



# China in the Middle East: an Analysis from a Theoretical Perspective of “Path Dependence”

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## Abstract

There is an ongoing debate about whether China’s growing economic presence in the Middle East will eventually make it more politically assertive on the Middle Eastern affairs. This paper demonstrates, from a theoretical perspective of “path dependence,” that China’s promotion of the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” since the 1950s as the guiding doctrine of its foreign relations has forged a “path” for China to follow, along which it has made and repeated promises against interventionism and imperialism to other countries including the Middle Eastern ones. It, in turn, has created a situation where moving away from that “path against interventionism and imperialism” will cause huge damage to China’s reputation as a reliable non-interventionist partner to the Middle Eastern countries, and the “Global South” in general. As a result, China has refrained, and will arguably continue to refrain, from being too politically assertive on the Middle Eastern affairs.

**Keywords** Sino-middle eastern relations · Non-intervention · Anti-imperialism · Path dependence

## Introduction

China’s relations with the Middle East, like its relations with many other regions of the world, have been growing over the past two decades. In 2004, China and the League of Arab States worked together to create the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in order to promote cooperation between the two sides [6]. Also, China has built different kinds of “partnership” with countries in the region, ranging from “cooperative partnership” to “strategic partnership” and “comprehensive strategic

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partnership” [45]. For example, China established a “strategic cooperative relationship” with Turkey in 2010 for better political and economic ties [15]. Since then, it has also developed “strategic partnership” with several other countries in the region to pursue more coordination between China and those countries on regional and international affairs [18]. In addition, China upgraded its relations with Egypt to an even higher partnership, “comprehensive strategic partnership” (i.e., long-term, all-dimensional, wide-ranging, and multi-layered cooperation), in 2014 and went on to build the same “comprehensive strategic partnership” with the other three major powers in the Middle East: Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2016 and the United Arab Emirates in 2018 [17, 18, 45].

Among all kinds of cooperation that China has been promoting with the Middle Eastern countries, the economic one is the most obvious. As China’s vice minister of commerce pointed out in the press conference for the 4th “China-Arab States Expo” held in July 2019, “Economic and trade cooperation is the longest and most active factor in China-Arab relations and an inexhaustible driving force for the development of China-Arab relations” [28]. Today, China’s effort to promote Sino-Middle Eastern economic cooperation has a lot to do with its grand economic strategy, “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), which was first introduced by the current Chinese leader Xi Jinping in 2013 and consists of what China calls the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” [38]. Referring to the so-called silk road that served as a trade route between China on the one side and Central Asia, the Middle East, part of East Africa, and part of Europe on the other during the ancient time, China now vows to revive that old trade route with the BRI and strengthen its economic ties with the countries along the route. With the BRI, China’s economic interests in the Middle East have been growing significantly. In the 8th CASC held in July 2018, China announced that it would provide several Arab countries with loan worth totally \$20 billion for “economic reconstruction” in “transportation infrastructure, oil and gas, finance, high-tech fields, the digital economy, and artificial intelligence projects” [20].

One major reason for China to promote economic cooperation with the countries in the region concerns its huge demand for oil. With domestic economic development continuing to be a priority for the Chinese government, China’s demand for natural resources has been growing, and securing the domestic and international supply of those resources has become very critical for its national security. Given that more than 60% of China’s oil imports are from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the importance of the Middle East to China is obvious [4]. The establishment of China’s first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 has caught many people’s attention. The location of this base (i.e., the Horn of Africa), which is between the Middle East and North Africa, reveals that securing the imports of oil from the MENA region to China is one of the key missions for that Chinese military base.

This development makes observers of Sino-Middle Eastern relations wonder whether China’s growing economic presence in the Middle East over the past two decades will be followed by a significant increase of China’s political, or even military, presence in the region. Actually, since China’s economic ties with the Middle Eastern countries started to grow due to its economic reform initiated in the late 1970s, there has been a debate among scholars about whether the expanding economic interests of China’s in the Middle East, which include not only oil import but also other trade and investment activities like labor export, construction services, engineering projects, business partnerships, and bilateral investment plans [43, 44], will sooner or later make

China become more politically assertive on the Middle Eastern affairs in order to better protect its economic interests over there from other international competitors. The growing voices among some Chinese intellectuals that urge China to modify its “low profile” foreign policy [43, 44] and the words said by China’s minister of foreign affairs in his interview with Al Jazeera in 2014 that “China’s political role in the Middle East will only be enhanced” [19, 33], as well as the establishment of China’s first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, make this debate even more important today for both academia and diplomatic circles.

The purpose of this paper is to engage in this debate from a new angle. Referring to the concept of “path dependence,” I argue in this paper that China’s long-time promotion of the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” (mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence) since the 1950s as the guiding doctrine of its foreign relations has forged a “path” for China to follow, along which it has made and repeated again and again promises against interventionism and imperialism to other countries, especially those in the “Global South” including the Middle Eastern ones. It, in turn, has created a situation where moving away from that “path against interventionism and imperialism” will cause huge damage to China’s reputation as a reliable non-interventionist partner to the “Global South.” Therefore, taking its reputation into account, China will likely stay on the same “path” and continue to adopt a less-political, business-first policy toward the Middle East in the foreseeable future.

To make my case, I will first review the literature on the aforementioned debate. Then, I will discuss the concept of “path dependence” and use it to analyze the reproducing and constraining effects of the “Five Principle of Peaceful Coexistence” on China’s policy toward the Middle East, especially focusing on the role played by China’s self-created reputation as a reliable non-interventionist partner to the “Global South” in this case of “path dependence.” In the last part of this paper, I will summarize my findings and discuss the implications of them for the studies of China’s relations with the Middle East, and the “Global South” in general, in the context of the rise of China in our world today.

## **The Debate: Will China Become More Politically Assertive in the Middle East?**

Since the establishment of the “new China” (i.e., People’s Republic of China) in 1949, China has been having a limited, though increasing, political presence in the Middle East. During the Cold War, while the two conflicting superpowers (i.e., the USA and the Soviet Union) enthusiastically intervened in the political affairs of the Middle East to protect their own interests in the region, China’s involvement was more like a response to those two superpowers’ acts. Regarding both the USA and the Soviet Union as its enemies, China’s fundamental interest in the Middle East back then was to reduce and eventually eliminate their influences over there [23, 40]. Many studies about China’s relations with the Middle Eastern countries during the Cold War focus on the issue of Palestine and examine how China tried to encourage the countries in the region to work together to resist those two superpowers’ intervention in the region [1, 23, 40].

However, as those studies show, China's effort was not very successful due to its Middle East policy back then that was largely characterized by "non-commitment and ambivalence" [40]. For example, while China in the beginning encouraged the armed "righteous struggle" of the Palestine Liberation Movement against Israel and what it called "American imperialist intervention" [1], it later supported the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Initiative, calling it a "just stand" and regarding it as a way to stop "Soviet expansionism" [40]. In general, during the peak of the Cold War, China cared more about the two superpowers' presence in the Middle East and ignored the importance of local issues and interests, which at times alienated countries in the region [40].

China's "reform and opening up" initiated in the late 1970s ushered in a new era of Sino-Middle Eastern relations. Throughout the 1980s, the economic exchanges between the two sides significantly grew with China exporting its goods and labor to the Middle East and the Middle East providing funds of investment and loans for China's development [42]. Also, during this period of time, the region of the Middle East as a whole became the biggest buyer of China's arms sales [42]. In addition, with its growing economic ties with the Middle East, China began to care very much about the stability of the region and became more willing to support the UN settlement of Middle Eastern issues [41]. China's participation and cooperation in the UN's effort to resolve the Gulf Crisis following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 is a good example [41, 42]. However, it is worth noting that while China's interests in the Middle Eastern affairs have increased, its acts of intervention are still limited. Take the aforementioned Gulf Crisis for example. Although China supported all of the ten UN Security Council's resolutions that imposed political, economic, and military sanctions on Iraq, it refused to endorse the resolution that authorized the use of force against Iraq by abstaining from the vote on it [41]. In general, as many scholars have found, China is still taking a less-political, business-first, economic approach toward the Middle East [47] while doing some "quasi-mediation diplomacy" (i.e., indirect involvement that emphasizes following rather than leading, revising the agenda rather than setting it, and conflict de-escalation rather than conflict resolution) at times in the region [48]. That being said, with China's economic presence in the Middle East continuing to grow, a debate has emerged about whether the expanding Chinese economic interests in the Middle East, as revealed by, for example, its growing demand for oil from the Middle East and the increasing importance of the region as a hub for market access to Europe and Africa [26], will eventually lead China to change its policy toward the region from a less-political, business-oriented one to a more politically active, interventionist one in order to better protect its expanding economic interests over there. This debate is not only academically important but also practically relevant. As studies show, there could be both positives and negatives as a result of China becoming more politically assertive in the region: while it might reduce the western influences in the region and therefore increase the Middle Eastern countries' "freedom of action to diversify and engage with more economic partners" [26], it would however bring about more tension between China and the USA, the two biggest powers in our world today [53].

Some argue that China will not become more politically assertive over the Middle Eastern affairs despite its growing economic ties with the region. One of the key reasons lies in China's effort to avoid being too politically active in the region at the expense of its relations with the USA that has huge interests in the Middle East. As a study by Wehrey, Kaye, Watkins, Martini, and Guffey about the Middle East in the

wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq shows [49], despite the erosion of the US standing in the region as a result of that unpopular war, China still has little interest in challenging the US presence in the region due to their shared interests in the stability of the Middle East, as well as its limited ability to project military power far away from home. The study concludes that the expansion of the Chinese presence will “proceed gradually and remain focused on economic dimension” [49]. Here, China’s military base in Djibouti established in 2017 is a good example. Given that China does not have a blue-water navy to deploy over there, the base is still relatively small as compared to other powers’ bases in and around the region such as the American one in Diego Garcia on the Indian Ocean and the Russian one in Tartus, Syria. A study of China’s role in Israeli-Palestinian relations by Chen [8] also finds that while China might be supportive of the Palestinian side, it still treats its relations with the USA as a priority and will not interfere with the issue of Israeli-Palestinian conflicts at the expense of Sino-US relations. Similarly, as Lai’s study on China’s “oil diplomacy” reveals [24], although China’s demand for oil from the Middle East has increased, which in turn might increase its incentive to compete with the USA over the influences in the region for its own energy security, China has largely accommodated the US presence in the region by, for example, not challenging the US policy toward Iraq and Iran. Studies on Sino-Iranian relations like the work by Ehteshami, Horesh, and Xu [14] and that by Conduit and Akbarzadeh [11] also show that China’s interests in Iran are still largely economic and that it is very cautious about exploiting the tension between Iran and the USA to its advantage: while on the one hand, it tries to strengthen its relations with Iran due to its growing demand of oil and its effort to get Iran on board for its BRI, China has no interest in building any form of military alliance with Iran against the USA and has been very careful not to be dragged into any unwanted conflict with the USA because of Iran.

In contrast to the studies arguing that the expanding economic interests of China’s in the Middle East are not making China more politically assertive in the region, there are others having a different view. As Calabrese’s work on China’s relations with the Persian Gulf countries demonstrates [7], China’s growing economic ties with those countries, especially in the energy sector, mean that China could no longer keep itself away from the complicated political problems in the region despite its effort to keep a low political profile and concentrate on economic issues only. According to Calabrese [7], the 1991 Gulf War is a good example showing that it is impossible for China that has growing economic interests in the region to “insulate itself from the adverse effects of events that transpire in the region” and that China will only get more and more involved in these events one way or another either voluntarily or involuntarily. A study by Sun and Zoubir [47] also demonstrates that, although China is still sticking to its “economic diplomacy” when it comes to Sino-Middle Eastern relations in order to protect “its expanding commercial interests while eschewing political entanglement,” the 2011 Arab Spring has made it difficult for China to “reap economic benefits while shelving political entanglement to sustain this economic diplomacy in the longer run.” More specifically, China’s effort to keep a distance from the Arab Spring, in contrast to those Western powers’ support for it, has brought China such accusations by the people over there as being indifferent and irresponsible in the face of the “slaughter of civilians,” which in turn might make China become less appealing in the region not only economically but also in other aspects [47]. Following the aforementioned

arguments, there are studies suggesting that China has to change its less-political, business-first policy toward the Middle East in order to better protect its interests over there. For example, Sun and Zoubir in another work of theirs [48] argue that, although China's involvement in the Middle Eastern issues has been increasing with its "quasi-mediation diplomacy" which also helps to promote its image and increase its soft power in the region, it should move beyond "quasi-mediation diplomacy" and start to conduct "genuine mediation diplomacy" by taking the initiative and getting involved directly on those Middle Eastern issues if it wants to effectively protect its long-term interests in the region. Similarly, Evron [16] argues that, in order for China to fully realize its BRI-related connectivity projects in the Middle East, it has to change its low-engagement policy toward the region (e.g., its marginal or even no involvement in such issues as the ISIS, the Syrian crisis, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and get more involved in regional politics by "promoting and facilitating collaboration between rival countries" and "building and exercising influence in those countries' political and business circles."

### **A New Angle to the Debate: China's Promises on "Non-intervention" and "Anti-imperialism"**

The review of the works on Sino-Middle Eastern relations in the previous section reveals that there is still no consensus on whether China will become more politically assertive or even interventionist in the Middle East as its economic interests in the region continue to expand. However, a closer look at those works uncovers a common thing that they share: both sides in the debate take a rational choice approach that focuses on China's consideration of its "interests." More specifically, while one side argues that not becoming politically assertive in the Middle East is the best way for China to protect its interests in the region, the other side argues that becoming politically assertive can better protect its interests. Although it makes sense that actions are taken to protect interests and therefore China's consideration of its interests in the Middle East should not be ignored in that debate, it is equally important to note that there is a critical intervening variable between China's actions and its consideration of interests that we have to pay attention to the following: China's long-time emphasis on the "principle of non-intervention" and the idea of "anti-imperialism" in its relations with the Middle Eastern countries. More specifically, to China, whether or not to become more politically assertive in the Middle East is not simply an issue about protecting interests. It also involves an issue of keeping promises on "non-intervention" and "anti-imperialism," which will significantly influence its international reputation, especially among the developing countries in the "Global South" that China, seeing itself as the biggest developing country in the world, has been identified with. A damage to China's reputation among the Middle Eastern countries due to its breaking the aforementioned promises will in turn undesirably hurts its interests in those countries or even the whole "Global South."

It is worth pointing out here that "non-intervention," along with "anti-imperialism," does not mean that China plays no role in the Middle Eastern affairs and has no interference with the regional issues over there at all. To China, although intervening in the Middle Eastern affairs is "fundamentally unacceptable," it is "occasionally

unavoidable” [43]. That being said, it is very obvious that China in the Middle East has tried to be as less politically assertive as possible and conducted only that “quasi-mediation diplomacy” at most if necessary. More specifically, when it comes to the Middle Eastern affairs, encouraging peaceful settlements by the Middle Eastern countries themselves is still China’s first and foremost option, with intervention without military force through regional or international organizations as a second but reluctant choice and unilateral intervention, as well as any interference by military force including those multilateral ones, as the option that China has tried to avoid the most [43, 44].

Emphasized by China itself, the “principle of non-intervention” and the idea of “anti-imperialism” constitute the key foundations of the CASCF. The CASCF is currently the most important formal institution through which China and the Middle Eastern countries (and some Islamic countries in Africa) work together to discuss and jointly deal with the issues concerning their relations. It consists of such meetings and activities as “Entrepreneurs Conference,” “Special Economic and Trade Seminar,” “Energy Cooperation Conference,” “China-Arab Relations and Civilization Dialogue Seminars,” “Cultural Exchanges,” “Higher Education and Scientific Cooperation Seminar,” “News Cooperation Forum,” “Environmental Cooperation,” “Human Resources Training,” and “Non-Governmental Exchanges” [37]. The CASCF was initiated in January 2004 when China and the Arab League made public the Joint Communiqué concerning the Establishment of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum at the end of the official visit by the then-Chinese president, Hu Jintao, to the headquarters of the Arab League [32]. In addition to announcing the establishment of the CASCF, the communiqué also pointed out the four principles for developing the relations between China and the Arab states raised by Hu, among which the first one is “establishing political relations on the basis of mutual respect.” Following the establishment of the CASCF, the first Ministerial Meeting of CASCF was held in September 2004. At the end of the meeting, China and the Arab League signed the Declaration of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, in which the two sides agree to follow the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” and stick to the concept of “sovereign equality” and the “principle of non-intervention” [9]. Then, at the end of the fourth Ministerial Meeting of CASCF held in May 2010, China and the Arab League signed the *Tianjin Declaration* to establish the “China-Arab Strategic Cooperative Relationship.” It is important to note that, in the declaration, they emphasize again the importance of the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” and urge all of the countries to respect each other’s “right to choose their own path for development” [10].

The prominent status of the “principle of non-intervention” and the idea of “anti-imperialism” in China’s relations with countries in the Middle East is especially manifested by China’s first-ever official policy paper toward the region published in January 2016 [34]. In the paper, China pointed out that it would “strengthen China-Arab cooperation in an all-around manner” including “political cooperation,” “investment and trade cooperation,” “social development,” “culture and people-to-people exchanges,” and “cooperation in the field of peace and security.” It is worth noting that, on top of these various kinds of cooperation, China constantly emphasized the importance of the “principle of non-intervention” and the idea of “anti-imperialism” in its relations with the Middle Eastern countries. In the introduction of the paper, mentioning the “Arab national liberation movement,” China said that it “firmly supports Arab countries’ struggle to uphold sovereignty and territorial integrity, pursue and

safeguard national interests, and combat external interference and aggression.” Also, seeing itself as a country that suffered from imperialism and colonialism as well, China emphasized that it and the Middle Eastern countries all have a “broad consensus” on “safeguarding state sovereignty and territorial integrity” and “defending national dignity.” Furthermore, regarding itself as a member of the “Global South,” China depicted its relations with the Middle East as a “model of South-South cooperation,” saying that “both sides have always respected and treated each other as equals and remained brothers, friends and partners no matter what happens on the world arena.”

Following the introduction, China pointed out in a more detailed explanation of its “Arab Policy” that it “upholds the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” and that it “respects choices made by the Arab people, and supports Arab states in exploring their own development paths suited to their national conditions.” China’s emphasis on the “principle of non-intervention” and the idea of “anti-imperialism” can also be found throughout the rest of the policy paper in its description of those different kinds of cooperation that China would conduct with the Middle Eastern countries. For example, discussing the “political cooperation,” China said that “in the principle of independence, equality, mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs, the Communist Party of China is willing to further enhance exchanges with friendly political parties and organizations in Arab countries, consolidating the political foundation of China-Arab relations.” Similarly, in the section about “cooperation in the field of peace and security,” China made it clear that “counter-terrorism operations should comply with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international norms, and respect sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries.”

### **“Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” and Path Dependence**

As discussed in the previous section, the “principle of non-intervention” and the idea of “anti-imperialism,” which are embodied in China’s “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” are emphasized by China itself as key foundations for its relations with the Middle Eastern countries. To further examine why and how they are affecting and will continue to affect China’s behavior in the Middle East, this section analyzes China’s enthusiastic promotion of the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and its lasting influence over China’s relations with the Middle Eastern countries from a theoretical perspective of “path dependence.”

The “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” were first raised by China in its negotiation with India between 1953 and 1954 over the issue about Tibet [30]. The principles were officially included in the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India that was signed by China and India in April 1954 [29, 30]. One year later, in April 1955, China promoted those same principles in the Asian-African Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia (i.e., the “Bandung Conference”), where China and the other 28 countries from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, many of which just became independent from the colonial rule, got together to show their solidarity against colonialism and promote economic and cultural cooperation among one another, and the principles were eventually incorporated into the resolution of the conference [30, 36]. Since then, as many official statements issued by China reveal, the



“Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” has been publicized by China as the guiding doctrine for its foreign relations [30, 31]. At the core of the “Five Principles” is the norm of “non-intervention,” especially in terms of struggle against imperialism/colonialism where powerful countries interfere with the affairs of other weaker countries to their own advantages. According to China, the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” get rid of the “unfairness” in international relations, are in opposition to “hegemony” and “power politics,” and reflect the “common desire of developing countries” [30, 31].

From a theoretical perspective of “path dependence,” China since the early 1950s has been following a “path” forged by the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” that were initiated by itself in the first place. “Path dependence,” associated with “historical institutionalism” that emphasizes “history matters” [21], is a theoretical framework resting on the assumption that “choices made in the past influence the menu of options available in the present and future” [25] and that “initial moves in one direction elicit further moves in that same direction” [27]. In other words, a certain decision you made in the first place would pave a specific path, as compared to other alternative paths, that you are inclined to follow moving forward: it has reproducing and constraining effects on the decision that you are making now, which in turn will have similar effects on the decision that you can make in the future. When it comes to the study of international relations, the concept of “path dependence” is a helpful theoretical tool for scholars to explain the foreign policy that a certain country is currently implementing and predict the policy that it will adopt in the future. As Leithner and Libby [25] point out, although the term “path dependence” is seldom used in foreign policy analyses, the idea that “history is an important explanatory factor in contemporary foreign policy decisions” is popularly accepted in the field.

Going back to China’s relations with the Middle Eastern countries, its mentioning the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” in all of the three key official documents concerning Sino-Middle Eastern relations that I have discussed (i.e., the Declaration of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, the Tianjin Declaration on the “China-Arab Strategic Cooperative Relationship,” and China’s Arab Policy Paper) can be well understood in the aforementioned theoretical framework of “path dependence,” which suggests that the researchers of international relations in general and those of foreign policy in particular should pay attention to how the original policy encourages the “reproduction” of that policy and/or the “constraints” on future policies in an “irreversible or uncontrollable manner” [25, 39].

The promotion of the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” by China in the 1950s was against the backdrop of China’s status as a less-developed country which had limited economic, military, and political capabilities but was facing several internal and external challenges. Territorial integrity was one of the key challenges. As mentioned, the “Five Principles” were first raised by China in its negotiation with India between 1953 and 1954 over the issue of Tibet that China claimed as a Chinese territory. Also, the issue of Taiwan that China regarded as a “renegade province” was an important one, too. At the Bandung Conference held in 1955 where China enthusiastically promoted the “Five Principles,” China secured support from many Middle Eastern countries for its claim on Taiwan and its bid for becoming a member of the United Nations (where the Chinese seat was held by Taiwan back then) with its promise to support their position on the issue of Palestine [23]. Threats from the

“imperialist” forces (i.e., the USA and, at a later point, the USSR) constituted another key challenge, and the “Five Principles” were used to rally support from the “third-world countries” against the two superpowers back then. Take the Bandung Conference for example again. At the conference, while China made clear its opposition to the “Western ‘imperialistic’ designs” in the Middle East, many countries in the region agreed to China’s position against the USA and its idea of anti-imperialism/colonialism in general [23]. Simply speaking, at least in the context of Sino-Middle Eastern relations, without enough capabilities to effectively impose its will on others, China had little choice but to resort to “norm” (i.e., principle of non-intervention) and “morality” (i.e., anti-imperialism), both of which were embodied in the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” to protect its interests.

However, it is intriguing that China is still emphasizing the importance of the “Five Principles” in its relations with the Middle East as revealed by those three key documents about Sino-Middle Eastern relations despite the fact that it has changed from that less-developed country to the second largest economy of the world that has huge economic, military, and political power. Here, as discussed, the reproducing and constraining effects of “path dependence” play an important role. Following the “path” set by China’s enthusiastic promotion of the “Five Principles” in the 1950s, China has not only continued to emphasize the principle of non-intervention and its position against imperialism but also made even more concrete promises along the way. For example, Deng Xiaoping as the chairman of the Chinese delegation to the 6th special session of the UN General Assembly in 1974 claimed in his speech to the UN that China “firmly sees its joint struggle with the third world against imperialism, hegemony, and colonialism as a sacred international duty,” “firmly stands by the third world countries,” and most importantly, “will never pursue hegemony” [52]. He went so far as to say, “If one day China should change her color and turn into a superpower, if she too should play the tyrant in the world, and everywhere subject others to her bullying, aggression and exploitation, the people of the world should identify her as social-imperialism, expose it, oppose it and work together with the Chinese people to overthrow it” [35].

Chinese leaders after Deng, including Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and the current leader Xi Jinping, continued to follow the “path,” pointing out on various occasions as well that China will never seek hegemony and domination *even if* it becomes strong and has the capabilities to do so [2, 3, 5]. Their words are all repeated in an official white paper entitled “China and the World in the New Era” that was made public by China in September 2019 [46]. In the paper, China emphasized that, with the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” it has “safeguarded the interests of developing countries, playing an important role in building a fair and equitable international political and economic order.” Furthermore, it pointed out that “China will never pursue hegemony or expansion, nor will it seek to create spheres of influence, no matter how international situation changes, how China develops itself.”

## Reputation as a Reproducing and Constraining Factor for China’s Policy

To further explore the reproducing and constraining effects of the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” on the future development of China’s relations with the Middle

East (or more specifically, their effects on whether China will become more politically assertive in the region), we should also examine another important point about “path dependence”: the negative consequence of changing the “path.” As studies of “path dependence” have shown, a key reason for an actor to stay on a certain path has a lot to do with the “cost” of switching from one path to another. Most importantly, as these studies have demonstrated, the longer an actor stays on a certain path, the higher the cost of changing the path [21, 25, 27]. Here, to China, the “cost” of changing the path forged by the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” involves a huge damage to its reputation as a reliable non-interventionist partner among the Middle Eastern countries that have viewed China’s “noninterventionism” more favorably than the “more-muscular US approach” to regional affairs [49]. More specifically, given China’s constant emphasis on the “Five Principles” over the past seven decades, becoming politically assertive and interventionist (or even an attempt to do so) in the Middle East would arguably make countries in the region (or even the whole “Global South”) regard China as not trustworthy due to its breaking its own long-time promises against interventionism and imperialism.

International reputation has been proved very important to a certain country as it affects how others would interact with that country [12]. For example, a country with a poor “reputation for resolve,” which is defined as others’ perception of a certain country’s willingness to risk war, would be more likely to face many challenges from other countries [50]. Here, among different kinds of reputation, “reputation for reliability,” which is related to whether a certain country is perceived by others as committed to its promises, is the most relevant to China’s relations with the Middle East under discussion in this paper. As a study of reputation for reliability by Crescenzi, Kathman, Kleinberg, and Wood [13] has revealed, countries with negative reputation for reliability would face more difficulties in obtaining allies and securing agreements with others because they are not perceived as “historically compliant partners.” From this point of view, there is little doubt that breaking its long-time promises on “non-intervention” and “anti-imperialism” would cause damage to China’s reputation for reliability among the Middle Eastern countries, which in turn would make it difficult for China to build more partnership and strengthen the existing one in the Middle East to protect and promote whatever interest it might pursue in the region and beyond.

Here, it is worth noting that the Middle East is not a homogenous region but a heterogenous one where countries have diverse conflicts of political, economic, and cultural interests among themselves as revealed by the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, the Iraq-Iran War, Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, the Yemen Crisis, the Syrian Crisis, the Islamic State, Iran’s nuclear programs, and so on. Occasionally, countries in the Middle East actually had no problem with or even expected China’s intervention given that China is much politically closer to them as compared to those western powers [43, 44]. However, even under this circumstance, China still declined to be more politically assertive and tried to avoid taking sides in order to maintain good relations with *all* sides [43]. Simply speaking, when it comes to a conflict of interests between two or more countries in the Middle East, China, keeping the reputation for reliability in mind, does not want to please one country while taking a risk of alienating another, being regarded by it as not reliable, and therefore losing opportunities of collaboration with it in the future.

By contrast, maintaining a reputation as a reliable partner that keeps promises would encourage cooperation from others. In terms of Sino-Middle Eastern relations, one key benefit that China has obtained by promoting and then sticking to the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” is that countries in the Middle East have in general refrained from interfering with those international controversies that China claims as its domestic affairs like those about Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Here, the issue about Xinjiang is especially relevant to Sino-Middle Eastern relations. The oppression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang by the Chinese government in the name of war on extremism since the 9/11 has caught attention of many people in the world including those in the Middle East. For example, in the wake of China’s brutal repression of Uyghurs’ protests in 2009, the reformists in Iran criticized their conservative counterparts for “supporting Muslims in Gaza while supposedly snubbing Uyghurs in China” [14]. Also, beginning in 2018, the “re-education camps” in Xinjiang that the Chinese government uses to “carry out anti-extremist ideological education” have been a target of criticism from human rights activists all over the world [51]. However, like the case of 2009, while there are people in the Middle East expressing support for the repressed Uyghurs in Xinjiang, their governments have largely shied away from openly criticizing China for those re-education camps [22]. It is reasonable to argue that China’s refraining from being too politically assertive on the Middle Eastern issues has been, to a certain degree, encouraging the Middle Eastern countries not to interfere with China’s affairs in exchange.

To recapitulate, from a theoretical perspective of “path dependence,” China’s enthusiastic promotion of the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” in the 1950s which involved, among other things, its promises on “non-intervention” and “anti-imperialism” has forged a path that China has continued to follow, along which it has constantly repeated those promises and reassured others, especially its third-world “brothers” including those in the Middle East, about the promises. China’s “century of humiliation” imposed by Western and Japanese imperialism is among the most mentioned in its reassurances. As explained by China itself in its 2019 white paper that I have mentioned, “from the mid-19th century, China was abused by the Western powers and left with indelible memories of the suffering brought about by war and instability” and therefore, “it will never impose the suffering it has endured on other nations” [46]. In other words, going down the “path against interventionism and imperialism” set by the “Five Principles,” an image as a reliable non-interventionist partner has been created and constantly reinforced by China itself among the countries in the Middle East through China’s effort to differentiate itself from “Western powers” that, according to China, have been engaging in zero-sum power politics in the region for nothing but their own interests. For example, stressing that China is different from other foreign powers in the region, China pointed out in its Arab Policy Paper that China is “actively involved in building a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation and jointly promoting world peace and development” [34]. From the point of “path dependence,” China’s pledge to build that “new type of international relations” is another result of its promoting the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” in the first place, which in turn will continue to have reproducing and constraining effects on China’s policy and behavior toward the Middle East in the foreseeable future: following the “path,” it will continue to make more similar promises on “non-intervention” and “anti-imperialism” and as a result will refrain from

becoming too politically assertive at least in the foreseeable future in order to maintain its image as a reliable and trustworthy partner to the Middle Eastern countries as compared to those interventionist/imperialist “Western powers.”

## Conclusion

China has been having limited, though increasing, political presence in the Middle East. However, with the significant growth of its economic presence in the region, observers of Sino-Middle Eastern relations have wondered whether China will become more politically assertive by changing its less-political, business-first policy to a more interventionist one in order to better protect its expanding economic interests in the region. The debate is still an ongoing one: while some say yes, others say no. This paper tries to contribute to the debate by taking into account the concept of “path dependence” which highlights the reproducing and constraining effects of the decisions made in the past on the decisions that are being made now and those that will be made in the future. More specifically, China’s promotion of the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” in the 1950s as the guiding doctrine of its foreign relations, especially its relations with the third-world countries including those in the Middle East, has forged a “path against interventionism and imperialism” that it has been following since then. Going down the “path,” China’s image as a reliable partner to the Middle Eastern countries that is identified with the “Global South” and is different from other foreign powers that like to interfere with the Middle Eastern affairs to their own advantages has been intentionally created and reinforced by China itself. As a result, China’s long-time emphasis on the “Five Principles” in its relations with the Middle Eastern countries has created a situation where it is difficult for China to move away from that “path against interventionism and imperialism” without receiving a damage to its reputation as a reliable non-interventionist partner among the Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, from a theoretical perspective of “path dependence,” it is likely that China will continue to stay on the “path” and continue to adopt a policy toward the Middle East that is still relatively less political and interventionist.

The findings of this paper reveal an emerging dilemma that China as a “rising power” must deal with: using power to protect its expanding interests on the one hand and keeping its long-time promises against interventionism and imperialism on the other. This is especially important to China’s relations with other underdeveloped and developing countries including those in the Middle East to which it makes those promises. It explains well why China has been taking a middle-of-the-road approach to the Middle Eastern affairs (or the so-called quasi-mediation diplomacy as discussed). Whether and how China as a “rising power” can continue to keep a sophisticated balance between protecting its interests with power and upholding promises against interventionism and imperialism is a topic worth more research, especially in the context of China’s relations with the “Global South.”

Following the aforementioned point, the findings of this paper also show that China as a “rising power” is facing challenges from not only those major developed powers, especially the USA, but also its underdeveloped and developing “brothers” including those in the Middle East. The existing literature demonstrating that China will not become more politically assertive on the Middle Eastern affairs largely bases their

arguments on China's concern about the USA's interests and presence in the region. However, this paper reveals that it is also related to China's concern about the Middle Eastern countries' attitudes toward China. Simply speaking, while China has to reassure (either sincerely or pretentiously) the USA and other major developed powers that it has no intention to be a revisionist power overthrowing the existing international order, it at the same time has to reassure other less powerful countries that it will not become an imperialist power exploiting them for its own advantages. Therefore, although it is important to study the interactions between China and other big powers, especially the USA, in the context of the rise of China, more research on how other less powerful countries, especially those in the "Global South," think about and interact with China and vice versa is needed if we want to have a full picture of the impact of the rise of China on the world.

Finally, this paper demonstrates that the concept of "path dependence" is a good analytical tool for the study of China's policy and behavior as a "rising power." As found, China's consideration of its international reputation as a reliable non-interventionist partner, as a result of its promotion of the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," has played (and will arguably continue to play) a role in keeping China from becoming too politically assertive on the Middle Eastern affairs. It is however worth pointing out here that, while an analysis based on "path dependence" largely focuses on "how increasing returns or positive feedback loops generated continuity as opposed to change" [25], it does not completely rule out the possibility of change. According to the studies of "path dependence," a dramatic change might still occur when there is a "critical juncture" in which "something erodes or swamps the mechanisms of reproduction that generate continuity" [21, 25]. Based on the findings of this paper, a change might occur when the cost of moving away from that "path against interventionism and imperialism" is no longer devastating to China. Whether and how it will happen is worth examining in future studies. It is especially important for those who believe that China will or should become more politically assertive on the Middle Eastern affairs to address the following question: under what circumstance might a reputation as a reliable non-interventionist partner to the Middle Eastern countries be no longer important to China (and therefore the cost of moving away from the "path" becomes very low or even irrelevant)? Simply speaking, while future studies of China's policy toward the Middle East should continue to examine the reproducing and constraining effects of that "path," whether there might be a "critical juncture" ahead is something worth exploring as well. All in all, this paper has demonstrated that "path dependence" is an important concept that has to be taken into account when studying the relations between China as a rising power and other countries, especially those in the "Global South" including the Middle Eastern ones.

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