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BRI-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION IN THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST: INFRASTRUCTURE, SECURITY, AND STRATEGIC DEPENDENCIES IN CHINA-MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS

Yujia Ma*

Abstract. This article examines how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reshapes political and economic relations in the Near and Middle East by generating multidimensional strategic dependencies. Rather than producing unilateral dominance, the BRI creates varying degrees of economic, technological, and diplomatic dependence shaped by domestic priorities and access to alternative partners. Through a comparative analysis of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran, the study demonstrates that moderate levels of dependence enable selective cooperation and the preservation of strategic autonomy, while higher levels of dependence encourage closer alignment with China. The findings challenge simplistic "debt trap" narratives by highlighting the role of state agency in mediating BRI outcomes. Overall, the article argues that the BRI contributes to a conditional and differentiated regional order in which influence is exercised through geoeconomic mechanisms rather than direct security control.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; Middle East; Strategic dependence; Geoeconomic influence; China; Infrastructure

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ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ БЛИЖНЕГО И СРЕДНЕГО ВОСТОКА ПОД ВЛИЯНИЕМ ИНИЦИАТИВЫ «ПОЯС И ПУТЬ»: ИНФРАСТРУКТУРА, БЕЗОПАСНОСТЬ И СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИЕ ЗАВИСИМОСТИ В ОТНОШЕНИЯХ КИТАЯ С БЛИЖНИМ ВОСТОКОМ

Юцзя Ма*

Абстракт. В статье анализируется, каким образом инициатива Китая «Один пояс - один путь» формирует политические и экономические отношения на Ближнем и Среднем Востоке посредством создания многомерных стратегических зависимостей. Вместо установления одностороннего доминирования инициатива формирует различные уровни экономической, технологической и дипломатической зависимости, обусловленные внутренними приоритетами государств и доступом к альтернативным партнёрам. На основе сравнительного анализа Саудовской Аравии, Объединённых Арабских Эмиратов и Ирана показано, что умеренный уровень зависимости позволяет сохранять стратегическую автономию и избирательное сотрудничество, тогда как более высокая зависимость способствует более тесному сближению с Китаем. Полученные результаты ставят под сомнение упрощённые интерпретации «долговой ловушки», подчёркивая ключевую роль государственной агентности в формировании последствий инициативы. В целом утверждается, что инициатива «Один пояс - один путь» способствует формированию условного и дифференцированного регионального порядка, в котором влияние осуществляется через геоэкономические механизмы, а не посредством прямого контроля в сфере безопасности.

Ключевые слова: Инициатива «Один пояс - один путь»; Ближний и Средний Восток; Страгетическая зависимость; Геоэкономическое влияние; Китай; Инфраструктура

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YAXIN VƏ ORTA ŞƏRQDƏ BKBY-NİN ŞƏRTLƏNDİRDİYİ TRANSFORMASIYA: ÇİN-YAXIN ŞƏRQ MÜNASİBƏTLƏRİNĐƏ İNFRASTRUKTUR, TƏHLÜKƏSİZLİK VƏ STRATEJİ ASILILIQLAR

Yujia Ma*

Abstrakt. Bu məqalə Çinin “Bir Kəmər, Bir Yol” (BKBY) təşəbbüsünün Yaxın və Orta Şərqdə siyasi və iqtisadi münasibətləri çoxölçülü strateji asılılıqlar yaratmaq yolu ilə necə yenidən formalaşdırduğunu təhlil edir. BKBY birtərəfli dominantlıq yaratmaqdan daha çox, daxili prioritətlər və alternativ tərəfdəşlərə çıxış imkanları ilə şərtlənən müxtəlif səviyyəli iqtisadi, texnoloji və diplomatik asılılıqlar formalaşdırır. Səudiyyə Ərəbistanı, Birləşmiş Ərəb Əmirlilikləri və İran üzrə aparılan müqayisəli təhlil göstərir ki, orta səviyyəli asılılıq seçici əməkdaşlıqla və strateji muxtariyyətin qorunmasına imkan verir, yüksək asılılıq isə Çinlə daha sıx uyğunlaşmanı təşviq edir. Nəticələr BKBY-nin təsirlərinin formalaşmasında dövlət agentliyinin rolunu ön plana çıxararaq sadələşdirilmiş “borc tələsi” yanaşmalarını tənqid edir. Ümumilikdə, məqalə BKBY-nin regionda təsirin birbaşa təhlükəsizlik nəzarəti vasitəsilə deyil, geoiqtisadi mexanizmlər üzərindən həyata keçirildiyi şərti və diferensial regional nizam formalaşdırduğunu irəli sürür.

Açar sözlər: Bir Kəmər, Bir Yol təşəbbüsü; Yaxın və Orta Şərq; Strateji asılılıq; Geoiqtisadi təsir; Çin; İnfrastruktur

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a major driver of economic and strategic change in the Near and Middle East. Through large-scale investments in infrastructure, energy, logistics, and digital connectivity, China has become an increasingly important economic partner for many states in the region. This expanding engagement has unfolded alongside the continued dominance of the United States in regional security affairs, creating a complex environment in which economic influence and military power do not necessarily overlap.

Much of the existing literature portrays China’s growing presence in the Middle East as a source of unilateral dependence, often framed through concepts such as “debt trap diplomacy.” Such interpretations, however, tend to oversimplify regional dynamics by treating Middle Eastern states as passive recipients of Chinese influence. In practice, regional actors retain significant agency and actively shape the terms of their engagement with China by balancing BRI participation against domestic priorities, alternative financing options, and long-standing security partnerships.

This article argues that the BRI generates differentiated and conditional forms of strategic dependence rather than uniform subordination. These dependencies operate across economic, technological, and diplomatic dimensions and vary in intensity across states. By comparing the experiences of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran, the article demonstrates how different levels of dependence influence patterns of cooperation, policy alignment, and strategic autonomy. In doing so, it reframes China-Middle East relations as a geoeconomic process in which influence is mediated by state agency rather than imposed through direct security control [1].

Over the past decade, scholarly debates on China’s Belt and Road Initiative have increasingly focused on the concept of strategic dependence as a lens for understanding its geopolitical implications. Strategic dependence in this context refers to the ways in which sustained economic and technological engagement shapes state behavior, policy preferences, and external alignments without relying on direct coercion. Rather than constituting a single or uniform condition, dependence emerges across multiple dimensions and varies according to domestic priorities, institutional capacity, and access to alternative partners.

Economic dependence reflects the scale and significance of Chinese investment in national infrastructure, energy, and logistics systems. Large BRI projects create long-term financial commitments and integrate host economies into China-centered trade and supply networks. Technological dependence develops when Chinese firms provide not only financing and construction but also design, operation, and maintenance services, thereby embedding Chinese

standards and expertise into critical systems. Diplomatic dependence arises when economic and technological ties incentivize states to accommodate Chinese interests in foreign policy, energy strategy, and regional coordination.

Importantly, these forms of dependence do not eliminate state agency. Governments retain the ability to negotiate project terms, diversify partnerships, and limit Chinese involvement in sensitive sectors. As a result, BRI engagement often produces selective alignment rather than comprehensive political convergence. States with greater access to alternative financing and security partners are better positioned to extract economic benefits while constraining China's leverage.

In this framework, the intensity of strategic dependence becomes a key variable shaping outcomes. Moderate levels of dependence allow states to balance cooperation with autonomy, whereas higher levels of dependence increase incentives for closer diplomatic coordination with China. This variation helps explain divergent regional responses to the BRI and underscores why China's expanding economic presence has not translated into uniform political or security alignment across the Near and Middle East.

2. Empirical Analysis

2.1. Saudi Arabia: Moderate Dependence

Saudi Arabia illustrates a case of moderate strategic dependence shaped by extensive economic engagement and strong alternative partnerships. Chinese involvement in Saudi infrastructure and energy projects has expanded under the BRI, particularly in refining, petrochemicals, transport, and industrial development. These investments enhance economic interdependence and support Saudi Arabia's domestic modernization agenda, yet they do not translate into decisive Chinese control over strategic assets. The Saudi state maintains regulatory authority and retains ownership over critical sectors, limiting the depth of external dependence [2].

Technological cooperation with China is significant but carefully managed. Chinese firms contribute expertise in construction, digital infrastructure, and renewable energy, while Saudi authorities avoid excessive reliance by maintaining diversified suppliers and technological partners. This selective approach prevents technological lock-in and preserves long-term flexibility. Consequently, technological dependence remains partial rather than systemic.

Diplomatically, Saudi Arabia's engagement with China reflects pragmatic alignment focused on economic and energy cooperation. While Riyadh supports certain Chinese positions in multilateral economic forums, it continues to anchor its security strategy in long-standing partnerships with the United States and its allies. BRI participation therefore complements rather than replaces existing strategic relationships. In this context, moderate dependence enables Saudi Arabia to leverage Chinese cooperation to enhance

bargaining power and strategic autonomy without compromising its broader foreign policy orientation.

2.2.United Arab Emirates: Balanced Dependence

The United Arab Emirates represents a model of balanced strategic dependence in which engagement with the BRI is embedded within a highly diversified economic and diplomatic strategy. Chinese participation in Emirati ports, logistics hubs, and industrial zones strengthens the UAE's role as a regional gateway connecting Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. These projects deepen economic interdependence by integrating Emirati infrastructure into transregional supply chains, yet strategic control over key assets remains firmly in domestic hands.

Technological cooperation further reinforces this balance. Chinese firms are involved in telecommunications, smart logistics, and digital infrastructure, contributing to efficiency and innovation without monopolizing critical systems. The UAE mitigates technological dependence by combining Chinese expertise with partnerships from Western and regional actors, thereby avoiding excessive reliance on any single provider [3].

In diplomatic and security terms, the UAE maintains a clear separation between economic cooperation and strategic alignment. While coordination with China facilitates trade and logistics connectivity, security policy continues to rely on established partnerships with the United States and other allies. This approach allows the UAE to extract economic benefits from the BRI while preserving autonomy in foreign and defense policy. As a result, balanced dependence enhances flexibility rather than constraining strategic choice.

2.3.Iran: High Dependence

Iran presents a case of high strategic dependence shaped by prolonged international sanctions and limited access to alternative sources of finance, technology, and trade. Under these conditions, China has emerged as a crucial economic partner, particularly in the energy and infrastructure sectors. Chinese investment and expertise support oil and gas development, transport corridors, and industrial projects that would be difficult for Iran to pursue independently. This depth of engagement creates a stronger form of economic dependence than observed in Gulf states [4].

Technological dependence is also more pronounced in Iran's case. Chinese firms provide key technical capabilities in project design, construction, and operation, often filling gaps left by the withdrawal of Western companies. As a result, Chinese standards and technologies are embedded more deeply in Iran's infrastructure systems, increasing long-term reliance. However, this dependence is driven less by strategic choice than by structural constraints imposed by sanctions.

Diplomatically, higher levels of economic and technological dependence translate into closer political coordination with China. Iran aligns more consistently with Chinese positions on issues such as sanctions, energy trade, and aspects of regional security. Nevertheless, this alignment does not amount to full political subordination. Iran retains autonomy in military affairs and regional strategy, indicating that even high dependence under the BRI does not eliminate state agency but rather narrows the range of available alternatives.

Taken together, the Iranian case highlights the upper limits of BRI-induced strategic dependence. While China's role becomes more influential under conditions of isolation, its leverage remains shaped by local priorities and geopolitical constraints rather than direct control [5].

Across the three cases examined, the Belt and Road Initiative demonstrates that China's influence in the Near and Middle East operates through differentiated pathways rather than a single, uniform model. The intensity and character of strategic dependence vary significantly depending on domestic political priorities, economic structures, and access to alternative partners. This variation highlights the importance of moving beyond binary interpretations of dependence and autonomy in assessing China–Middle East relations.

One of the most notable findings is that economic engagement under the BRI does not automatically translate into political or security alignment. Even where Chinese investments play a substantial role, host states retain meaningful leverage through regulatory authority, ownership structures, and diversification strategies. This is particularly evident in states with strong institutional capacity and multiple external partners, where BRI projects are incorporated into broader development agendas rather than defining them [6].

Technological dependence emerges as a critical but often underestimated dimension of BRI engagement. The provision of design, construction, and operational expertise embeds Chinese standards and practices into local systems, creating longer-term forms of reliance that extend beyond financing alone. However, the degree to which this reliance constrains policy autonomy depends on whether host states can combine Chinese technology with alternatives from other providers.

Diplomatic alignment under the BRI is best understood as incremental and issue-specific. States tend to accommodate Chinese interests in areas directly linked to economic cooperation, such as energy trade, infrastructure protection, and logistical coordination. At the same time, they often resist broader political alignment that would undermine existing security commitments or regional strategies [7].

The presence of the United States as a dominant security actor continues to shape the strategic environment in which BRI projects unfold. Rather than displacing U.S. influence, China's engagement coexists with established

security architectures, reinforcing a functional separation between economic and military domains. This separation enables regional states to pursue hedging strategies that maximize economic benefits while minimizing strategic risk.

3. Conclusion

Overall, this article shows that China’s Belt and Road Initiative does not produce uniform or coercive dependence in the Near and Middle East, but rather generates differentiated and conditional forms of strategic dependence. Economic, technological, and diplomatic ties created under the BRI vary in depth and impact according to domestic priorities and access to alternative partners. The cases of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates demonstrate that moderate and balanced dependence allows states to benefit from Chinese engagement while preserving strategic autonomy.

In contrast, Iran’s experience illustrates how higher dependence, shaped by sanctions and limited alternatives, encourages closer alignment with China without eliminating state agency. Across all cases, China’s influence operates primarily through geoeconomic mechanisms rather than direct security control. As a result, the BRI contributes to a more flexible and uneven regional order rather than a shift toward hegemonic domination.

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