

# International actors in North Africa and the Middle East: China

International Relations in North Africa & the Middle East

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*To what extent does China use its position as a ‘positive actor’ in shaping its relations with the North African and Middle East states?*

## Table of Contents

Theoretical Framework.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Current Situation .....	3
Gulf Countries.....	3
North Africa.....	4
Levant.....	4
Turkey .....	5
Critical Assessment & Conclusion .....	5
References .....	6

## Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a constructivist theoretical framework to examine how China uses its identity as a ‘positive actor’, grounded in the principles of non-interference, sovereignty, and development-oriented cooperation (Reeves, 2025) in its relations with Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) states. Constructivism emphasises that foreign policy is not only driven by material interests but also by norms, ideas, and identity constructions (Wendt, 1999). This puts the idea in opposition to the approach historically cultivated by the Western countries that used foreign intervention as a tool to ‘protect and serve their national interests in the region’ (Kieh, 1992). In this context, China’s foreign policy behaviour in the MENA region must be understood through the norms it promotes and the way it represents itself in contrast to Western powers.

The traditional reliance on political conditionality, military intervention, and democracy promotion, especially by the US and the EU, has shifted with China positioning itself as a partner that supposedly prioritises ‘respect for sovereignty and mutual development’, drawing on its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Scholars such as Zhang (2010) or Carlson (2011) argue that non-interference is supposed to form a central point of Chinese national identity, which moulds its diplomatic behaviour and reinforces the idea that its engagement in MENA is of a non-coercive and non-ideological nature. Building on this constructed identity, China could be portrayed not

as an imperial power seeking unilaterally beneficial gains, but as the aforementioned ‘positive actor’ offering partnership on equal terms often described as the ‘Developmental Peace Model’ that challenges the “Liberal Democratic Peace” (Dawar, 2024).

However, the proposed constructivist approach also allows for a critical outlook on whether China truly behaves according to its self-proclaimed norms, or whether its ‘positive actor’ identity is simply a strategic narrative to expand Beijing’s influence. Following this line of thought, the very idea of a non-imperialist actor engaging with the MENA states solely relying on motifs of equal cooperation and the respect for sovereignty could be severely questioned. As scholars such as Chaziza and Goldman (2014) have pointed out, China’s practice of non-interference has increasingly become selective and adaptable. It is thus imperative to consider whether China’s identity has been utilised in the MENA region as a tool to legitimise influence to secure its own national interests in terms of economic gains, energy security, or political leverage.

Henceforth, following the above theoretical framework, the research question of ‘To what extent does China use its position as a “positive actor” in shaping its relations with the MENA states?’ shall be considered.

## Introduction

China’s relations with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) states have undergone a profound transformation over the past decades. Its current relationship with the region is the product of a gradual evolution in its foreign policy priorities, which emerged as a result of changing domestic needs and a search for greater influence in the global order (Reeves, 2025).

According to Shichor (1979), during the Cold War China’s involvement in MENA could be described as rather limited and largely ideological. While the economic footprint of Beijing remained marginal at the time, it was particularly during this era that China began to extend its relations with the region based on a strategy of ‘sweet reasonableness’ which aimed to build on anti-colonial solidarity (Calabrese, 1991). China’s support for key Arab nationalist causes, such as Egypt during the 1956 Suez Crisis, when Beijing granted a loan of 20 million Swiss francs and public diplomatic backing, reflected its attempt to project an image of a ‘responsible, sovereign-respecting revolutionary actor’ (Calabrese, 1991). As can be observed, at the time China initiated its construction of a non-Western, anti-imperialist identity in the region which formed a foundation of its ‘positive actor’ narrative.

The post-Cold War era marked a turning point in the situation, following China’s rapidly growing industrialisation, which significantly transformed its foreign policy priorities. Following the 1979 reform of the Chinese market and boom in economic growth, China’s dependence on imported hydrocarbons has grown significantly, especially through the 1990s and early 2000s (Downs, 2004). MENA and particularly the Gulf states, became central to meeting these needs. This economic and industrial growth have shifted Beijing’s priorities growingly away from ideological alignment to stable energy partnerships. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, and Iraq emerged as key suppliers, and China moved from being a minor importer to becoming one of the largest global consumers of MENA oil (Al-Tamimi, 2014). This phase also marked the consolidation of China’s diplomatic narrative emphasising sovereignty, non-interference, and ‘mutual benefit’, framing its presence as apolitical and development oriented.

By the 2010s, China’s foreign policy had entered a new phase following Xi Jinping’s vision of ‘major country diplomacy’ and a more pronounced global role. For instance, the launch of the Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 framed MENA as a strategic corridor linking Asia, Africa, and Europe. Investments in ports (Khalifa Port in the UAE), industrial zones (Oman's Duqm SEZ), and infrastructure (Egypt's New Administrative Capital) marked a shift from energy-centred cooperation to a growingly multidimensional partnership including construction, logistics, finance, and technology (Fulton, 2019). These developments have fundamentally strengthened China's identity as a development focused, reliable partner or, according to the paper's agenda, 'positive actor'.

## Current Situation

China's relations with MENA states are deeper than ever before, as China's importance as a world power increases, and as the world is more globalised than ever. China has taken a very pragmatic approach to relations in the region, as evidenced by its 'comprehensive strategic partnerships' with both Iran and Saudi Arabia (as well as Egypt, the UAE and Algeria), as well as its brokering of an agreement between those same two countries to re-establish diplomatic relations (Library of Congress, 2023). This pragmatic approach has helped China continue to build its 'positive actor' image, promoting investment rather than division. This can be seen through the evolution of exports from selected countries in each MENA sub-region<sup>1</sup> to China over the twenty years prior to 2023, through a comparative lens with the US.

### Gulf Countries

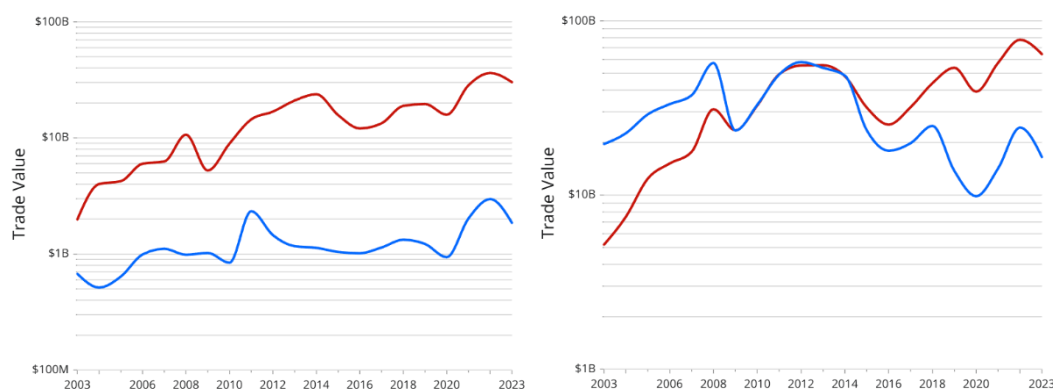


Figure 1: Oman (L) & Saudi Arabia (R) exports to China (Red) and the US (Blue).

Source: *The Observatory of Economic Complexity [OEC] (2025)*

Arguably China's stronghold, the Gulf countries have collectively become by far China's largest trading partners in the MENA. Though they already had strong connections at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as Oman's 3<sup>rd</sup> and Saudi Arabia's 5<sup>th</sup> largest export partner in 2003, trade has grown such that China is both countries' 1<sup>st</sup> export partner in 2023, in the former six and a half times, and the latter double, their exports to India, both countries' 2<sup>nd</sup> export partner (OEC, 2025).

In the Gulf, China offers healthy competition to traditional US ideological and economic hegemony, successfully deepening economic and diplomatic ties with these countries, as evidenced by growing trade, and examples of China's pragmatic approach to the Saudi-Iran divide.

<sup>1</sup> except Iran due to its practically non-existent trade with the US.

Citizens of all the Gulf countries besides Yemen are also permitted to stay in China visa-free for 30 days (Chinese Visa Application Service Center, 2023).

## North Africa

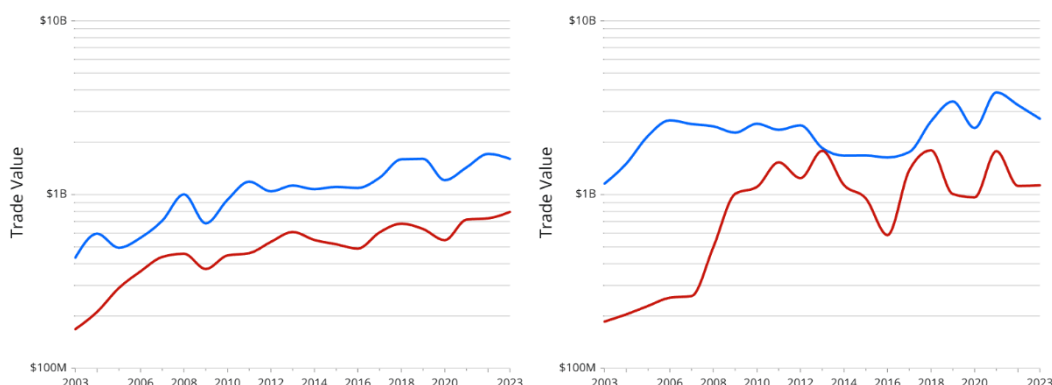


Figure 2: Morocco (L) & Egypt (R) exports to China (Red) and the US (Blue).

Source: (OEC, 2025)

While China’s strong competition with the US is already entrenched in the Gulf, in North Africa it is slowly catching up with both the US and the EU, though this is far more evident in Morocco and Egypt’s imports (as Morocco’s 3<sup>rd</sup> import partner and 11<sup>th</sup> export partner, and Egypt’s 1<sup>st</sup> import partner and 13<sup>th</sup> export partner), demonstrating that North Africa remains very much a client in terms of trade rather than a partner to China (OEC, 2025).

## Levant

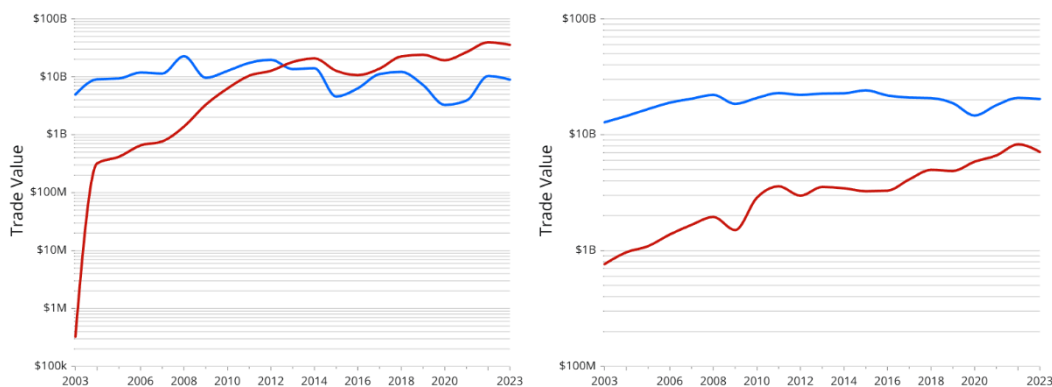


Figure 3: Iraq (L) & Israel (R) exports to China (Red) and the US (Blue).

Source: (OEC, 2025)

Likewise in the Levant, China has gradually grown as a trade partner, closing the gap, and even overtaking, in many countries, the US in terms of trade influence. In Israel, the US’ closest partner in the Levant, China has already become 2<sup>nd</sup> in exports and 1<sup>st</sup> in imports, signalling the tightening gap of economic hegemony (OEC, 2025).

## Turkey

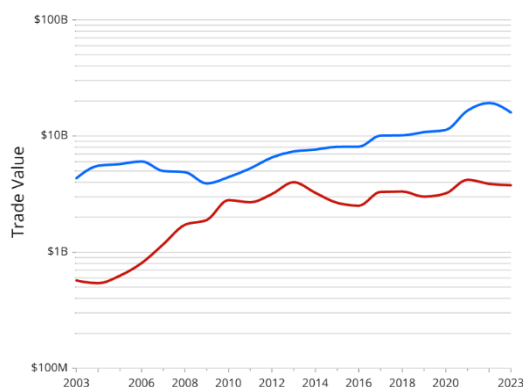


Figure 4: Turkey exports to China (Red) and the US (Blue).

Source: (OEC, 2025)

With the largest GDP of all the MENA countries, Turkey is a significant trading power in itself. Much of its trade is conducted with countries much closer than China or the US, though they both still account for significant shares of exports and imports (the US is Turkey's 2<sup>nd</sup> export partner and China is Turkey's 1<sup>st</sup> import partner) (OEC, 2025).

From a diplomatic and geopolitical perspective, China also offers Turkey an alternative to the EU and US promotion of democratic norms, as Turkey drifts away from these democratic standards (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025).

## Critical Assessment & Conclusion

China's performance in the region, both in economic and diplomatic efforts, is a sign of a larger shift in the world order, as the unipolar hegemony is challenged. Through its 'positive actor' position, it has consistently left ideology out, while heavily developing economic ties. So far, this has been a success for both sides, there has not been as much of a dependence on China as in other regions of the world, (such as in the Hambantota Port case in Sri Lanka, among others) (Chew, 2019). Although China can still be criticised through a neocolonial lens, as it still primarily imports raw materials from the MENA, and exports finished goods, it has been argued that these states still negotiate from a position of power, by leveraging the US and the EU against China (Bakir & Al-Shamari, 2025). It would be interesting to investigate the export and import data further through aggregation by product type.

In conclusion, China is currently successfully expanding its influence in North Africa and the Middle East, both through very strong economic ties and growth, as well as diplomatic efforts ensuring the development of a reputation of a 'positive actor' in the region, contrasting with historical examples of US and European development.

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