy that has enabled China to peacefully increase its global influence. China generally approaches the international arena from its geo-economic interests, giving priority to the establishment of strong economic ties with foreign governments. From this perspective, the Middle East has become an interesting region for China in recent years given the region's rich energy sources and its increasing economic importance. With initiating an Arab policy paper and the establishment of several platforms like the CACF and the OBOR initiative, China's intention for long-term relationships with the region is declared.

As became clear in chapter three, China's economic diplomacy has been utilized as an important diplomatic tool for the generation of soft power and the development of "win-win" relations that have enhanced economic activity in the Middle East. As China's economic growth has mainly been fueled by purchased Middle Eastern oil, ensuring permanent access to the region's energy sources is therefore a key objective for China. Moreover, China's expertise on renewable energy technology places Beijing in a favorable position, as the majority of the Middle Eastern states are focusing on renewable energy. Through construction of, and large investments in construction projects for the development of infrastructure, the energy industry, and joint cooperation platforms such as OBOR, China managed to contribute to economic development of Middle Eastern states on the one hand and to strengthen its position in the region on the other hand. Moreover, the visibility that China generates from 'Made in China' manufacturing goods contribute to a positive image in the Middle East. China's 'business-first' approach including the deepening of economic ties through cooperation and joint investments have been a key strategy of China to empower its soft power in the region.

In chapter four, it became evident that culture is also of major importance in China's soft power strategy. It is particularly aimed to portray its global prestige and national strength (image-building) in order to

deepen ties with the region. One of the most prominent tools of cultural soft power is cooperation in the field of education, through educational exchange programs, the foundation of Confucius institutes, and the construction of Chinese universities within the Middle East, which try to disseminate Chinese language and the rich culture. The spread of China's domestic media in the region, by adopting regional languages such as Arabic and Farsi, has been another prominent tool to further propagate Chinese soft power. Furthermore, entertainment has been used to further improve China's image in the Middle East, especially through the media industry and the utility of art.

As China is reliant for more than fifty percent of its energy supply on Middle Eastern energy sources, the region remains of vital importance for China's economy. Nevertheless, regional instability poses great risks on this economic focused strategy of soft power. Especially during the last decade several political upheavals and conflicts have erupted in the region, which have pushed China to distance itself from its traditional 'business first' approach of soft power to ensure its position in the region.

China has traditionally adhered to a non-interference principle that prevents China to meddle in other states' internal affairs. This policy has enabled China to remain neutral during regional political tensions and to remain friendly with all Middle Eastern states. It likewise conforms to its 'business first' approach in the Middle East, since this political neutrality prevents China to put at risk good economic ties. Nevertheless, China recently seems to gradually become more pro-active and willing to use its soft power to fulfill its share in the Middle Eastern political affairs. Several examples in this thesis have underlined this, including China's role in establishing a dialogue with both the Syrian opposition and the al-Assad regime, its increasing involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and China's role as arbiter in the Iran nuclear deal. Moreover, China has adopted a leading role as mediator in the South-Sudan peace process as it perceived more advantages than drawbacks, particularly in protecting its economic interest. Likewise, its involvement in the Afghan peace process is motivated by the economic prospects of Afghanistan in the OBOR initiative as well as to prevent terrorist spillover into China. This gradual shift from non-interference to limited interference could indicate that China's diplomatic skills are becoming more sophisticated and that it is increasingly aware of the fact that a different approach to soft power strategy is necessary to safeguard its influence in the Middle East and hence to reach great power status. Through its proposals and mediation, China has found a way to be more assertive in the political arena while refraining from taking a politically exposed position.

With regards to military soft power, China distinguishes itself from other states, particularly the U.S., with the absence of Chinese hard power in the direct region. China's soft military missions in the Middle East have not only contributed to safeguarding Chinese economic interests and Chinese expatriates, they have also contributed to positive image building efforts, which in turn have boosted China's soft power. This positive image is mainly the result of the nature of these missions, as their main objective it to maintain global and regional peace and security. Par example, China's contributions to the counter-

piracy mission, several peacekeeping missions, the evacuation of expatriates from the region, as well as the removal of the chemical weapon arsenal from Syria in 2014, places China in a favorable light in the region and thus further enhance its soft power.

Throughout this thesis' in-depth analysis of China's soft power strategy in the Middle East, it has become clear that China's influence in the Middle East is rapidly increasing through a variety of soft power initiatives that focus on the enhancement of its relations with the region. China's key objectives for its pivot towards the Middle East are energy security and economic interests. Even though China's soft power is traditionally met through its 'business-first' approach and hence through a soft power strategy mainly focusing on economy and culture, and to a lesser extent focusing on relatively political and military neutrality, the outcome of this analysis has depicted that, in case of the Middle East, political and military soft power strategies have taken a larger focus in recent years. It has shown that China's gradual shift from non-interference to limited interference in favor of the region enhances its soft power, as it becomes gradually more proactive in the political and security field. As the Middle East is considered a key global crossroads and the largest provider of energy sources, China is committed to maintain and improve its image in the Middle East, not only by further integrating in the Middle East economically and culturally through cooperation platforms like the OBOR initiative, but also through gradually increasing commitment to neutral political involvement, peacekeeping and security efforts in the region.

9.2 Limitations

As this research successfully described China's soft power strategy, limitations are bound to the extent of data-selection and the initiatives that have been highlighted in this thesis. This limited data selection, however, can be extended by including other initiatives. As sources are lacking that indicate how the Middle East perceives China's soft power strategy, it remains rather unclear to what extent China's soft power strategy is translated in real influence. Government documents provide some insight, but the perception of the Middle Eastern population which polls China's soft power according to the definition used in this thesis is non-existent. With the help of questionnaires, the perception of the population could be measured. Moreover, as China's soft power strategy is a relatively new strategy that China is deploying for ten years, it is unclear how it will develop in the future. As chapter seven indicates, China has a lot of potential opportunities, as well as challenges, which could upgrade, as well as downgrade China's influence. Further research on China's soft power strategy is therefore needed in the future in order to shed light on these new developments in the upcoming years.

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