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## Chinese Soft Power: Creating a Charm Image in the Islamic World

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Received: 4 Nov 2019

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Accepted: 12 June 2020

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### Abstract:

In recent years, the rise of China as an emerging great power has been widely perceived across the world. China adhered to a new strategy which focuses on improvement of its image in the world. China's soft power strategy in the Islamic world is little researched. However, the Islamic world is of paramount global importance as Muslim-majority countries provide nearly 45 percent of the world's supply. The purpose of this paper is to explain China's soft power strategy in the Islamic world through focusing on economic, cultural, political and military soft power initiatives. This paper examines the elements which characterize China's interest in the Islamic world and China's strategies for promotion of its interests in the area. The paper argues that China's pivot towards the Islamic world is primarily driven from its perception of securing energy sources, as well as other economic interests. Although China's soft power strategy is mainly focused on economic and cultural soft power creativities, but political and military soft power initiatives have taken a larger focus in recent years.

**Keywords:** The Islamic world, Middle East, Soft Power, China, Energy Sources

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### 1.Introduction

When in 1976 the Mao regime came to an end, China had the opportunity to redefine its national objectives. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Deng Xiaoping in 1978, believed it could solve all the country's problems by more development. Deng, seen as the architect behind China's modernization in the 21st century, stated "development is the most

important means to solve China's problems (Mingjiang, 2009). China launched its long awaited modernization plan in 1978, focusing on getting rid of the material poverty following the end of the Cultural Revolution. It adopted an economic strategy which resulted in the opening-up of the economy. China's economy soon experienced its "take-off"

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moment, reaching an unprecedented continuous annual growth rates in the double digits, sustaining its economic growth for more than three decades. 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). 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."

The rise of China has been acclaimed as one of the most significant changes in the turn of the century global relations. The unprecedented rise of China, was creating concerns and suspicion amongst other governments (Wang and Lu, 2008, p. 435). Furthermore, Chinese officials also started to show grand interest in the notion of soft power under the Hu administration (Cho & Jeong, 2008). 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.

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, but in China, the soft power discussion among policy makers and academics has

evolved in the previous decade. It has shifted towards a more comprehensive and sophisticated review of Nye's definition of soft power. Likewise, Beijing has progressively applied the concept of soft power, in diplomatic language and initiatives, such as in the "Peaceful Rise and "Harmonious World."

The Islamic world is of paramount global importance as Muslim-majority countries provide nearly 45 percent of the world's supply. The Islamic World is more than a geographical reference. It is a concept that refers to both historical and geographical imaginations where the Islamic faith plays a significant role. This spans regions and societies that are heavily influenced by Islamic qualities because Muslims form the majority, or have a significant presence.

When we think of the Islamic world, naturally we think of the Middle East. Yet, our imagination of the Islamic world rarely stretches beyond those borders. In reality, large parts of North Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia are predominantly Muslim. China's connection with the Islamic World is one that dates to antiquity, largely thanks to the silk routes. In more recent times, China's dealings with Muslim-majority countries are largely grounded in pragmatism. Following the leadership of Deng Xiaoping from the 1970s and the end of the Cold War, China's foreign policy towards these countries is based on practicality and economic prudence. While it has diplomatic ties with these countries, it remains distant. This is especially so with the Middle East where China describes itself as a "bystander". Its affinity with these countries start and ends with economic sensibilities, and a big part of that is oil.

China has increasingly expanded its involvement in the Middle East since the 1990s. Its engagement in the region has predominantly been economic, particularly fo-

cused 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 and 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. Therefore, this paper sheds light on China's influence The Islamic world especially in the Middle East and aims to answer the following questions:

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

We argues that China's interest in The Islamic world is mainly shaped by its need for continuous energy supply and economic and trade-related considerations. Although China's soft power strategy is mainly focused on economic and cultural soft power initiatives, but political and military soft power initiatives have taken a larger focus in recent years.

The purpose of this paper 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.

## **2. Conceptualization of soft power: Idea and Role**

Before starting any discussion of soft power, it seems necessary to clarify the most basic question: what is and how do we define "power"? there is no consensus yet on this matter. The simplest understanding of power is the capability of accomplishing something. In the context of this paper, my definition of power is primarily influenced by Nye's con-

ceptualization. Nye defines power as the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes that you want. He identifies several approaches: "*You can coerce them with threats, induce them with payments; or you can attract and co-opt them to want what you want.*" (Nye, 2011, p. 21). The first two approaches are classified as classical hard power, while the last two as soft power elements.

### **2.1 Soft power**

Soft power has been defined in a number of ways. For example, soft power is viewed as the "non-material capabilities such as reputation, culture, and value appeal that can aid the attainment of a state's objectives" (Viotti and Kauppi, 2013, p. 207). Breslin says that "soft power is conceived as the idea that others will align themselves to you and your policy preferences because they are attracted to your political and social system, values and policies" (Breslin, 2011, p. 8). Joseph Nye, who has written the seminal work on soft power in the study of international relations. 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. 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).

## 2.2 Alternative perspectives

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". 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 and Keohane, 2007). 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).

## 2.3 Soft power into China's academic and officials

Soft power theory has gained major popularity amongst Chinese academia and officials. 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 (Wang and Lu, 2008, p. 427)

Besides the popularity of soft power theory amongst the Chinese academics, Chinese government officials have also embraced soft power. On 30 August 2004, 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". 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. 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).

As analyzed above, the sources of soft power are not static. Consequently, this paper identifies four major sources of Chinese soft power: China's foreign economic policies, China's culture, China's political contributions, and China military missions.

### **3. Navigating a diverse Islamic world: China's interest**

The historical origins of the relationship between China and the Islamic world date back to ancient times, when they were connected by trade networks which are now known as the Ancient Silk Roads. China's investments in the Islamic world is consistent with its behavior elsewhere. The bulk of it is in the energy and transport sector, which is no surprise. The Islamic world is rich in energy resources, and the Middle East and North Africa is a crucial land bridge connecting China to Europe.

The end of the Mao regime in 1976 gave China the opportunity to redefine its objectives. 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 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).

China has increasingly expanded its involvement in the Middle East since the 1990s. 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 and 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).

In more recent times, China's dealings with Muslim-majority countries are largely grounded in pragmatism. Following the leadership of Deng Xiaoping from the 1970s and the end of the Cold War, China's foreign policy towards these countries is based on practicality and economic prudence. While it has diplomatic ties with these countries, it remains distant. Its affinity with these countries start and ends with economic sensibilities, and a big part of that is oil.

This is especially so with the Middle East where China describes itself as a “bystander”. 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 (Kazemi and 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. “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 OBOR vision is designed to invest \$4 trillion in infrastructure development linking 70 global countries through the creation of new ports, roads, railways and pipelines. Such connectivity will enable Chinese companies to reap the gains from construction contracts and from long term export opportunities into these markets. 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 (Vakili, 2018).

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, 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).

Likewise, 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. For example, 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 focuses 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. 33-34).

#### **4. Building the Power of Attraction at all Levels**

##### **4.1 Economic Engagement**

In order to facilitate further economic expansion, the Chinese government continuously seeks to improve its relation with the region. China surpassed the US by becoming the largest importer of crude oil worldwide in 2017 (EIA 2018). 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. 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). 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)

As significant as this statistic is, China's economic engagement with the Middle East goes far beyond the energy field. Driven by China's OBOR initiative and facilitated by the CASCF, China is engaging the region in multiple areas. In 2014, China proposed a "1+2+3" model of cooperation with the Middle East in the 6th Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab Forum. The proposal expanded bilateral cooperation from energy into diverse areas such as infrastructure, trade,

and investment – as well as high tech cooperation in nuclear energy, space satellites, and other new energy initiatives. As the proposal materialized, China's investment in the region soared (Chen, 2018). China's investment in Iraq's oil industry and its bilateral trade with Saudi Arabia are among the most noteworthy. In addition to an extensive cooperation on oil and energy, China and Saudi Arabia vowed to develop comprehensive strategic partnerships and cooperation in the fields of aerospace, finance, and nuclear power. In 2016 the two states established a bilateral mechanism, the China-Saudi Arabia High Level Joint Committee to facilitate the comprehensive partnership. In all, the whirlwind diplomacy conducted during Xi's first trip to the Middle East in 2016 secured no fewer than 50 cooperation agreements and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with Middle East countries (Perlez, 2016).

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 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).

In addition, China's OBOR initiative will enhance larger investment in infrastructure in the Middle East. China's investment in the countries along the OBOR route already reached \$50 billion at the beginning of 2017. China has announced that it will invest one trillion dollars in the OBOR initiative over the next decade New infrastructure like ports,

bridges, power plants, roads, railroads, and pipelines are needed to make the massive trade network a success. Moreover, as of now, major regional powers including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran all stand ready to jointly build the OBOR with China and many of these countries have taken practical steps to be part of this grand initiative. In September 2017, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif commented during a visit to Beijing that Iran hoped to conduct integration with the Chinese side as soon as possible (Chen, 2017). 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 (Cendrowski, 2016). Another important element that constitutes the trade between China and the Middle East are manufactured goods. The Middle East is a major consumer of these low-cost goods. For example, Chinese export to Libya increased from \$216 billion in 2003, to \$1.3 billion in 2005 (Alterman, 2009, p. 65).

China has also expanded economic cooperation with Palestine and Israel in recent years. In 2017, China announced its commitment to actively speed up negotiations on a China–Israel free trade zone. The two sides discussed deepening their collaboration in multiple areas ranging from advanced technology, clean energy, and communications. With regard to Palestine, China committed to assist Palestine in increasing its self-help capacity by building industrial parks, developing solar power stations, and increasing investment and economic aid. Both Israel and Palestine confirmed their eagerness to jointly build OBOR with China (Chen, 2017).

Therefore, 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. 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.

#### 4.2 Cultural Engagement

As Nye states, an attractive culture will contribute to a positive outward image, which enhances a state to be more influential (Nye, 2004). Culture has played a major aspect in the strategy of China's outwards image projection as a state with rich history and culture. 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). 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.

The promotion of language has become a prominent asset of cultural soft power diffusion. As a product of the cultural strategy, China established its first Confucius institute in Seoul, South Korea in 2004. 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). 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).

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). 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).

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).

Cultural exchange in the form of art exchange has always been an important component of China’s diplomacy with foreign states. 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).

#### **4.3 Political and Diplomatic Engagement**

In light of China’s geo-economic strategy, its diplomatic efforts have increasingly been influential in recent years. China aims to maintain good relationships with all major regional players, such as Egypt, Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. In the fear of losing this position, China has been wary to get involved in regional issues (Alterman and 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 (Signh, 2014, p. 10). However, recently China’s involvement in international diplomatic efforts in the region has slowly been increasing.

The so-called “Arab Spring” and the political transitions that several states witnessed caused China to redirect its dealing with the region. As political Islamists took over power in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, China was very willing to establish relations with the new political forces. 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. 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). 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)

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 Afghanistan peace process. 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 and 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. 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.

With regard to the Iran Nuclear Crisis, Beijing both facilitated and supported the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) via its bilateral consultation mechanism with Iran (Chen, 2017). 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. Although China played a minor role during the negotiations, its role as arbiter between Iran and the U.S. was constructive to the negotiations.

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.

#### 4.4 Military and security Engagement

Besides flourishing economic and diplomatic activities, China has engaged the region militarily via arms sales, the presence of its navy forces, its participation in peacekeeping, and its collaboration with the regional anti-terrorism fight (Olimat, 2014).

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). 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.

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.

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).

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).

Under the framework of bilateral cooperation, China actively supported Iraq in its fight against ISIS by sharing intelligence and providing training (Chaziza, 2016). Additionally, military cooperation with Iran also expanded when the two countries held a joint military exercise in the Persian Gulf in June 2017 (Chen, 2017).

Hence, China's 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.

### 5. Conclusion

The Islamic World is more than a geographical reference. It is a concept that refers to both historical and geographical imaginations where the Islamic faith plays a significant role. This spans regions and societies that are heavily influenced by Islamic qualities because Muslims form the majority, or have a significant presence. This paper has aimed to investigate China's soft power deployment in the Islamic world. In order to reach these aim, an assessment has been made through the analysis of the four key soft power forms, economic, cultural, political and military soft power.

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 Islamic World. 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, which try to disseminate Chinese language and the rich culture.

The last decade several political upheavals and conflicts have erupted in the Islamic world, which have pushed China to distance itself from its traditional approach. 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. Nevertheless, China recently seems to gradually become more pro-active and willing to use its soft power to fulfill its share in political affairs. Several examples in this paper 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. 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.

China has also been making efforts towards facilitating Islamic finance. In 2018, the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Islamic Development Bank—a multilateral bank that focuses on Islamic finance—to jointly finance projects in Africa and other developing countries. The AIIB is purportedly considering using Hong Kong as a sukuk—an Islamic financial certificate—issuance base. Banks like the Industrial Commercial Bank of China, and the Qatar National Bank, have also made efforts to make access to and investment in Islamic finance easier.

China's military missions in the Islamic world have not only contributed to safeguarding Chinese economic interests, they have

also contributed to positive image building efforts, which in turn have boosted China's soft power.

The outcome of this analysis has depicted that, 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.

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