

West Asia and North Africa (WANA): China's Enlarging Footprints and Impacts on the Indo-Pacific Region

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Abstract

The China Dream aims at re-establishing the Middle Kingdom in Asia, even as it expands its influence in other regions of Eurasia, Oceania, and the Americas. The Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) holds the key for such a domination. The continental construct of the IPR is as important as its maritime domain and needs equal attention. This includes the landlocked countries that are dependent on these oceans/seas for their trade. The West Asia and North African (WANA) regions form part of the western flank of the IPR and also provide a connect with rest of Africa, Asia, the Mediterranean Sea and Europe, i.e., Eurasia and Africa or Afro-Eurasia, which forms the 'world island' of Halford Mackinder. For China, gaining influence in this region would therefore be critical for the success of its Dream. Even as China faces headwinds in SE and South Asia, its growing influence in the WANA would enable it to further its interests in the IPR. This needs to be analysed assiduously by other countries of the region and the USA for balancing China.

Keywords: China, WANA, Continental IPR, Balancing China

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General

China has looked at the use of geo-economics for its rejuvenation and rise to compete with the US and the West by establishing an alternate system of economic and financial institutions. Towards that end it initially ensured that not only was it integrated with the global economy, but that it was so deeply enmeshed with the US and the West by becoming their ‘workshop’ that despite its rising threat to the extant systems, due to the threat of negative covariance of rewards, they would be constrained to expel it from the US and Western led institutions. This, it felt, would enable it to overcome the Thucydides Trap.

The Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) is the key for domination of Asia; this has transitioned from the Asia-Pacific of the 20th Century due to the rise of India in this 21st Century.

As part of the China Dream for its rejuvenation, China has looked to dominate its neighbourhood – Asia and its various regions, even as it expands its influence on other regions of Eurasia, Oceania and the Americas. The Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) is the key for domination of Asia; this has transitioned from the Asia-Pacific of the 20th Century due to the

rise of India in this 21st Century. Many commentators err in only looking at the maritime aspects of the Indo-Pacific due to the large volumes of International trade routes that cross these waters. However, the continental construct is equally important.

The continental IPR includes landlocked countries that are also dependent on these oceans for their trade. Of these the West Asia and North African regions form the western flank of Indo-Pacific and also provides a connect with rest of Africa, Asia, the Mediterranean Sea and Europe, i.e., Eurasia and Africa or Afro-Eurasia, which forms the ‘world island’ as per Halford Mackinder (“The Geographical Pivot of History”, The Geographical Journal, Vol. 23, No.4, (April 1904), 421–43). For China, gaining influence in this region would therefore be critical for the success of its Dream and its rejuvenation.

This paper looks at China’s growing influence in the WANA (or Middle East North Africa - WANA) region under the following heads,

- A broad overview of China’s Grand Strategy.
- The importance of WANA (WANA) Region for China.
- China’s enlarging footprints.
- Impact on IPR and way ahead.

Broad Overview of China’s Grand Strategy

China’s Dream is to rejuvenate itself as the sole super-power of the world, which it feels

will heal the wounds of the ‘Hundred Years of Humiliation’ starting from the Opium Wars of 1840’s, stretching into the Sino-Japanese wars in the 1930’s through the World War (WW) II and ending with the victory of the Communist Party of China (CPC) over the Kuomintang (KMT) in 1949 at the end of the Civil War after the end of WW II. It aims to re-establish the ancient ‘Middle Kingdom, wherein all roads would lead to China. Learning from the tumultuous Western history of extensive wars preceding a shift in the balance of power, China appears to have sought to achieve its goal using the geo-economic route for geo-political and geo-strategic gains, thereby hoping to avoid the Thucydides trap.

In the 1980’s, Deng Xiaoping got his scholars to create new metrics for determining National Power – Comprehensive National Power (CNP). The CNP had an additional pillar to the US and Western construct of national power that was limited to Diplomacy, Economy and Military (includes Information of late), the ‘Human Index’. Learning from the manner in which the CPC gained ground against the KMT by subverting the population – the human index, China now aims to use similar multi-domain tools to gain influence and subvert the CNP of the target country. In this it follows the rules of its ancient game of Weiqi or Go, whereby it prioritises its immediate neighbourhood, its neighbourhood and extended neighbourhood as the key for its resurgence. These three add up to virtually the

whole of Asia and parts of Africa, i.e., its Eastern Seaboard and SE Asia, Central and South Asia, WANA, East Africa and Oceania.

The tools for this outreach are the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Digital Silk Road (DSR), San Hai Strategy (Three Seas / Ocean Strategy), Unrestricted Warfare (URW) and the Three Warfares Strategy and setting up of Continental and Maritime Overseas Strategic Strong Points (OSSP) to expand its influence and reach. Concurrently this enables China to actualize its strategy of ‘Active Forward Defence’, as enunciated in its Science of Military Strategy 2013. The BRI enables it to bleed the target country and subvert its CNP, as witnessed in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Djibouti. It is verily like an octopus that sucks the blood of its prey and also has eight arms like it – 7 continental roads plus the Maritime Silk Route (MSR).

Concurrent with the Weiqi rules of the game, even as it is protecting its immediate rear, flank and front (the IPR - the Yellow, East and South China Seas, SE Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Mongolia, Russian Far East, WANA, Afghanistan and Pakistan or WANAP, Oceania, Indian Ocean Region, Eastern Africa), it needs to ensure that the attention of the competitors (the US and West) is divided by creating geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic risks and challenges in other regions, like Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe (16 + 1), Arctic Silk Route threat to the North Atlantic, Rest of Africa and Canada. It has

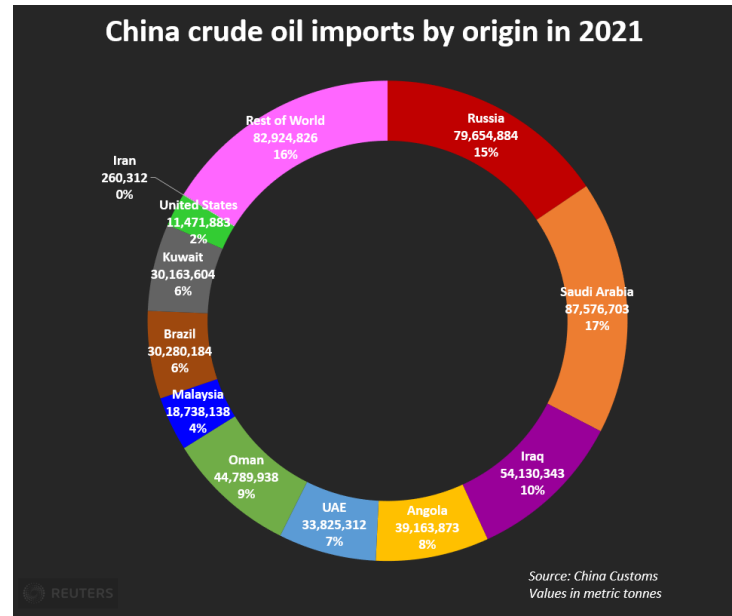
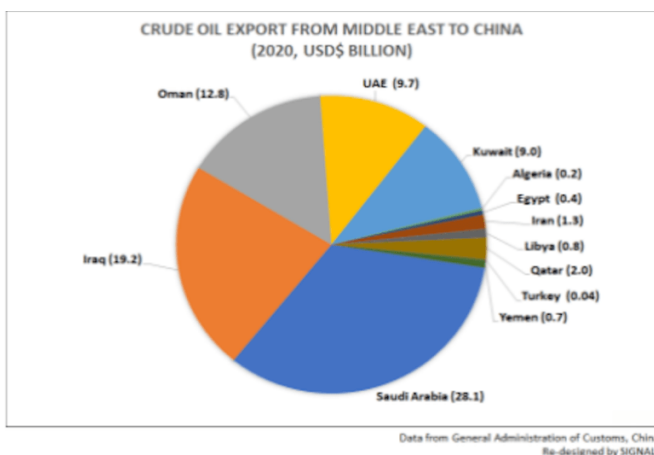
been assisted in no small end by the ongoing Ukraine conflict, as not only has Russia now come into the Dragon's embrace to some extent, but it has curtailed the capability of Europe in the IPR. The weaponisation of the US and Western led financial institutions against Russia in the ongoing Ukraine conflict does provide it the opportunity to further entrench its Shadow Institutions thereby strengthening this alternate eco-system for its planned future world order under it – the Middle Kingdom.

The present flux in the WANA region, due to the pull back by the US and the West provides China the opportunity to further its influence in the region.

Importance of WANA for China

This region, along with Eastern Africa, forms the Western flank of the IPR, which it needs to dominate to be able to counter the other rising power of the region - India. Further, about 49 percent of its fuel imports come from this region, details given in the figures below,

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Presently China appears to be facing a 'ko' moment in its Weiqi grand strategy due to its own internal fissures that have arisen against Xi Jinping's third term anointment in the Congress in October this year, the unending Wuhan Virus, the headwinds in South Asia, SE Asia, Southern Pacific (less Solomon Islands) and extreme caution in Africa. The conflict in Ukraine and the September 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh stand-off between Azerbaijan and Armenia^{iv} has blocked its link to Europe via Russia and the Caucasus (the Northern and Central Routes) thus making the Southern route via Iran and Turkey very critical.

The evolving geo-political vacuum in the WANA region due to the withdrawal of the US, West and Russia provides China with an opportunity to create a geo-economic and geo-strategic risk whose response by the US and West and India could unlock the 'ko' in other areas for it to additionally exploit. China's growing economic presence since 2009

provides it the necessary platform for expanding its influence. The San Hai Strategy enables it to expand and connect the three Seas and Oceans across and beyond the IPR via WANA – Bay of Bengal-Arabian-Mediterranean Seas and the Pacific-Indian-Atlantic Oceans. This adds to its push to secure the Pacific-Arctic-Atlantic Oceans via the Arctic Silk Route and its own backyard seas – The Yellow, East and South China Seas (through its Anti-Access and Area Denial or A2AD Strategy) that provide the direct approach to the Han Heartland its Eastern Seaboard.



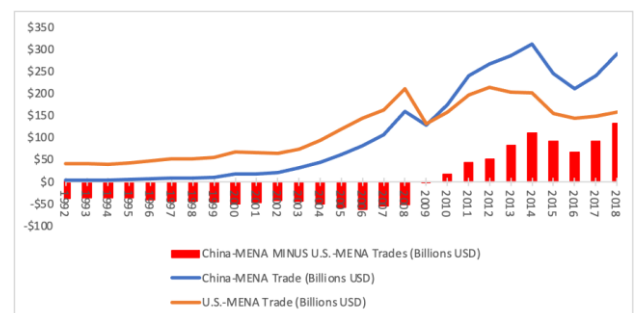
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China's Enlarging Outreach in WANA

China had proposed a “1+2+3” model of cooperation with the Middle East in the 6th Ministerial Conference of the China–Arab Forum, in 2014.

In line with its strategy of slow expansion and consolidation of its influence to gain geo-strategic space, China has been quietly

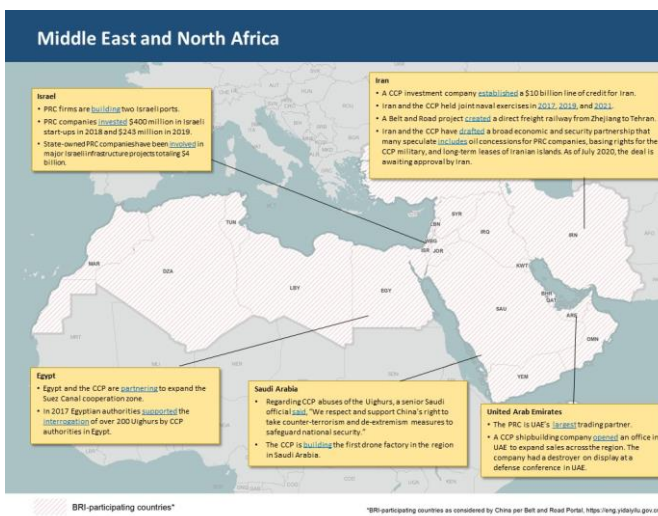
expanding its footprints in WANA since early 21st Century and lately through its BRI. The chart below indicates the comparative trade flows of both US and China from 1992 – 2018 in Bn USD, based on World Bank's World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) Database.^{vi} China had proposed a “1+2+3” model of cooperation with the Middle East in the 6th Ministerial Conference of the China–Arab Forum, in 2014. The proposal expanded bilateral cooperation from energy into diverse areas such as 1 - infrastructure, 2 - trade, and investment, and 3 – high tech cooperation in nuclear energy, space satellites, and other new energy initiatives ^{vii}. As the proposal materialized in 2016-17^{viii}, China's investment in the region has soared.



Iran is now crucial for its connectivity to Europe via Turkey considering that the Ukraine Conflict and the simmering Nagorno-Karabakh stand-off between Armenia and Azerbaijan seems to have temporarily blocked the Northern and Central routes to Europe. Further, it needs to handle the Russia and the US plus EU stand-off over the Ukraine conflict very deftly so that it does not impact its own economic and trade dependencies on them negatively. That would have a domino effect

on its economy and its geo-economic strategy for rejuvenation. It is in this backdrop that it looks on to the WANA as its window of opportunity to further its geo-strategic interests, even as it balances its relations with both Russia and the US and EU.

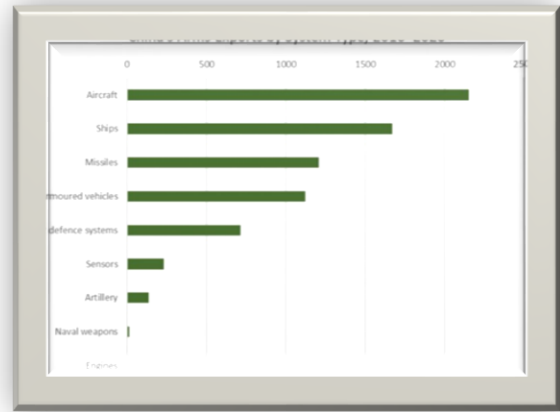
Its is pushing ahead with its outreach for the control of ports in the Red and Mediterranean Seas, Persian Gulf and gain some control over the Suez Canal.



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Towards this end it has comprehensive strategic partnerships with five states, Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, and strategic partnerships with six, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, apart from that with Turkey^x.

China has attempted to penetrate the lucrative arms industry in the region also, and has met with some success since 2016, as the chart below suggests^{xi},



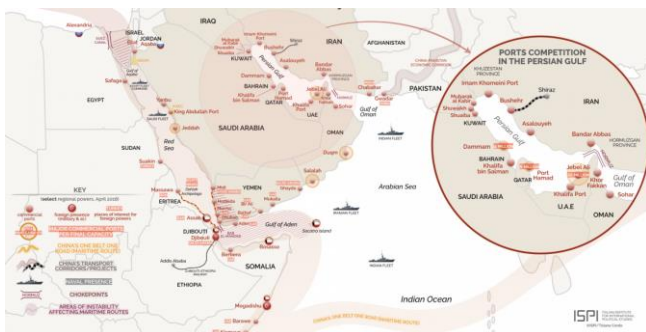
In this it has attempted to target those systems / sub-systems that have been denied by the US and West to WANA, targeting both sides of the Shia Sunni divide. It has delivered systems like missiles - DF3 and DF21D to Saudi Arabia, UAVs and UCAVs, like CH4A & B and Wing Loong I & II to Saudi Arabia and UAE, agreement to make the CH4 UAVs & UCAVs in Saudi Arabia and training of specialist for establishing nuclear power plants in the region, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran. Of late there are reports emerging of interest shown in hypersonic weapon systems and unmanned autonomous surface vehicles (for the Navy). It could also expand to drones, integrated layered air defence systems, Beidou systems, long range artillery and multi-barrel rocket systems, etc.

As part of its DSR it plans to connect MENA, Turkey and Africa via Gwadar, Iran, Djibouti and thus be able to provide alternate digital systems and internet to the systems provided by the US and West. As of 2019 Huawei had

signed 5G contracts with 12 countries in the WANA, with its biggest markets being Saudi Arabia and Middle East^{xiii}. This would also enable fielding of its surveillance systems to ensure the government can watch over its population with an iron hand, with the data also being available to China thereby enabling it to orchestrate its narrative and enable the continuation of governments that are amenable to China's policies.

Impact of Chinese Outreach on the Region & Way Ahead

The Chinese attempt is not just to use the opportunity provided by the US and West in WANA to increase its sphere of influence to its extended neighbourhood, but also to create a fresh geo-strategic flux in this region for them. Their reactions could provide it further opportunities to break the 'ko' moments in the other regions of the Indo-Pacific. To further its BRI, China is looking at the ports in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to go along with its outreach in the Mediterranean Sea, thereby gain control of movement of maritime traffic in this region (refer the maps below).



Source: - *Gulf Powers: Maritime Rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean*, ISPI, as modified by the author



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This would enable it to establish new OSSPs in this region, akin to the ones already established in Djibouti and Gwadar^{xiv}. The aim is to create inter-locking OSSPs thereby securing a network of these in the IPR and the Mediterranean Sea to secure its presence. It would be in line its Science of Military Strategy of 2013^{xv}, wherein the concept of Active Forward Defence has been enunciated for moving the battlespace well away from China's borders, thereby providing it with strategic depth.^{xvi} This sharp focus towards maritime domain has been forced due to the 'ko' moments in the continental portions of IPR and BRI.

Such domination of the major international maritime trade routes will surely draw sharp responses from the US and the West, but the Ukraine conflict would inhibit major US, NATO and EU responses. With the Chinese heft across the Shia – Sunni divide across the Persian Gulf, its outreach with nuclear,

emerging and disruptive technologies to the select WANA countries could place China in a much stronger position in this region. Concurrently, China is moving towards securing its Eastern Seaboard using a series of Floating Nuclear Power Plants, in the garb of providing energy for its entities, including in the disputed Taiwan Straits and the artificial islands in the South China Sea^{xvii}, which will further divert US efforts in the region.

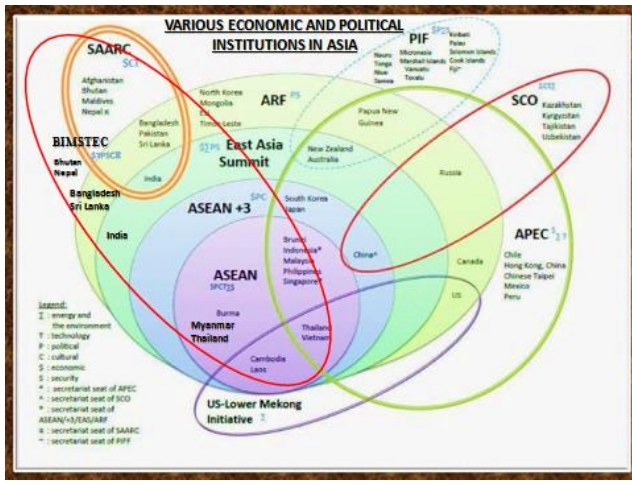
This Chinese outreach in WANA forces Israel to join with China, as it increases its risks from a future well-armed Arab nations. While many of the Sunni nations may have good relations with Israel at present, as it provides assistance with the US and the West against the Shia nations led by Iran, but history has shown that it doesn't take long for intentions to change. And the US would be hard pressed to cover all the flanks by itself.

For India, which for long has had good relations across the Shia-Sunni divide this also provides a good opportunity to expand its relations beyond energy dependency. A focussed approach towards providing alternate eco-system for development to that of China would be the need of the hour. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, the joint effort of India and Japan provides an ideal platform to cover the WANA region also. Its four pillars of enhancing Capacity and Skills, quality Infrastructure and Institutional connectivity, development and Cooperation Projects, and People-to-People Partnership, as stated in the

Vision Document^{xviii}, would go a long way in providing succour to the people of the region and achieve respective sustainable development goals.

For the like-minded countries of the IPR, the options are two-fold, either continue as hitherto-fore, with multiplicity of agreements and treaties, and attempt to balance China's growing footprints with various projects or come together under one overarching architecture. The former permits China to gradually isolate its target countries bilaterally engage them in agreements that would be win-win for China in the near, medium and long terms. While it may appear to be a win-win for the target countries in the near term, but the geo-economic burden of 'white elephant' economic projects would lead to extreme negative covariance of geo-economic rewards^{xix} and a debt-trap with China

This appears to be the opportune moment to set-up an overarching Indo-Pacific Council by the like-minded nations of the region, with the support of the US and the West. The bane of the Indo-Pacific region and Asia has been the multiplicity of architectures, with many overlapping layers that could work at cross-purposes with each other (refer figure below),



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Multifarious Regional Architectures in Asia

Such an Indo-Pacific Council would be the overarching architecture that could subsume all extant agreements and treaties under its various verticals, including the QUAD. It should provide a geo-political, geo-economic and geo-commerce model that would facilitate security for the citizens, economic development for all, ensure infrastructure development thereby connecting the region, unite people to work as one and shed the inhibitions based on divisive fissures, respect for sovereignty and integrity of all nations of the region, ensure environment protection and thus create a multi-domain multilateral regional economic and security architecture. This would verily ensure Security and Growth for all in the Region – SAGAR, as stated the Prime Minister Shir Narendra Modi for India's vision and geopolitical framework of maritime cooperation in the IPR.

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