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The BRI in the Persian Gulf: A Limited Driver of Sino-US Regional Competition

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Abstract

The Persian Gulf has acquired increased importance in China's global projection in the last two decades. While the region was historically associated with Beijing's energy security strategy, the launch of the BRI in 2013 has recentred the dominant narrative underlying this encounter around China's multifaced grand project. By separately looking at Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Iran, which are characterised by antithetic relationships with Washington but similar attitudes towards Beijing, the paper will explore if and how the BRI has turned into a driver of great powers competition between China and the United States in the Persian Gulf. The paper concludes that the BRI is not a driver of great power competition per se, and it has been an element of substantial continuity rather than disruption in the historical trajectory of Sino-Persian Gulf relations. Ultimately, the paper suggests that the primary sources of competition between Washington and Beijing in the Persian Gulf are three: (1) a natural spillover of the global competition between the two great powers; (2) the China-US-Iran triangle; and (3) China's occasional intrusion in susceptible areas of cooperation with the Arab Gulf Kingdoms.

Keywords: *BRI; Persian Gulf; Iran; GCC; Great Power Competition*

Introduction

In the past decade, China's relations with the Middle East have attracted the growing attention of scholars and policymakers, moving the topic from the intellectual niches of area studies, international security studies, and political economy to occupying a more prominent space in the public debate. As addressed in this paper, this unprecedented prominence results from two entwined-yet-distinct phenomena. On one side, the ascent of Xi Jinping has instilled more confidence and momentum in Chinese foreign policy, with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the flagship framework of Beijing's global projection. On the other, the emergence of great power competition as the primary political and strategic definer of US-China relations in the 2020s has re-centered the significance of peripheral regions, including the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, as potential areas in which the two great powers actively compete for political, economic, and strategic influence.

China's contemporary approach to the Persian Gulf sub-region is effectively described as a mix of strategic hedging and soft balancing toward the dominant external power - the United States. This interpretation is theoretically and empirically consistent with the claim that the region occupies a secondary place within Beijing's outward projection. In this context, the Belt and Road Initiative has emerged as an element of substantial continuity rather than disruption in the historical trajectory of Sino-Persian Gulf relations, remaining consistent with the economy-driven approach that is quintessentially associated with strategic hedging. As such, the BRI does not seem to represent a driver for great power competition in the Persian Gulf because, despite being a quintessentially economic, financial, and interconnectivity project, it has not fostered direct economic-driven competition between China and the US in the region. Ultimately, the paper suggests that the primary sources of competition between Washington and Beijing in the Persian Gulf are three: a natural spillover of the global competition between the two great powers; the China-US-Iran triangle; and China's occasional intrusion in particularly sensitive areas of cooperation with the Arab Kingdoms.

The following research question guide the paper: does the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represent a primary driver of great power competition between China and the US in the Persian Gulf? Furthermore, several subsidiary research questions help define the analytical direction of the article: which theoretical approach best describes China's strategy in the Persian Gulf? Is the BRI in continuity or discontinuity with the historical trajectory of China-Persian Gulf relations? Which are the main drivers of the emerging China-US competition in the Persian Gulf?

In terms of structure, the paper's first section locates the Persian Gulf in China's global strategy, defining the theoretical ground of Beijing's economic-driven approach to the region. This is followed by the assessment of the impact of the launch of the BRI on three pivotal states, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Iran, to conclude that China's grand project has not significantly impacted the trajectory of the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s relations with the Persian Gulf. Yet, in the post-2013 era, Beijing has worked to systematise its partnerships with the region, creating a hierarchy of relationships that reflects its global partnership strategy and not necessarily a direct implementation of the BRI. In such a context, two scenarios might emerge. The first one is in continuity with the current trajectory of China-Persian Gulf relations and the asymmetric regional competition between Beijing and Washington. The other one entails the emergence of a more direct, economic-driven competition between China and the United States.

Beijing's Strategic Hedging and Soft Balancing at Play in the Persian Gulf

The debate about the Middle East (and Persian Gulf) place in China's strategic priority rank has attracted much academic attention. A consensus has emerged that the region is of secondary importance to the PRC, especially when compared to closer neighbouring areas and countries such as the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and Central Asia (Nathan and Scobell 2012: 5-7; Niblock 2021). Therefore, according to Fulton (2021a: 4), China "remains in the second tier of external powers in MENA". Nonetheless, the region has its place in China's going-out strategy. This explains why the encounter between the Asian Great power and the Middle East has grown in quantity and quality over time. As per Scobell (2018: 9-23), four factors have made the region relevant for Beijing: the region is an arena of great power competition; its primary role in China's energy security and the opportunities for economic engagement with the region; the presence of ethno-religious links that connects the Middle East with China's Western provinces; and the potential hub role of the Middle East in the Belt and Road Initiative (Ghiselli and Giuffrida 2020: 4). The critical question, therefore, remains how to understand and best describe China's approach to a region that is not among the most urgent strategic concerns but has also seen a visible expansion of Chinese presence. Adding further complexity, the Middle East and the Persian Gulf sub-region are characterised by a "perennial" endogenous conflict formation in which the exogenous intervention of the external great powers has "tend[ed] to sustain, and at times to amplify, the regional dynamics" (Buzan and Wæver 2003: 216).

Strategic hedging and soft balancing, two International Relations (IR) theories generally associated with the broader realist camp, which have become prominent in the IR discourse (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019: 367), appear to be the most effective way to conceptualise China's approach and strategy in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf sub-region (Salman et al. 2015; Salman and Geeraerts 2015; Garlick and Havlova 2020; Ghiselli and Giuffrida 2020; Fulton, 2021b). Conceptually, strategic hedging is "attractive to second-tier states in a deconcentrating unipolar system" (Tessman 2012: 203), and it is performed essentially through engaging different regional countries regardless of the pre-existing local conflicts and without directly challenging the power position of the dominant regional (or extra-regional) actor. As Fulton puts it, "strategic hedging usually starts with stronger economic ties and builds towards deeper political relations, slowly strengthening influence and power in the region".[1] Notably, given the specific power configuration in the Persian Gulf - where the United States remain the primary external security provider - China's strategic hedging in the region is best described using Tessman's (2012: 219) definition of Type B hedging, a "behaviour which is driven by the fear of what the leading state may someday stop doing (providing some public good or security benefits)". Ultimately, Washington's security role in the Persian Gulf has historically enabled Beijing's successful economic penetration in the region. In that sense, China has demonstrated typical free-riding behaviour, benefitting from the pre-existing, US-led collective security architecture without incurring the costs of contributing to it. In a 2014 interview, US President Obama openly called China a free rider in Iraq, generating immediate rebuttal from Chinese scholars and media.[2]

Yet, despite showing enough comfort in a division of labour in which the US acts as the primary security provider and China focuses on developing its economic footprint,[3] the PRC's economic-driven approach to the Persian Gulf also serves as a statecraft tool to "prevent another power from becoming dominant in a region other than the home region of the country under consideration" through focusing on economic and diplomatic engagement instead military and security involvement (Ghiselli and Giuffrida 2020: 13). China's offshore balancing against the United States fits within the broader context of strategic hedging. At the same time, it also doubles down on Beijing's historical focus on building growing economic and financial ties with the Persian Gulf.

Iran has its own place as a balancer of the United States in China's strategic encounter with the region. Such a balancer role is historically rooted, and China appears to have recognised it since the 1970s when pre-revolutionary Iran was a convenient - although often reluctant (Garver 2006: 50) - partner to counter Soviet expansionism in the region. Then, after the 1979 Revolution and the Islamic Republic's total rejection of the US role in the Persian Gulf, China re-focused part of its strategic interest in Iran toward countering Washington's hegemony in the region (Esfandiary and Tabatabai 2018: 33-34). Nonetheless, consistent with offshore balancing and strategic hedging, the PRC has always stopped short of building anything close to a military alliance with Iran.

China's strategic hedging and offshore balancing in the Persian Gulf have resulted in two visible, interconnected dynamics. First, since its first encounters with the region in the 1970s and 1980s, the PRC has adopted an economic-driven approach centred around energy relations and expanded through economic and financial penetration. Second, China has effectively built relations with all the countries in the Persian Gulf, taking great care to balance between them and along the pre-existing rivalries such as the one between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Fulton 2021b; Houghton 2022). As will be described later in this work, a key element of Beijing's contemporary strategy in the Persian Gulf is developing a hierarchy of partnership that reflects both the balancing act and the recognition of the pivotal status of three regional countries. According to Sun (2021: 302), Beijing identifies pivot states based on their military, economic, geographical, and political power in the region, which makes them "important support for China to safeguard its global interests, security, and influence". Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE naturally occupy such a place in China's Persian Gulf strategy. The Islamic Republic is an economic, political, and military powerhouse, significantly influencing several other regional countries. Saudi Arabia is China's most important energy partner and political and religious power in the Muslim world. Although smaller in size and population, the UAE has set itself as one of the region's leading political and economic actors, emerging as a technological powerhouse.

The BRI in the Persian Gulf's Pivotal States: Continuity Rather Than Disruption

Since 2013, China has constantly framed its engagement with the Persian Gulf through the BRI framework. The "multifaced grand strategy" (Zhou and Esteban 2018: 488) has provided Beijing and the regional countries a reference point to communicate their mutual engagement in a time and space horizon beyond everyday politics and economic interaction. Yet, as noted by Small (2018: 189), "the role of the Middle East in China's Belt and Road Initiative is one of the least-clearly articulated of any of the regions that fall under the scheme". Notably, several scholars (e.g., Gurol 2023 and Rasheed 2022) have convincedly advanced the argument that China's penetration into the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East promotes what Rasheed (2022: 69) calls "authoritarian reinforcement", a form of external legitimisation of autocratic regimes based on authoritarian effectiveness, defence of sovereignty and independence, and discursive promotion of fairness and equality in the international system. In other words, China offers regional states a "toolbox of not only practices but also ideas and norms for (voluntary) emulation" (Gurol 2023: 705). For instance, as demonstrated by Gurol, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown how China's Persian Gulf partners have reproduced in various forms the PRC's authoritarian narratives, introjecting them into their media discourse as successful - and thus inspirational - examples of leadership and systemic superiority (Gurol 2023: 696-701). Arguably, the authoritarian convergence between China and the Persian Gulf countries is a lubricator of relations, offering a normative and ideational foundation for the BRI that precedes and sustains the economic engagement that remains at the core of Beijing's regional penetration.

As will emerge in this section, the BRI framework has proven flexible enough to adapt to the needs and features of two distinct blocks: the GCC, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and Iran, the third pivotal state in the Persian Gulf sub-region. If the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the UAE represent *sui generis* BRI partners, having no "need [to] access to cheap Chinese credit like some African and East Asian countries", Iran has embraced China's grand project as a country in great need of investments, infrastructure development, and political capital.[4]

Regarding the GCC and its two major actors, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, much of the BRI interaction appears driven by the Arab Policy Paper that Xi presented at the Arab League during his January 2016 visit to the region. According to the paper, "China's proposed initiatives of jointly building the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road'", establishing a '1+2+3' cooperation pattern (to take energy cooperation as the core, infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation as the two wings, and three high and new tech fields of nuclear energy, space satellite and new energy as the three breakthroughs), and industrial capacity cooperation, are well received by Arab countries."[5]

In the 1+2+3 model, the economic driver is preponderant. Energy, without any doubt the most crucial push factor for China's engagement with the Persian Gulf, remains at the core of the relationship even under the auspices of the BRI. Similarly, infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation, the two flanks of energy relations, have a solid economic rationale, echoed in the technological breakthrough indicated by the model. Yet, the preponderance of the economy over any other areas of cooperation in Sino-Persian Gulf relations temporally precedes the Belt and Road Initiative and the 1+2+3 model.[6]

Saudi Arabia is at the commercial core of China's venture in the oil-rich sub-region. The relationship between the two countries is historically symbiotic and heavily revolves around oil, with KSA being China's most important supplier and the PRC being Saudi Arabia's largest crude customer (Al-Tamimi 2021: 143). On that base, contemporary Sino-Saudi relations have expanded significantly, becoming multi-faced and articulated over multiple commercial interests and lucrative areas of cooperation. As in the case of the UAE, the launch of the BRI has created a convenient dialogue with the Saudi long-term development framework "Saudi Vision 2030", to the point that the two countries established the High-level Joint Committee in 2016 as a "mechanism for planning and coordinating policy cooperation" between the two grand projects (Al-Tamimi 2021: 144). At the head of the Saudi delegation at the G20 summit in August 2016, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman weighed in, declaring that the BRI is "one of the main pillars of the Saudi Vision 2030, which would seek to make China among the Kingdom's biggest economic partners" (Fulton 2019a: 103). Even recently, Saudi commentators have reiterated the compatibility between the two macro-projects, highlighting that "the integration of the Belt and Road Initiative with the Kingdom's Vision 2030 can help achieve the development goals of both countries".[7] Nonetheless, the BRI entered a trajectory that was already clear. Since establishing official diplomatic relations in 1990, Sino-Saudi relations have grown constantly, pushed by oil exports and sustained by several high-ranking diplomatic visits. This culminated with King Abdullah's trip to China in 2006, the first of a Saudi monarch. Even in the pre-BRI era, Chinese companies had the chance to invest and participate in important infrastructure projects in the Kingdom, as allowed by MoU signed by the two countries in 2007. This included several high-profile and highly symbolic projects, such as the Chinese participation in constructing a railway connecting Mecca and Medina pilgrimage sites, a large joint-venture deal to build an oil refinery in Yanbu, and a peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement (Fulton 2019a: 102; Al-Tamimi 2021: 141). Therefore, it is evident that, although the BRI has given an essential push to Sino-Saudi economic relations by expanding their scope and creating new mechanisms of coordination, China's grand project's impact on the partnership with Saudi Arabia was not necessarily disruptive. Instead, it largely insisted on an already functioning and promising economic and commercial partnership.

Sino-UAE relations have seen similar premises and a developmental path comparable to Sino-Saudi relations. Bin Huwaidin (2022: 299) notes that "since the 1990s, China's interest in the UAE has focused on its economic priorities", giving impulse to a seemingly unstoppable growth in the economic exchange between the two countries, which grew 700 times between 1984, the year in which the two countries established diplomatic relations, and 2017 (ibid.). In his comprehensive study of China-UAE relations, Fulton (2019a) identifies four historical phases that characterised the relationship between the two countries: indifference (1949-1965), hostility (1965-1971), transition (1971-1990), and interdependence (1990-present). Until 1971, Sino-UAE relations drifted between indifference and hostility, then commencing a transition phase in which commercial relations began to gain traction. Yet, most notably, the fourth phase identified by the author is that of interdependence (1990-2012), in which, "political and diplomatic interactions between China and the UAE increased significantly throughout the period of interdependence and reflect the importance of bilateral relations that leaders in both states perceive as meeting international and domestic political goals. With the cooperation mechanisms developed by the strategic partnership (signed in 2012 and then upgraded in 2018), Sino-Emirati political and diplomatic cooperation and coordination have continued to increase in line with substantial BRI cooperation" (Fulton 2019a: 153).

So, even in the UAE case, the Belt and Road Initiative emerged as a continuation element in China's incremental economic (mainly) and political relations with the Persian Gulf sub-region. Indeed, Abu Dhabi quickly and effortlessly became one of the epicentres of the BRI in the Persian Gulf, showing the tentacular potential of China's economic and financial cooperation, which ranges from exalting the UAE's unmatched potential as a commercial and connectivity hub in the region and beyond (Huwaidin 2021: 84) to highly technological collaboration in the framework of UAE Net Zero 2050 vision, including significant investments in sustainable energy projects ranging from solar farms to hydrogen plants.[8]

The impact of the BRI on China-Iran relations has been somewhat elusive. Sino-Iranian diplomatic relations predate the 1979 Revolution, having been officially established in 1971. Since then, Iran has emerged as an indispensable component of China's Persian Gulf venture as an essential source of oil to feed China's spectacular economic growth and a balancer against Soviet and, after the Cold War, US hegemony in the Persian Gulf (Alterman and Garver 2008: 177; Lin 2010: 50). Oil and gas have undoubtedly been a key driver of China's historical outreach to Iran. Beijing has dramatically increased its energy relationship with Tehran after the Iraq-Iran War. The two countries became increasingly interconnected while the PRC transitioned from being a net oil exporter to a net importer in the mid-1990s.[9] As noted by Garver (2013: 79), in the first decade of the 21st century, China became the largest investor in Iran's energy sector. Then, consistent with the judgement of Iran as a pivotal country in the Persian Gulf region, China considers Iran as a "nation with a large area and population, a powerful political and strategic actor in the heart of the Middle East located between the Strait of Hormuz and the Caspian Sea" (Garlick and Havlova 2020: 94). Economically, Iran's attractiveness to China is also boosted by the opportunity offered by the Islamic Republic's international isolation. Indeed the 1979 Revolution cut off Tehran's economic and financial links with its primary partner, the United States, leaving the newly empowered regime to find alternative partners within an international community that looked at Revolutionary Iran with scepticism. The eight years of war in which the Islamic Republic was caught after being invaded by Iraq in 1980 increased Tehran's need for economic partnerships with external powers able to assist in the reconstruction of a war-torn country. China, which at that time was opening to the world under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, was keen to accept Tehran's call. Chinese companies got involved in several infrastructural and industrial projects in the country, such as the construction of dams, airports, and railways. Most notably, in 1991, Iranian President Akbar Rafsanjani publicly invited China to bid for the construction of the Tehran metro system, a flagship project symbolising Iran's emergence from the war years. The project was finally awarded in 1996 to a conglomerate between an Iranian company and the China International Trust and Investment Corporation (CITC) and then completed in 2001 (Scita 2022: 165). Over the years, taking advantage of Iran's international isolation and difficulties in freely accessing the global markets due to limitations imposed by the US and international sanctions, China has grown dominant in Iran's domestic market and foreign trade, constantly ranking as the Islamic Republic's largest trading partner.[10] Lastly, Iran's geographic location is equally important, at the convenient crossroads of three macro-regions: Central Asia, the Middle East, and the wider Mediterranean region. In the BRI context, this is translated into Iran's place in the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWEC), "which represents the BRI's land route to connect China to the borders of Europe, bypassing Russia" (Scita 2021: 172).

Iran's strategic geographic location, its largely unexpressed economic potential, and the presence of Chinese companies in the Iranian market and infrastructure planning since the 1990s would have made the Islamic Republic an ideal BRI partner. In reality, the effective implementation of the BRI in the country struggled to deliver substantial results, with minimal impact on the expansion of Sino-Iranian economic relations. Since 2013, Iran's Chinese infrastructure and connectivity projects have been the most reactive to the BRI momentum. For instance, a Chinese bank is supposed to finance the high-speed rail between Tehran and Mashhad, a project that will follow the electrification of the same crucial railway approved by the Rouhani administration and granted to Chinese companies (Esfandiary and Tabatabai 2018: 172). More recently, the announcement of a new shipping route between China and Iran's only oceanic port of Chabahar represents one of the first concrete steps in the implementation of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed in 2021 while also being consistent with the BRI's connectivity goals.[11] Yet, while international sanctions have allowed China to "flood" the Iranian market and become Tehran's most important economic partner (Ehteshami et al. 2018), they have also been a severe impediment to effectively translating the potential of Sino-Iranian relations into an expansion of Chinese investments in the country. Although, as pointed out by Garlick and Havlova (2021: 16), figures and data must be managed carefully given that it is "often not clear, for instance, whether the figures cited are pledged or fulfilled", comparing the value of Chinese investments in Iran pre- and post-BRI shows that the impact of the BRI was less pronounced than expected and the spike observed in 2016 and 2017 - in which the annual value of Chinese investments in Iran was at the highest since 2006 - does not necessarily appear related to the unexpected success of the BRI compared to the previous years (*ibid.*: 17).[12] Instead, the growth in Chinese investments appears strongly connected with the small window in which US secondary sanctions were lifted thanks to the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), consequently reducing the risk of investing in the country. Unsurprisingly, Chinese investments returned to plunge after US President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the nuclear deal and reimposed secondary sanctions on Iran in 2018 as part of his "maximum pressure" campaign. Comparative data from other Persian Gulf and similar BRI countries such as Pakistan confirm that Iran has not been particularly successful in enjoying the benefits of China's grand project, remaining largely cut off from Beijing's investment bonanza in the Persian Gulf (Garlick and Havlova 2021; Greer and Batmanghelidj 2020).[13] As suggested, secondary sanctions remain the main impediment to a significant expansion of Sino-Iranian relations and a long-term stabilisation of the partnership. Directly, sanctions have made Chinese companies cautious at best but more often reluctant to invest in Iran. Indirectly, the negative environment created by imposed economic coercion had a cascade effect on the normalisation of Sino-Iranian relations, entrenching them in a state of perennial exceptionalism. As described by two Iranian scholars, the BRI resulted in minimal improvement in policy coordination, trade, people-to-people exchange, and financial integration between China and Iran, with the latter representing the gatekeeper for all the other areas of cooperation, including any growth in Chinese investments in the Islamic Republic (Shariatinia and Azizi 2017: 58). Revealing the preponderant economic dimension of the BRI: in the absence of an environment conducive to investment and economic partnership, China's grand project fails to drive a comprehensive expansion of bilateral relations.

As discussed in the next section of the paper, on the political side, relations between China and the Persian Gulf's pivotal states have expanded significantly post-2013, establishing three Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships. Whether or not the BRI has directly induced this development remains questionable.

The Emergence of China's Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships in the Persian Gulf

Overall, the trajectory of China's relations with the Persian Gulf sub-region appears linear and incremental rather than disruptive and exponential. Economic engagement remains the core and driver of Beijing's growing regional footprint, and the BRI has emerged as the continuation of an already marked path. As described in the previous section, the impact of the BRI on the Persian Gulf pivotal states has been less defining than expected. In the case of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, economic relations have undoubtedly increased since 2013. Still, the launch of China's new grand project has not significantly changed the trajectory and premises of the relationships. Instead, it has provided a political framework compatible with the two countries' long-term visions by which nourishing an already well-lubricated encounter. Similarly-yet-differently, in the case of Iran, macro-economic evidence shows that Sino-Iranian relations "[have simply] not been affected by the advent of Xi Jinping's flagship foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative" (Garlick and Havlova 2021: 22). Structural limitations and external intervening variables have significantly limited the expected benefits the BRI should have brought to the Islamic Republic. In other words, even in the Iranian case, the Belt and Road Initiative has not had a disruptive impact on what constitutes the core of the partnership: the economy.

Arguably, the most visible development in China-Persian Gulf relations after 2013 has been the formalisation of a hierarchy of partnerships peculiar to Beijing's diplomacy in the Middle East. Notably, "partnership diplomacy [is] a significant part of the major power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" (Sun 2021: 299), further entrenching the Middle East and the Persian Gulf into Beijing's global strategy. The articulation of such a distinctive, often byzantine, network of bilateral and multilateral relations dates to the 12th Party Congress held in 1982 under the guidance of Den Xiaoping and his "independent and self-reliant foreign policy of peace", which launched China's non-alliance policy (Fulton 2019b: 33; Li and Ye 2019: 71). Yet, the first partnership the PRC established was in 1993 with Brazil, with the number progressively growing and booming in the 2010s to form a comprehensive network that embraces tens of countries all over the world in a typology of 24 different types of partnerships that ranges from the "New Partnerships" to the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination" only reserved to Russia (Li and Ye 2019: 68-9). Chinese leaders and foreign policy bureaucracies have consistently reiterated the preference for partnerships to alliances as a distinctive feature of China's alternative approach to the post-Cold War international system. In the words of former Foreign Minister Wang Yi, as reported by Li and Ye (2019: 71), "[b]uilding partnership is a distinctive feature of China's diplomacy. After the end of the Cold War, which was marked by the confrontation between alliances of nations, we drew on the experience and lessons of history in a timely way and succeeded in developing a new approach to forming partners instead of allies".

In their nature, partnerships are goal-driven rather than defensive (Struver 2017) and, therefore, fit with the classic Chinese narrative of inter-state cooperation as the realisation of mutual development goals not targeted at third countries, indicating "a clear distinction between the American use of alliances and partnerships based on dense security cooperation and hardens a regional order that isolates Iran" (Fulton 2021b: 208). Partnership diplomacy also responds well to the fear of entanglement. As described by Fulton (2019b: 34), such preference for non-binding defensive commitments by one side shields China from the security dilemma of risking being trapped in conflicts that are not in its strategic interests, but, on the other, it also "creates the perception of an opportunist and potentially unreliable partner". Nonetheless, China's partnership diplomacy has been welcomed in the Persian Gulf under the assumption that it fosters deeper economic and financial cooperation, opens more frequent high-level diplomatic visits, and promotes mutual development (Goldstein 2005: 135). Partnership diplomacy has also allowed Beijing to maintain a balance between Iran and the GCC and successfully advance its developmental goals in a highly fragmented and conflictual sub-region.

Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE occupy the highest place in China's hierarchy of partnerships in the Middle East, shared only with Egypt and Algeria. The elevation of their status to the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partners (CSP), announced by Xi in 2016 for Iran and Saudi Arabia and in 2018 for the UAE, is a direct consequence of the pivotal place occupied by the three countries in China's consolidation of its footprint in the Persian Gulf sub-region (Sun 2021: 302-3). The explanation of the terms "comprehensive", "strategic", and "partnership" offered by the former Chinese premier Wen Jiabao provides a clear indication of what is ideally attached to these relationships: China partners with other countries to develop mutually beneficial cooperation, which becomes comprehensive when it embraces the economic, technological, cultural, and political fields and promotes collaboration in solving multilateral issues. Finally, the strategic partnership level is reached when the relationship has a long-term projection (Li and Ye 2019: 68). As recognised by Sun (2021: 302), Sino-Saudi relations have grown fast since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1990, but this is somewhat unsurprising given the political and economic prominence that KSA has in the Persian Gulf, which is reflected in Riyadh being China's largest trade partner in the Middle East and constantly ranking at the top of Beijing's oil suppliers. Similarly, Iran is the most populated country in the Persian Gulf and a geopolitical powerhouse of which China has recognised Tehran's regional preeminence since the 1970s. The two countries have long been engaged in an ideological and geopolitical rivalry in which China has carefully avoided taking a side, as symbolically demonstrated by the concurrent announcement of the elevation of the partnership with both countries to the CSP status during Xi's trip to the region in January 2016. Notably, the proposed upgrade of the Sino-Iranian partnership came immediately after the implementation of the JCPOA - a further sign that the advancement normalisation of Iran's relations with China is tied to regional and global dynamics. The UAE's elevation to the CSP level in 2018 is also an explicit recognition of the country's regional power and testify to the vast investment and financial cooperation opportunity that China has identified in the UAE. Formally, Riyadh, Tehran, and Abu Dhabi share the same top-level partnership with China, consistently with the balancing feature attached to strategic hedging. In reality, however, there is a clear difference in the effective implementation of the CSPs. For instance, if the UAE represents a model of a quick and comprehensive expansion of economic and financial relations under the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework, Iran sits on the opposite side of the spectrum. Although announced in 2016, it took five years for Tehran and Beijing to sign the partnership's document (2021). The beginning of the implementation phase was announced in January 2022 by the respective FMs, Wang Yi and Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, resulting in a modest improvement in Sino-Iranian trade and investments.[14]

The increasingly visible definition of a partnership hierarchy in the Persian Gulf in the late 2010s is broadly consistent with Xi's global foreign policy activism. It also fits the expansion of China's footprint in the region, of which the Belt and Road Initiative has been the driving framework since 2013. Yet, it is essential to highlight that partnership diplomacy is a distinctive feature of the PRC's global politics that predates the BRI and involves tens of countries that are part of Beijing's grand project. Furthermore, the hierarchy reflects China's evaluation of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran as the primary pivots for its presence in the Persian Gulf sub-region. Such consideration is not necessarily logically nor temporarily derived from the cooperation framework established by the Belt and Road Initiative.

Two Scenarios for the China-US Competition in the Persian Gulf

In the short and medium term, the prospects of a reversal in the competitive path China and the United States have taken at the global level are low, increasing the chances that the great power continuation will continue reverberating in the Persian Gulf. The reason is twofold. First, great power competition has emerged as the central pillar of the US foreign and security policy discourse toward China, at least since the Obama administration.[15] Second, regional countries appear comfortable navigating between Beijing and Washington, exploiting the current division of labour to obtain greater leverage and benefits.[16] Furthermore, in a global context shaped by the great power competition, China's growing presence in the Persian Gulf seems a further barrier for the United States to significantly reduce its hard presence in the region, pushing Washington to continue maintaining a strong security presence in the region – the public good most sought-after by the Arab Kingdoms. Concurrently, GCC countries are attracted by China's expanding economic, commercial, and financial engagement with the Persian Gulf, of which BRI is the leading outbound investment and infrastructure framework. At the same time, oil and hydrocarbons remain the backbone of the PRC's imports from the region, still constituting the primary driver of cooperation. In other words, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the other GCC countries are not prepared or interested in alienating one great power to favour or please the other. Therefore, the relationship between the Arab Kingdoms of the Persian Gulf and the Sino-US competition appears growingly symbiotic and, thus, resilient. In the case of Iran, the triangular relationship between the Islamic Republic, China, and the US is equally symbiotic but not based on the division of labour that traditionally characterises the Arab Kingdom's approach to China and the US. Instead, the Islamic Republic considers China a crucial - and perhaps irreplaceable - economic and political partner in its struggle against US and Western-induced international isolation. For this reason, Iran has long tried to incorporate the PRC into its anti-hegemonic discourse and the quest to build a front of like-minded countries dissatisfied with Western hegemony (Garver 2006). Beijing has occasionally accepted Tehran's courtship feeding Iran's anti-hegemonic discourse but has consistently refused to create a Sino-Iranian military entente. Ultimately, from both the GCC and Iran perspectives, the Sino-US great power competition offers opportunities to gain leverage vis-à-vis their partners and adversaries.

Therefore, in the short term, the status quo will likely hold. On the horizon, however, two different scenarios might emerge. The more likely one is the substantial continuation of the current division of labour but in an increasingly competitive way with little room for cooperation between the two great powers in the Persian Gulf (Ghiselli 2021). In such a scenario, the United States will remain the primary external security provider in the Persian Gulf, continuing to offer military aid and significant deployment of forces in the GCC countries. The need to (peacefully) contain Iran's nuclear ambitions following the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 continues to be a primary motive for Washington's active engagement with the region. China, instead, will continue expanding its economic footprint in the area full throttle. However, the current division of labour is made by something other than watertight compartments. US interests in the region will remain ramified, and the engagement with GCC states is historically multifaceted. Concurrently, the PRC's growing economic, political, and human involvement in a region that presents traditional and non-traditional security threats will increasingly require new policies and approaches by the People's Liberation Army and the Chinese private security firms (Ghiselli 2021). Similarly, the more pervasive Beijing's footprint in the region, the more frequent and unescapable the requests by local actors to add a more prominent diplomatic and security component to China's engagement with the region will likely be.

Therefore, the way and extent the Sino-US competition plays out in the region remain primarily driven by the global outlook of the great power competition. Regional competition, however, will remain asymmetrical, with the two extra-regional actors continuing to specialise in providing investments and economic engagement, as in the case of China, and security, as in the case of the United States. Yet, Chinese likely growing ventures in sensitive areas of military and technological cooperation with the Arab Gulf States are already emerging as sources of extraordinary tensions between the GCC and Washington. Cases in point have been the evidence of the construction

- later stopped following US pressure - of a potential Chinese military facility in the UAE in 2021 and Abu Dhabi's refusal to abandon its 5G cooperation with Huawei, which put on hold a major weapon deal that included the sale of fifty US state-of-the-art F-35 fighter jets.[17] Then, according to CNN, the evidence of "multiple large-scale transfers of sensitive ballistic missile technology between China and Saudi Arabia" prompted the Biden administration to consider sanctioning Saudi and Chinese entities, with commentators suggesting that Washington should respond firmly to Sino-Saudi ballistic missile cooperation.[18] Similarly, Beijing's essential political and economic support for the Iranian regime will continue to generate growing friction, fostering a zero-sum competition in which the two external powers are quintessentially non-cooperative.

The second scenario entails the emergence of a more symmetric competition in which China and the United States compete in providing investments and economic engagement with the region. For the US (and the EU), moving the regional competition with China to the same playing field - that of economic engagement, infrastructural development, and financial investments - through the definition, development, and pursuit of alternatives to the BRI might be the best solution to contrast China's growing footprint in the Persian Gulf. The Biden administration appeared to be keen to follow this path at the global level with the launch of the joint US-G7 Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative aimed at creating "a values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership led by major democracies to help narrow the $40+ trillion infrastructure need in the developing world".[19] Although Burton and Yellinek have noted that the B3W is likely to find some difficulties in emerging as a credible competitor of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Middle East, especially given that most of the regional countries, including the GCC, are comfortable with what China is currently offering.[20] Yet, "it is not hard to argue that [regional] stability and prosperity would be best served if the B3W and BRI initiatives were to work in tandem".[21] Although the current competitive framework will remain in place - and frictions over sensitive areas of Sino-Persian Gulf cooperation will not be discharged - changing the premises of the regional competition could also open a minimum degree of political and diplomatic cooperation between the two great powers. Notably, Arab Gulf States have openly rejected the notion of their relationship with the US and China as a zero-sum game. In the press conference that followed US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's visit to Saudi Arabia in early June 2023, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud defended KSA's partnership with China, "the world's second-largest economy [and Saudi Arabia's] largest trading partner," adding that: "[s]o, I don't ascribe to this zero-sum game. I think we are all capable of having multiple partnerships and multiple engagements [...] we can only encourage that because we see the future in cooperation, we see the future in collaboration, and that means between everybody".[22]

Similar remarks echoed at the 10th Arab-China Business Conference, held in Riyadh under the telling slogan "collaborating for prosperity", with the Saudi Energy Minister reiterating that the Kingdom is interested in maximising business opportunities and thus refuses to be engaged in a zero-sum competition between Washington and Beijing.[23] The same mood has long been expressed by the UAE's officials.[24] The role recently played by China in successfully mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran, an undoubtedly positive development for the region, has shown that Beijing and Washington "have a shared interest in ensuring the region's stability".[25] On that basis, the Sino-US global competition could play out constructively in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf thanks to a shared effort of compartmentalisation, competition, and engagement.

Conclusion

This paper has described the BRI initiative as the continuation of China's economic-driven incremental approach to the Persian Gulf. Rather than representing a significant disruption to the trajectory of this relationship, the BRI has enhanced, in the case of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the pre-existing, quickly developing, and promising economic partnership with Beijing. In the case of Iran, China's grand project has made the limits of Sino-Iranian relations more apparent than ever. Even when it comes to significant political developments in China-Persian Gulf relations in the post-2013 period, embodied by the upgrade of ties with the region's pivotal states to the comprehensive strategic partnership level, the process does not appear necessarily related to the BRI. Instead, it reflects a logical development in China's hedging strategy in an increasingly important region. Overall, the launch of the BRI in 2013 and the consequent path taken by Sino-Persian Gulf relations have not departed from the economic-first approach that remains best described with the theoretical lens of strategic hedging. Yet, this does not mean that the BRI has no impact on Sino-US competition in the region. Undoubtedly, having been a booster of economic, financial, and political cooperation, the Belt and Road Initiative has helped China's footprint in the region, increasing friction with the United States. But Beijing and Washington are not competing to provide the same public good to the region. Instead, they stick to a long-term division of labour that presents China as a growing economic powerhouse and the United States as the region's primary security provider.

Although this is outside the objectives of this paper - and constitutes material for further research - the observation of Sino-US relations in the Persian Gulf suggests that at least three significant factors drive the regional competition between the two great powers. First, given the increasing pervasiveness of the great power competition as the dominant definer of the relationship between China and the US globally, regional spillover appears to be a natural and inevitable collateral effect. In other words, the shrinking space for cooperation between the two great powers reverberates even in regions where Chinese and US interests might occasionally overlap (e.g., Iran's nuclear programme), closing the space for dialogue and policy coordination. Second, China-Iran relations have historically been a source of tensions between the two great powers. As Alterman and Garver wrote (2008: 97), "one of the greatest areas of strategic difference [between the PRC and the US] is with policy toward Iran". As such, the deadlock rivalry in which Tehran and Washington are entrenched generates an entanglement with Sino-Iranian relations that, in the absence of cooperative behaviour between the two great powers, is a source of regional and global confrontation. Lastly, the more pervasive China's presence in the Persian Gulf becomes, the more the cooperation between Beijing and the US regional partners becomes critical and sensitive. Sino-GCC collaboration in areas such as 5G and satellite communication, let alone the already mentioned military cooperation, is increasingly perceived as problematic and threatening by the United States.

In conclusion, the global competitive path undertaken by China and the US will continue reverberating in the Persian Gulf. Yet, it is not the Belt and Road Initiative - and, by extension, China's growing economic footprint - the primary driver of such regional spillover. Interestingly, if the United States decides to directly compete with China on economic, financial, and infrastructure integration, and the two great powers build a minimum level of coordination on shared regional interests, then the Persian Gulf could partly shield itself from the global great power competition. Regional countries, however, should play a role in bringing Washington and Beijing to the same table. Otherwise, the region will continue to be vulnerable to a potential turn of the Sino-US competition into confrontation.

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